

Clip: 1 of 1

Modi first to check in at state's 3rd airport

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KOLKATA: Prime Minister Narendra Modi became the first passenger to use the country's first greenfield private airport at Andal in Bardhaman on Sunday. His helicopter landed there at 12:40pm. Twenty-five minutes later, his aircraft took off from the airport, marking the end of his two-day visit to the state. It is the third airport in Bengal after Dum Dum and Bagdogra.

"Although the PM did not have the time to look around, he did take note of a few things and expressed satisfaction with the infrastructure," Partha Ghosh, the managing director of Bengal Aerotropolis Projects Ltd, the company that promoted the project, told *HT*.

Modi was on the ground floor for eight minutes and spent time glancing around and enquiring about the project. The airport authorities welcomed Modi with flowers and an *uttariya*.

CONTINUED ON P3

Clip: 2 of 1

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

"The Prime Minister said '*bahut achha kaam hua hai*' (it's a job well done) and promised to take a better look around the place when he visits the region next time. He also noted that the state government took some extra steps to ensure that the airport sees the light of the day," Ghosh said.

Three identical choppers landed at Andal on Sunday. Apart from the PM, the passengers included Governor Keshari Nath Tripathi, minister of state for urban development Babul Supriyo, Bengal's urban development minister Firhad Hakim, state BJP president Rahul Sinha and some officers of the PMO. The aircraft the Prime Minister travelled in had conducted a test-run at the airport on May 1.

Modi's take-off from Andal came as a big boost for the Bengal Aerotropolis authorities who spent eight long years to battle a host of issues, including political ones, to implement the project.

During the day, chief minister Mamata Banerjee announced that all planes that

refuel at Andal would enjoy tax-free rates till 2021. Aircraft fuel is taxed at a rate of 30% in the state and the tax-free status may be a major incentive for commercial airlines. Also, students will get a 25% concession on the fares if they travel from Andal.

Ghosh told HT that the first commercial flight will take off from Andal on May 18. "The Air India flight will take off from Dum Dum at 5:05pm and land here at 5:40pm. It will take off from Andal at 6pm and connect the passengers to a flight for Delhi leaving Dum Dum at 7:40pm and another for Mumbai at 8:15pm," Ghosh said.

The aerotropolis — an airport city — project is the first of its kind in the country and will entail a township, an industrial park, hospitals, shopping centres, amusement zones and the airport. Originally envisaged over 2,100 acres, the project has finally been built on 1,850 acres. The airport occupies 650 acres.

Changi Airport International, the Singapore major, is not only a big investor in the company but is also offering critical inputs for the operations.