

PM opens bridge crucial for NE, takes aim at Cong

BOGIBEEL LINK Says project would have finished sooner had Vajpayee returned to power; promises more development

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NEW DELHI/GUWAHATI: Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated on Tuesday the Bogibeel Bridge in Assam that improves road and rail connectivity in the region, especially to Arunachal Pradesh, but pointed out that the project could have been completed by 2007-08 had former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee (December 25 was the 95th birth anniversary of the Bharatiya Janata Party leader who died August 16) got another term in 2004.

“There can’t be a better tribute to Atal-ji on his birthday,” Modi said.

The Bogibeel Bridge, which also facilitates the movement of troops in a strategically sensitive region, was part of the Assam Accord of 1985 and was finally sanctioned in the year 1997-98. The foundation stone of the project was laid by then Prime Minister, HD Deve Gowda, on January 22, 1997 and the work



Prime Minister Narendra Modi waves to people after inaugurating the Bogibeel Bridge on the Brahmaputra river on Tuesday. PTI

commenced under the watch of Vajpayee on April 21, 2002.

“This is good governance. There must be some people who were here 16 years ago when Atalji was here. Since then, a generation has changed, you have waited for long,” said Modi.

“You are witness to the fact that till 2014 less than 50% work

was completed and only few pillars were seen. There is no doubt that had Atal Ji’s government got another term, this bridge would have been inaugurated in 2007-08.” he added, after inaugurating the two-tiered bridge and flagging off the first passenger train on the track.

CONTINUED ON P 6

PM opens bridge

The 4.94 km bridge connects Assam's Dibrugarh on the south bank to Dhemaji, also in the state but close to the border with Arunachal, in the north and will boost defence logistics along the China border. It is also expected to reduce the travel time to people going to Arunachal Pradesh by road by at least eight hours and clip at least 14 hours of train journeys.

Lieutenant General SL Narasimhan (ret'd), a member of the National Security Advisory Board and a China expert, said the Bogibeel railroad bridge across the Brahmaputra is quite important in strategic terms as it makes the movement of military assets towards the border easier and swifter.

"Also, now there is redundancy in trans-Brahmaputra movement with the availability of three bridges – Bogibeel, Sadiya and the one near Tezpur. The push for infrastructure development along the border coupled with the building of roads and bridges in the hinterland are positive developments," he added.

Jantu Gogoi, who runs a travel agency in Dibrugarh said the bridge means he is no longer dependent on ferry services to take him to the North Bank of Brahmaputra and onwards to Arunachal Pradesh.

"Earlier when tourists headed to Arunachal Pradesh would land in Dibrugarh, one was totally dependent on the ferry service at the Bogibeel Ghat in Dibrugarh. One hour from the airport to the Ghat and then another hour to cross the river and, also, the time one would waste waiting for the ferry, all that is now taken care of. Sometimes during the rain, the ferry service would stop. Now with the bridge, one can cross over anytime," he added. The Prime Minister also said that while only three bridges were built over the

Brahmaputra River in 60-70 years, three more have been completed in the last four and a half years alone. Another five, he said, are works in progress. He said this enhanced connectivity between the northern and southern banks of the Brahmaputra, is an element of good governance and would transform the North-East.

The NDA has focused on building infrastructure in the North East as part of its Act East policy to develop the region, and use it as a link to parts of South and South East Asia.

The Prime Minister spoke of the Union Government's vision of what he called transformation through transportation. He added that almost 700 kilometres of National Highways have been completed in the past four and a half years.

Describing the bridge as an engineering marvel, Modi said that this bridge had been a dream for the people of this region for generations, and is now a reality. "Dibrugarh is an important centre of healthcare, education and commerce in the region, and the people living north of the Brahmaputra, can now access this city, more conveniently," he said. "It was difficult and expensive, to cross the river on a ferry. If I had to take the car, it would take me two to three thousand rupees depending on the mood of the ferry operator just to cross. Now if I have to come from Itanagar to Nimsai, the road travel time has reduced to six hours at the most," said Taka Padi, General Secretary, Youth Congress, Arunachal Pradesh.

It previously used to take nine hours to travel from Itanagar, the capital of Arunachal Pradesh to Namsai in Assam.

Modi said that the bridge will also help people of north Assam to reach Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai and Bangalore without going to Guwahati. "In the next two to three years, capitals of all north-eastern states will have broad

gauge line. About R 47000 crore will be invested for 15 new rail lines in northeast. About 1000 km rail lines have been converted to broad gauge. Earlier, only 100 km rail line used to be laid or converted to broad gauge but the number has increased to 350 km in past four and half years. Not only this, 19 waterways are under progress in this area," Modi said.

At the inauguration ceremony, Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu thanked Prime Minister Narendra Modi. "Upper Assam and 15 districts of eastern Arunachal Pradesh will benefit from the bridge. I want to thank Modi ji for the kind of importance he has given to connectivity in North East, be in rail, road or digital," he said.

Former Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi said the bridge would "help in trade, commerce and defence." Gogoi said he was not invited for the inauguration ceremony even though most work for the bridge happened during the UPA-regime.

"There is no doubt that Modi has completed it. But most connectivity projects were started by the Congress," he said. "We don't believe in holding ceremonies. The work on the Dholasadiya bridge, the longest in the country bridge was started without even a foundation ceremony," he added.