

KUSHINAGAR NOW HUB OF BUDDHIST TOURIST CIRCUIT

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Pilgrims way: PM Narendra Modi with a Sri Lankan delegation, led by Minister Namal Rajapaksa, in Kushinagar. PTI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday inaugurated the Kushinagar International Airport in Uttar Pradesh, which will help connect key Buddhist pilgrimage sites.

Kushinagar is an important Buddhist pilgrim destination, and is believed to be the final resting place of Gautam Buddha.

An inaugural flight of Sri Lankan Airlines landed at the airport earlier in the day, bringing a large contingent of Buddhist monks and Sri Lankan Ministers, including Sports Minister Namal Rajapaksa, nephew of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and son of Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa. They met Mr. Modi at an event at the Mahaparinirvana Temple here.

Diplomats attend

Diplomats from 12 countries where Buddhism is practised, including Mongolia, Myanmar, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Bhutan, Republic of Korea, Nepal and Japan, were also present.

“There is a special focus on the development of places associated with Lord Buddha through better connectivity, and creation of facilities for devotees. Lumbini, the birth place of Lord Buddha, is not far from here. Sarnath, where Lord Buddha gave the first sermon, is also within a radius of 100-250 km. Bodhi Gaya, where Buddha attained enlightenment, is also a few hours away. With the launch of this airport, I, as a representative of Poorvanchal, have also fulfilled one of my commitments to this region,” Mr. Modi said.

With the Uttar Pradesh Assembly election slated for early next year, several Union Ministers had also flown in from Delhi.

Apart from Civil Aviation Minister Jyotiraditya Scindia, Minister of State for External Affairs Meenakshi Lekhi, Tourism Minister G. Kishan Reddy, Law Minister Kiren Rijiju and Minister of State for Parliamentary Affairs Arjun Ram Meghwal were present.

Air India privatisation

In his first comments on Air India since privatisation, Mr. Modi said, “The decision on Air India will give new energy to the aviation sector in the country.”

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath said, “This will be Uttar Pradesh’s ninth airport, seven of which have been developed in the past seven years alone. The State will get 11 more airports in the years to come, including two international ones.”

Secretary of the Ministry of Civil Aviation Rajiv Bansal told *The Hindu* that Thailand sends the largest number of tourists to this region, and he expected charter flights from there to Kushinagar to start soon.

On the sidelines of the Kushinagar airport inauguration, Mr. Namal Rajapaksa presented to Mr. Modi a Sinhala-Tamil-English translation of the Bhagavad Gita.

The Sri Lankan delegation also brought relics from the 'Rajaguru Sri Subhuthi Maha Vihara', a famed Buddhist shrine located 40 km south of Colombo.

Indian officials would organise an exposition of the relics in several cities, including Kushinagar and Sarnath, a statement from the Indian High Commission in Colombo said. The Sri Lankan delegation would visit Varanasi and offer prayers at the Kashi Vishwanath temple.

On Wednesday, Mr. Namal Rajapaksa met Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla and had a "cordial and productive conversation," the Indian mission said in a tweet.

(With inputs from

Suhasini Haidar in New Delhi and Meera Srinivasan in Colombo)

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