

Issue Brief

No.28

February 2026



Turning Conflict into Opportunity: Exploring 'Bharat Rannbhoomi Darshan' in Sikkim

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Cite this publication as:

Lachenpa, Sangay. 2026. "Turning Conflict into Opportunity: Exploring 'Bharat Rannbhoomi Darshan' in Sikkim". Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies, Shiv Nadar University, Delhi NCR. *Issue Brief*. No. 28. February.

<https://snu.edu.in/centres/centre-of-excellence-for-himalayan-studies/research/Turning-Conflict-into-Opportunity-Exploring-Bharat-Rannbhoomi-Darshan-in-Sikkim/>

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Abstract

The Government of India announced the Bharat Rannbhoomi Darshan (BRD) to promote battlefield tourism during the 77th Army Day in January 2025. Locations along India's borders, which witnessed key battles over the course of the country's postcolonial state-building process, displayed the courage and sacrifices of the Army, and were of strategic importance, were introduced as BRD sites. Though the concept of battlefield tourism has been explored and written about to a considerable extent in the West, India's battlefield tourism is relatively less developed. The fact that India has fought numerous battles in its short postcolonial history makes it all the more necessary to understand the concept of battlefield tourism. This Issue Brief attempts to fill this gap by comprehending the BRD programme in Sikkim - it looks at the impact of the BRD programme on the border population and on the tourism sector in Sikkim. Key challenges and opportunities of the BRD programme in Sikkim and managing tourism in these historical sites is also highlighted.

Keywords: Bharat Rannbhoomi Darshan; battlefield tourism; border tourism; Sikkim; Himalayas

The Government of India announced the Bharat Rannbhoomi Darshan (BRD) to promote battlefield tourism during the 77th Army Day on 15 January 2025 (Ministry of Defence, Government of India 2025). The BRD is a national programme developed jointly by the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Tourism, the state governments, and the Indian Army. It aims at showcasing India's rich military history through tourism. Key locations along India's borders that witnessed key battles over the course of the country's postcolonial history, displayed the courage and sacrifices of the Army, and are of strategic importance, were introduced as BRD sites. Along with other border states, key sites in Sikkim were also included under the BRD programme. Doka La (Doklam), Gurudongmar, Nathu La and Cho La in Sikkim were categorised as the ‘Shaurya Gantavya’ sites under the BRD programme (Ministry of Tourism, Government of India 2025). The Sikkim government, accordingly, announced the opening of Cho La and Doka La as new tourist sites under the BRD programme (*News on Air* 2025); Nathu La has already long been open for tourists.

Sikkim, with its striking landscapes, rich biodiversity and culture, attracts many tourists from across the country and globe (Table 1). The increasing inflow of tourists provides employment opportunities and rising income for locals. In many selected border villages such as Lachen, Lachung, Kupup and Nathang along the Tibet-Sikkim borderlands, the livelihood of the local people largely depends on tourism-related activitiesⁱ.

While issues related to battlefield tourism have been investigated to a great extent (see Stone and Sharpley 2008; Garcia-Madurga and Grillo-Mendez 2023; Seaton 1999; Baldwin and Sharpley 2009, there is a large gap that needs to be filled, particularly relating to India's case. The fact that India has engaged in several conflicts and confrontations with Pakistan (1947, 1965, 1999, 2025), and China (1962, 1967 (Nathula and Chola in Sikkim), 2017 (Doklam), 2020) in its short postcolonial history adds greater necessity to the task of correct portrayal and understanding of these sites and their history as public interest increases. This Issue Brief examines the BRD programme in Sikkim relying on data from numerous interactions and informal interviews with key stakeholders in Gangtok and border villages in Sikkim. Through ethnographic fieldwork, this piece looks at the impact of the BRD

programme on the border population and on the tourism sector in Sikkim. Key challenges and opportunities of the BRD programme in Sikkim and managing tourism in these historical sites are also highlighted.

Battlefield Tourism: Is it New?

Battlefield tourism is associated with “dark tourism” (Stone and Sharpley 2008), and in recent years, it has become a popular form of travel where millions of people around the world visit sites associated with death, suffering and tragedy such as of executions, massacres, assassinations, cemeteries, mass graves, memorials, prisons, concentration camps and battlefields (Garcia-Madurga and Grillo-Mendez 2023). Dark tourism has been variously termed ‘morbid’ or ‘black spot’ tourism or ‘milking the macabre’ (Stone 2006, 148). As such, battlefield tourism can be considered as a type of ‘thanatouristic experience’ where the ‘thanatourist’ is motivated by the desire for actual or symbolic encounters with death (Seaton 1996, 240).

