

Bengal Aerotropolis inaugurated, renamed after poet Nazrul Islam

PROBAL BASAK

Andal (Durgapur/WB), 19 September

After various verbal and other differences over two years, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's government finally demonstrated its support for an aerotropolis project here, with half the state cabinet and she arriving for the formal inauguration on Thursday.

Banerjee also renamed the project — a new airport, 200 km from Kolkata (plus a township and industrial park around it, yet to be built) — after one of her supposedly favourite poets. It is now to be known as the Kazi Nazrul Islam airport. The poet's daughter, Kalyani Kazi, shared the stage with the CM at the event.

This was the state's only major industrial project under implementation and the airport is expected to begin operations from the coming April. The entity in question is Bengal Aerotropolis Projects Ltd (BAPL), a venture of local entrepreneurs, in which Singapore's Changi Airports has a 26 per cent stake.

This project was conceived in 2006-07 during the Left Front government and the airport was to have been ready a year before. However, after Banerjee came to power in 2011, her government had opposed the project and held back various needed clearances. It also announced a decision to build another airport at Asansol, only 40 km away, among other things; that plan has now been given up. The developers also had to realign their land requirement and had various problems from the state government in acquiring whatever else was needed after the Left government had departed.

However, all that is supposed to be now part of the past. "We are expecting the airport will be inaugurated and operational on Poila Baisakh (Bengali new year, on April 14 next year)" said BAPL director and chief executive officer (CEO) Partha Ghosh. Construction of the runway, passenger terminal and air traffic control building is almost complete but equipment is yet to be installed. BAPL is in talks with all major domestic airlines to bring them here; the first flight is likely to be on the Durgapur-Delhi route.

At a time when all other big-ticket projects in the state like JSW Steel's steel/power project at Salboni or NTPC's power project at Katwa have hit some block or the other in the Mamata regime, the Andal project has become a showcase one for the latter. "The Kazi Nazrul Islam airport is a land-



West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee at the naming ceremony of Durgapur Airport, now Kazi Nazrul Islam Airport

PHOTO: SUBRATA MAJUMDER

mark achievement. This will mark the beginning of a new era for Bengal as an investment destination," said a pleased Banerjee on Thursday. "I would like to urge Changi and the investors' community to come and invest in the state. That is our sole focus."

Later, responding to a query on this, Lim Liang Song, CEO, Changi Airports International, said: "The airport city is a part of our long-term commitment. We also, on our behalf, urge investors from our country and worldwide to come and invest here." He, however, did not comment on whether Changi would increase its stake in BAPL, as suggested earlier by the government.

Recently, the government decided to provide a three-year sales tax waiver on aviation turbine fuel to airlines which would be operating out of non-metro airports like this one. This is going to help BAPL to woo airlines to come here.

The government also has a 1.23 per cent stake through West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation. Other Indian promoters include IL&FS, Pragati Social Infrastructure & Development, Pragati 47, Lend Lease Company India and Citystar Infrastructure.

The airport has been built over 650 acres with an investment of ₹600 crore but for BAPL, this is only half the job; it has plans for an airport city, an information technology park, hospitals and a residential complex. The airport city is expected to see an investment of about ₹10,000 crore.