

A 'century' for India as Sikkim gets first airport

CONNECTED New airport puts state on the aviation map, reduces its dependence on NH10

Pramod Giri

letters@hindustantimes.com

SILIGURI: The country had 65 airports till 2014 and has added 35 since, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said while inaugurating Sikkim's first airport, the 100th in India on Monday.

The foundation stone of the airport was laid in 2009 by former civil aviation minister Praful Patel. Pakyong airport, about 30 km from the state capital Gangtok at a height of about 4,600 feet above sea level, not only put Sikkim on the aviation map but also liberated the tiny Himalayan state from its critical dependence on a sole highway, NH10, for connectivity with the country.

"Hindustan hit a century today with 100 operating airports... In the past four years, we set up 35 airports while there were only 65 airports in 67 years since Independence, till 2014. On average, we have made nine airports per year while, in the 67 years till 2014, only one airport was created per year," said the Prime Minister while addressing a gathering at a nearby school after inaugurating the airport.

"They would have taken 40 years to do what we have achieved in four years," remarked Modi, referring to, without naming, the Congress, which governed India for much of



■ Sikkim CM Pawan Kumar Chamling greets PM Narendra Modi as Sikkim governor Ganga Prasad (L) and Minister of State at PMO Jitendra Singh (R) look on at the inauguration of Pakyong airport, Monday. PTI

the 67 years. He added that the new airport would soon connect Sikkim with Kolkata in West Bengal and Guwahati in Assam and that efforts would be made to connect it with airports in neighbouring countries. PM remarked that in the 70 years since Independence, 400 aircraft were serving the country. "Now India has become the world's third largest market for domestic aviation industry. In the past one year, different airlines have placed orders for 1,000 aircraft," he said.

He also said the airport has been brought under Ude Desh ka Aam Naagrik (UDAN) scheme, under which any flight up to an hour costs ₹2,500-2,600.

Modi also pointed out that Sikkim gets tourists that are 1.5 times its population (6.1 lakh according to 2011 census), and the airport would boost the tourism.

NH10, connecting Sikkim with Bengal is often blocked by agitators in Darjeeling district of Bengal who demand a separate state of Gorkhaland.

ACT EAST POLICY

Emphasising the Centre's Act East Policy, he said, "Every one or two weeks, a central minister visits the North East states to take stock of the development. The Centre has approved ₹350 crore for the National River Conservation Plan. Out of the nine projects

approved under the plan, eight are in Sikkim."

Modi also said that an assistance of ₹1,500 crore has been given to Sikkim to revamp electricity transmission lines. He praised the people of Sikkim for setting an example in organic farming; Sikkim is the first state in the country to become fully organic. Among those present on the occasion were Chamling, Sikkim governor Ganga Prasad, Union civil aviation minister Suresh Prabhu, Union MoS for Development of North Eastern Region Jitendra Singh and Union MoS for electronics and information technology SS Ahluwalia, MP from Darjeeling.