Battlefield tourism, or people visiting the sites of conflicts, is not new. The first firm evidence of people visiting battlefields comes from the aftermath of Waterloo (1815), which became a popular tourism destination in the nineteenth century (Seaton 1999). In 1856, Thomas Cook organised his first tour to Waterloo and was taking customers to the South African battlefields of the Boer War even before hostilities ceased in 1902 (Lloyd 1998). Baldwin and Sharpley (2009) posit that the First World War was a pivotal event in the emergence of battlefield tourism, with increasing numbers of visitors wanting to visit the graves or death sites of their loved ones. For example, in 1919, 60,000 people visited the Western Front battlefields, assisted by tour companies, and this continued for the next 20 years (Seaton 2000, 63).

The turmoil through the Second World War resulted in a long period of reduced interest in these sites, and revival only came about from the late 1960s onwards. By the late 1970s, battlefield tours were increasing in number again. The increasing role of media and popular writings associated with both World Wars led to a surge of interest in visiting these sites again (Keil 2017).

Visits to sites associated with war and conflict has become a major category of tourism today. Battlefields such as Waterloo, Normandy, the DMZ (between North and South Korea), sites of Pol Pot’s atrocities in Cambodia, etc., have become cultural heritage and memory sites. They provide an opportunity for visitors to engage with history and culture, facilitating a deep understanding of past events and providing reflection and reconciliation for the future (Garcia-Madurga and Grillo-Mendez 2023).

Although there is a significant criticism of dark tourism being exploitative and disrespectful, and for objectifying the past (Sharma 2018; Gaur 2024), others argue that it can serve as an important educational and memorialisation purpose where connections are made with the past, allowing visitors to learn about history in an interactive and lived manner. Some (Stone and Grebenar 2021; Miles 2012) have argued that battlefield tourism, through its presentation, whether real or fictional, has become a commodity for consumption in a global communications market where someone’s death and tragedy are commodified.

Though battlefield tourism has developed fairly well in the West, the concept of visiting sites associated with death, conflict and suffering is hardly new. However, India, in spite of boasting numerous sites of military conflicts from its precolonial to postcolonial history, lacked a cohesive battlefield tourism initiative. The Government of India’s initiative of Bharat Rannbhoomi Darshan (BRD) intends to fill this void. Under the BRD, the government has identified 77 sites that project the valour and sacrifices of the Indian Army. These sites

span several states, and include 11 in Jammu and Kashmir, four in Himachal Pradesh, seven in Rajasthan, five in Gujarat, five in Ladakh, four in Sikkim, 21 in Arunachal Pradesh and eight in Uttarakhand (Ministry of Tourism, Government of India 2025).

Although the BRD initiative remains in its nascent stage, it holds significant promise for strengthening tourism-led development in the borderlands. The initial funding for the BRD was Rs.30 lakhs towards development, cyber hardening, hosting on NIC cloud, site launch and content creation (Ministry of Tourism, Government of India). Infrastructure enhancement for the BRD is supported through the Ministry of Tourism's 'Special Assistance to States for Capital Investment' (SASCI) initiative. Under this initiative, the government has also approved Rs.3,295.76 crores (2024-26) to support 40 projects across India (Ministry of Tourism, Government of India 2025).

Bharat Rannbhoomi Darshan in Sikkim: Catalysing Growth in the Already Vibrant Tourism Sector

Sikkim had fewer visitors during its pre-merger years (pre-1975). Even after the merger, the growth rate remained low since many mountainous locations continued to be off-limits to visitors and Sikkim fell either under Restricted Area or the Protected Area regulations (Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India (n.d.)). However, thanks to government initiatives and easing of the permit system over the years, the state's tourism sector is doing well, with the number of visitors matching or exceeding the population of the state (Table 1). It is evident from the data of the last decade and a half that there has been a surge in tourist arrivals, except in 2020-21 when COVID-19 forced movement to come to a halt (see Table 1).

