

# Andal airport takes off on star power

## Gets Off To A Flying Start, But Tough Test Ahead

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**Andal:** On its first day of commercial operations, 101 passengers flew into and out of Kazi Nazrul Islam Airport at Andal in three flights that operated on Monday. Most of them were VIPs — cinestars, ministers and bureaucrats, and all — except one Captain Anirudh Agarwal — of them were guests of the state government and airport developer Bengal Aerotropolis Projects Ltd (BAPL).

It was quite by chance that Agarwal, posted at the Panagarh airfield of Indian Air Force, became the first paying passenger to use the country's first private sector greenfield airport. He would surely have missed the distinction and the flight had it been on time. But as luck would have it (or lucky stars?), the flight's departure was delayed by 40 minutes, giving enough time for the airline to reopen bookings and make the transaction.

Agarwal had initially been turned away at the tick-

et counter as he had arrived at the Andal airport barely 15 minutes before the scheduled 6.05pm departure of Alliance Air flight 91 714. But with flight 91 713 that arrived from Kolkata at 5.45pm packed with VIPs from Kolkata, the departure was pushed back to allow a refreshment break at the terminal.

The IAF officer finally managed to purchase a ticket to Delhi from Andal via Kolkata for Rs 18,551 at 6.30pm. When the 42-seater ATR 42-320 aircraft finally took off for Kolkata from Andal 15 minutes later, the quiet man in seat no. 7C was barely noticed. But he didn't mind the obscurity and was more than happy that there were cine-stars on board to grab the limelight.

Among those who were on board included MPs Dev and Moon Moon Sen, Tollywood actors Hiron, Nusrat Jahan, Sayantika Banerjee, Mimi Chakraborty and Srabonti, ministers Aroop Biswas and Moloy Ghatak, bureaucrat Rajeeva Sinha and IPS Raj



Kanojia. But for officials of BAPL, the real VIP was the unexpected 37th passenger: Anirudh Agarwal. After reaching Kolkata, Agarwal took Air India's Delhi connection flight AI023 at 8.15pm.

(Clockwise from above) Dev with Shrikant Mohta and Aroop Biswas; Nusrat Jahan, Mimi Chakraborty, Sayantika Banerjee and Srabonti at the terminal; Moon Moon Sen with Dev on the flight; Anirudh Agarwal at the ticket counter

Apart from Alliance Air, Pinnacle Air also operated a flight to Andal from Kolkata that flew onward to Cooch Behar on the first day.

The airport authorities and the airlines hope it is a good omen for future. "The challenge will begin on Tuesday. We have all made projections based on studies. Now fingers are crossed for the numbers to turn into passengers," a BAPL official said. Till Monday evening, 18 pas-



sengers had booked on Tuesday's flight to Andal from Kolkata and 33 on the return flight the same evening.

Durgapur-based businessman Kripal Singh, who travelled on the Kolkata-Andal leg, is confident the airport will have passengers to Delhi, Mumbai and Silliguri and even suggested flights to Guwahati as Durgapur and the Northeast exchange a lot of student and trade traffic. "The airport will cater to not just residents and executives

in Durgapur, Raniganj and Asansol but onward till Dhanbad and even beyond," he said on board the flight.

As of now, the Alliance Air flight schedule has been structured in a manner which will enable easy connectivity to Delhi and Mumbai via Kolkata. Through check-in facility has been arranged for passengers travelling from Durgapur to the twin metros.

Earlier, flagging off the star-studded flight at Kolkata airport, state finance minister Amit Mitra said it was a proud day for Bengal to house the country's first private greenfield airport facility. "The airport's takeoff realises Mamata Banerjee's dream of putting Durgapur on the country's aviation map," he said.

BAPL managing director Partha Ghosh said the company's dream was to address the latent need for flight connectivity to the Asansol-Durgapur region that has been the state's primary industrial belt for decades.

"We challenged ourselves continuously to achieve this feat of being India's first private greenfield airport," he said.