

Arunachal finds place on commercial aviation map

Creating history: The 42-seater Alliance Air flight landing at the Pasighat airport on Monday. PTI

A wartime airstrip laid 66 years ago helped Arunachal Pradesh create history on Monday by becoming the last of the eight northeastern States to be on India's commercial flight service map.

Pasighat airport, too, made it to the record books — as India's easternmost airport with civilian operations — when an Alliance Air flight touched down at 2.30 p.m. from Kolkata via Guwahati, carrying Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu and other passengers.

Pasighat, about 570 km northeast of Guwahati, is the headquarters of East Siang district and the State's oldest city. The airport is roughly on 95.33°E longitude, while Mohanbari airport near Dibrugarh in adjoining Assam, hitherto the easternmost civilian airport, is on 94.91°E longitude.

"Today's a historic day, ending our long wait for fixed-wing flights. This flight service also underlines the focus of our government on providing air and road connectivity to the remotest parts of Arunachal Pradesh," Mr. Khandu said, after alighting from the 42-seater ATR-42 aircraft.

The Alliance Air flight took off a couple of hours later for Kolkata. Officials of Alliance Air, a wholly owned subsidiary of Air India, said the near-full flight holds promise for the thrice-a-week service on the Kolkata-Guwahati-Pasighat circuit, introduced under UDAN, the regional air connectivity scheme.

Built in 1952

Pasighat airport, one of six operational advance landing grounds (ALGs) in Arunachal Pradesh primarily for military use, was laid in 1952 but was virtually abandoned after the China-India war in 1962, until the Indian Air Force took it over in 2010. The airport was inaugurated in August 2016 with the landing of a Sukhoi Su-30 fighter jet. A civilian terminal was built in 2017 and a test landing of Alliance Air's commercial flight was carried out in April this year.

Arunachal Pradesh is working on a bigger airport at Hollongi near Itanagar. The project is yet to take off because of land acquisition issues.

On April 27, the UDAN scheme connected Meghalaya's Umroi airport near State capital Shillong via an 18-seater Air Deccan flight. Umroi, though, had erratic commercial flight service more than a decade ago. Air connectivity for Sikkim, too, was opened on March 10 this year when a 70-seater SpiceJet flight from Kolkata touched down at Pakyong Airport near Gangtok.

Assam is the best air-connected State in the northeast, with Guwahati being the communication hub. The other civilian airports with commercial flight service are at Dibrugarh, Silchar, Jorhat, north Lakhimpur and Tezpur. The busiest airports after Guwahati are Imphal and Agartala, followed by Lengpui near Mizoram's capital Aizawl, and Nagaland's commercial hub of Dimapur.

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