Table 1
Tourist arrivals in Sikkim (2010-25)

Year	Domestic Tourists	Foreign Tourists	Total
2010	7,00,011	20,757	7,20,768
2011	5,52,453	23,945	5,76,398
2012	5,58,538	26,489	5,85,027
2013	5,76,749	31,698	6,08,447
2014	5,62,418	49,175	6,11,593
2015	7,05,023	38,479	7,43,502
2016	7,40,763	66,012	8,06,775
2017	13,75,854	49,111	14,24,965
2018	14,26,127	71,172	14,97,299
2019	12,88,435	1,33,388	14,21,823
2020	2,96,473	19,935	3,16,408
2021	5,00,161	11,508	5,11,669

2022	15,57,000	68,600	16,25,573
2023	12,27,261	93,908	13,21,169
2024	14,55,601	84,820	15,40,421
2025	11,71,781 (Till October)	46,591 (Till September)	12,18,372

Source: Compiled by the Author from the annual reports of the Department of Tourism and Civil Aviation, Government of Sikkim (n.d.).

Tourism sector is based on human resources; its expansion not only creates employment, but also stimulates growth in other sectors like transport, telecommunication and retail sales. Therefore, tourist arrival into any state has a significant impact on local economies as visitors spend money on hotels, restaurants, and in shops, which in turn leads to job creation, development of infrastructure and services (see also, Chakrabarti 2009, 96).

The BRD initiative to boost tourism through battlefield tourism aims to achieve the twin objectives of enhancing the local economy and awakening the national consciousness amongst both tourists and the border populations. Sonam Norgay Lachungpa, chairman of the Department of Tourism, Government of Sikkim,ⁱⁱ posits that the launching of battlefield tourism in Sikkim will bring about an awareness amongst the citizens about the valour and sacrifices of the Indian Army in protecting the sovereign territory of India and further enhance tourism-based livelihood in the borderlands with the unveiling of new destinations for touristsⁱⁱⁱ.

The BRD initiative and its impact may not be significant nationally, but it will play an enhanced role in promoting regional and local tourism. In the case of Sikkim, the sites selected under ‘Shaurya Gantavya’ include Cho La, Doka La, Nathu La and Gurudongmar which lie in remote border areas with limited livelihood opportunities, poor infrastructure, and inadequate capital for economic development. As such, the BRD would go a long way in opening up these borderlands and transforming them into tourist hotspots.

Within the larger objective of tourism development on the lines of the BRD, Sikkim was allocated two projects (see Table 2) under the SASCI initiative of the Government of India. These, along with the Vibrant Village Programme and the larger strategic road construction in these borderlands will boost tourism in the state.

Table 2
List of projects in Sikkim under SASCI

Year	Project Details	Sanctioned Cost (In Crore Rs.)
2024-26	Skywalk (Bhaleydhunga), Yangang in Namchi	93.37
2024-26	Border Experience in Nathula	68.19

Source: Ministry of Tourism, Government of India. 2025.

Bharat Rannbhoomi Darshan: Challenges in Sikkim

The Eastern Himalayas harbour some of the most interesting and indigenous flora and fauna, making it a biodiversity hotspot. The BRD sites, located at high altitudes, are ecologically fragile and vital ecosystems for diverse flora and fauna. The flow of visitors to these ecologically fragile areas raises serious environmental concerns. Vehicular pollution, disturbance to wildlife, and garbage accumulation are some of the major challenges resulting from tourist inflow in the region. To curb these challenges, the Government of Sikkim, in the context of opening up Doka La and Cho La (both Shaurya Gantavya sites), has put a cap on the number of tourists allowed to visit these sites. As per the notification, a maximum of 25 tourist vehicles and 25 bikers are allowed to visit these sites per day (Home Department, Government of Sikkim notification No. 87/Home/ 2025 dated 23/09/2025). A permit fee of Rs.1,120 per person is levied, and this is inclusive of the fee for the visit to the wildlife sanctuary. The permit is issued by registered travel operators only, who have been briefed and instructed not to litter the premises and carry back any waste generated during the visit.^{iv} Such measures bring accountability and contribute to better management of tourist inflow.^v

Sikkim's location and terrain coupled with harsh monsoon rains further threaten to undermine the success of BRD. The key battlefield locations, such as Doka La and Cho La, are located in the remote borderlands where the physical infrastructure is not yet developed to cater to the tourism sector. Sonam Norgay Lachungpa points out that connectivity (bad roads) has always remained a challenge for the development of the state in general and for the tourism sector in particular.^{vi} Therefore, though the BRD had been officially launched in Sikkim, key sites such as Cho La and Doka La were declared open by the Governor only on December 15, 2025^{vii} due to the infrastructure delays^{viii} (Government of Sikkim 2025).

