

A CASE TO PROMOTE BORDER TOURISM

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To enjoy additional benefits

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In the Changthang wildlife sanctuary, there are wetlands and a thriving population of the Kiang, a wild ass. | Photo Credit: Ashish Kothari

Last December, Chief of Defence Staff General Anil Chauhan spoke of the need “to repopulate vast unoccupied areas, located even far away from the last villages of the state towards the border” and emphasised the importance of promoting border tourism in such areas. The Government of India has made unprecedented efforts to build border infrastructure. It has also announced plans to open villages along the northern border for tourists under the [Vibrant Villages Programme](#). The Home Affairs Ministry has also reportedly held meetings with public representatives of villages from various border States.

India’s tremendous tourism potential in its border States remains largely untapped due to the remoteness of locations and the difficulty of access. Apart from the infrastructure deficit, even adventure sports, mountaineering and related commercial activities are subject to cumbersome security procedures and permits, often by multiple agencies.

The tourism potential of the Karakoram Pass in Ladakh cannot be overstated. Regular motorcycle expeditions should be organised for civilians in cooperation with India’s major motorcycle manufacturers. Areas such as the Saser Kangri massif could be explored for mountaineering expeditions by small experienced teams in tandem with the armed forces and the Indian Mountaineering Federation.

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Similarly, the Pangong Lake in Ladakh is a tourist’s paradise. The area around Pangong Lake and Chushul is a delight for photographers and birdwatchers. In the Changthang wildlife sanctuary, there are wetlands and a thriving population of the Kiang, a wild ass. Lhari Peak is sacred to both Hindus and Buddhists. The Demchok area is home to several hot springs that are popular for naturopathy cures. The nearby villages of Tsaga, Koyul and Hanle can also be further developed. There is a need to increase tourist footfalls in the Chumar area. Tourism can be promoted in the Tso Moriri lake area, with a particular focus on home stays.

In the central sector, Mana Pass in Chamoli, Uttarakhand, is one of the highest vehicle-accessible passes in the world. Mana village is steeped in mythology as the gateway to heaven. It is close to Hemkund and the Valley of Flowers. The Badrinath shrine is located nearby. The

Deo Tal lake near Mana can be developed for sailing, and the nearby slopes offer a good site for skiing. Peaks such as Mount Kamet and nearby peaks in the Nilang-Jadang valley are prime destinations for mountaineering expeditions.

Likewise, the Niti Valley and the eponymous Mana village close to the Line of Actual Control in Uttarakhand have considerable potential. There is also scope to develop tourism around the Parvati Kund at Rimkhim in the Barahoti bowl. There is no gainsaying the fact that given its proximity to the contested Barahoti pasture, some special procedures for visitors would need to be put in place.

In Sikkim, the region around Doka La is ripe for tourism. Pedong, Nathang Valley, Zuluk, Kupup, Baba Harbhajan Mandir and the Yak Gold Course, the highest golf course in the world, are nearby. Conducted tours, including trekking expeditions up to Batang La, could be a start.

In the eastern sector, the Bum La Pass in Arunachal Pradesh is already a well-established tourism hub. There is scope to bring in more tourists all the way up to Zero Point, the site of border personnel meetings with China. Publicity should be given to the memorial built there in honour of Subedar (Baba) Joginder Singh, who was posthumously awarded the Param Vir Chakra for outstanding bravery in the battle near Tongpen La during the India-China war in 1962. Nearby, the Pangateng and Sangetsar lakes are picturesque. Expeditions on the lines of NIMAS's Winter Bailey Trekking Expedition could attract international tourists to Tawang and the interiors of the State.

Further up in the Upper Subansiri district, Taksing is surrounded by beautiful river valleys, virgin rainforest and scenic camping sites. It also holds religious significance for Buddhists along the ancient Tsari pilgrimage route. River rafting beyond Siyum is also a possibility. The Walong area in Anjaw district is the site of the Battle of Walong. Facilities along the stretch covering Walong, Dong, Kibithu and Kaho could showcase India's military history and tourism.

Though many border areas are remote and sparsely populated, every effort should be made to promote hubs of civilian presence and arrangements for home stays. Foreigners add value since they use social media platforms to publicise their travels. Funds from schemes such as the Border Area Development Programme should be utilised to build habitations and to lay optical fibre cable for communication.

The military's deployment still remains the mainstay of livelihood for local residents in many remote places. This should change in favour of commercial activity, including tourism. The priority should be to build all-weather roads, rest houses, rest rooms, fuel pumps, health clinics, electricity (preferably solar and wind energy), telecom towers, and medical facilities in suitable areas. While the vast tourism potential of India's border areas need to be tapped, it is equally important to ensure that tourism projects are implemented after conducting feasibility studies. Unbridled construction in violation of norms leads to subsidence in the Himalayan belt. Infrastructure which is built in a sustainable manner and benefits the local economy should be encouraged.

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