The high-altitude terrain of the BRD sites constitutes a further structural constraint. The principal sites designated under 'Shaurya Gantavya'—Cho La, Doka La, Nathu La, and Gurudongmar—are located at elevations between 13,000 and 17,000 feet. The rapid ascent required to access these zones, where visitors have to travel from roughly 5,000 feet to over 13,000 feet within a three-hour timeframe, causes significant physiological stress making them vulnerable to altitude-related health complications. The problem is further exacerbated by the limited presence of medical infrastructure in these remote landscapes, thereby amplifying the risks and vulnerabilities faced by tourists.

Security arrangements pose an additional challenge for the effective implementation of the BRD in Sikkim. The key BRD sites in the state are situated within highly securitised borderland regions. Consequently, any increase in visitor inflow to these areas necessitates enhanced surveillance and security measures, thereby placing additional pressure and financial burden on the concerned security agencies.

Policy Recommendations

Battlefield tourism, like heritage tourism, is about the ways in which the present makes use of the past. Visitors come to these sites with preconceived notions, including a motivation and desire to learn more about the history of the site. They wish to pay their respects to fallen soldiers and also connect with their national identity. To ensure that all these expectations are fulfilled requires high-level management to preserve the site's integrity. Accurate information and interpretation based on verified knowledge is imperative to achieve and advance these objectives. Border populations can be trained by experts in the field to become 'battlefield guides' that brief visitors. Further, select travel agencies can also be trained to assist visitors who wish to know more about the history of these sites.

Re-enactment sites, such as battlefield heritage walks and museums, can be set up in the villages close to these sites, whereby the visits to the ‘real’ sites are complemented by hands-on experience, making them more interactive and enriching. These activities give the visitors a chance to engage at two levels - real (field level) and re-enactment level (museums). The Government of Sikkim has been providing skill enhancement training through its programmes, such as ‘Sikkim Inspires’, funded by the World Bank (Tourism and Civil Aviation Department, Government of Sikkim 2025). The training, such as those for battlefield tourism guides, could be introduced within its themes.

With regard to the challenges of physical infrastructure and connectivity, securing substantial investment for large-scale infrastructural development remains a significant hurdle; diversified funding sources and strategic financing mechanisms are essential. Central government initiatives, such as the Vibrant Village Programme, offer important avenues for resource mobilisation. For instance, the central government has proposed an allocation of Rs.4,800 crore up to 2026, of which Rs.2,500 crore is earmarked specifically for road construction (Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India 2023). Additionally, funding available under the Swadesh Darshan 2.0 and SASCI schemes of the Ministry of Tourism may be leveraged to strengthen connectivity and infrastructure in these regions.

Given that the ‘Shaurya Gantavya’ sites are located within heavily militarised border landscapes, fostering collaborative arrangements between civilian authorities and the Indian Army becomes critical for addressing several operational challenges. The Indian Army Medical Corps, for instance, could help mitigate the scarcity of medical facilities across these high-altitude frontier landscapes. Moreover, joint training programmes involving border residents and army personnel—particularly in basic first aid and emergency response—would enhance preparedness and resilience in remote areas.

Ultimately, the effective implementation of the BRD in Sikkim necessitates a holistic governance framework that integrates both top-down institutional planning and bottom-up community participation. Strategic coordination between higher-level administrative bodies and local stakeholders is essential for ensuring long-term sustainability and success of the initiative.

Conclusion

Implementation of the BRD in Sikkim, will not only highlight the state as a tourist destination, but will also extend the tourist season, which in turn will contribute positively to the livelihood of local communities in particular and economy as a whole.

At the same time, the BRD will transform the way tourism is seen, especially in the context of the Himalayas in general, and Sikkim in particular. Tourists visiting Sikkim are often drawn to the state’s scenic beauty but with the introduction of battlefield tourism, ‘empty’ frontier landscapes will be remoulded into landscapes invoking a sense of national consciousness, identity and integration.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Author’s field notes, 2025, Lachen, Lachung, Kupup.

ⁱⁱ Sonam Norgay Lachungpa has been spearheading the BRD initiative in Sikkim serving as the

government’s (Sikkim) representative.

ⁱⁱⁱ Interview with Sonam Norgay Lachungpa, 21 July 2025, Gangtok.

^{iv} Author's field notes, 1 August 2025, Gangtok.

^v Author's field notes, 8 December 2025, Gangtok.

^{vi} Interview with Sonam Norgay Lachungpa, 21 July 2025, Gangtok.

^{vii} Author's field notes, 1 August 2025, Gangtok.

^{viii} It was initially supposed to be opened on 1 October 2025 but was finally opened only on 15 December 2025.

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