

Shri Natha Singh was a Member of the Rajasthan Legislative Assembly from 1972 to 1977. He represented the State of Rajasthan in this House from April, 1982 to April, 1988.

In the passing away of Shri Natha Singh, the country has lost a noted social worker.

We deeply mourn the passing away of His Majesty King Fahd Bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud and Shri Natha Singh.

I request the Members to rise in their places and observe silence as a mark of respect to the memory of the departed.

(The Members then stood in silence for one minute)

MR. DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Secretary-General will convey to the members of the bereaved families our deep sense of sorrow and sympathy.

ORAL ANSWERS TO THE QUESTIONS

Utilisation of Rupsi Airport

*121. SHRI DWIJENDRA NATH SHARMAH: Will the Minister of CIVIL AVIATION be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government have any proposal to utilise the Rupsi Airport near Dhubri in Assam;

(b) if so, what steps have been taken by Government till now; and

(c) whether there is any commitment from Government to the NER MPs in this regard?

THE MINISTER OF STATE OF THE MINISTRY OF CIVIL AVIATION (SHRI PRAFUL PATEL): (a) to (c) A Statement is laid on the Table of the House.

Statement

(a) to (c) The possibility of renovation and reconstruction of Rupsi Airport near Dhubri in Assam was examined. Inspection of the existing airstrip by Airports Authority of India (AAI) at Rupsi near Dhubri in Assam has indicated an estimated expenditure of Rs. 65 crores to make it operational. No firm commitment from airlines for scheduled operations from Rupsi has been received. Therefore, AAI has no proposal to renovate the Rupsi Airport at present.

SHRI DWIJENDRA NATH SHARMAH: Sir, lack of airports facilities is one of the major causes of underdevelopment of Assam and the North Eastern Region. The facilities in the lower Assam, particularly, are even worse. Sir, there is an airstrip near Dhubri called Rupsi Airport, and it is lying unutilised for a long time. In a meeting which was held last year in the chamber of the hon. Minister, it was requested that if Rupsi Airport is opened for civil airlines, then, a lot of people will be benefited, even the people of North Bengal, Coochbehar will also be benefited. Now, the Minister has given a negative reply. May I know from the hon. Minister which Airlines he contacted for this purpose, which has said that they would not be able to run Airlines in that area? I would like to know the name of the Airlines which is not ready to fly aircraft to that Airport.

SHRI PRAFUL PATEL: Sir, it is a fact that Assam and the entire North-Eastern Region need increased connectivity. Already, there are many airfields within the entire North-Eastern region, which have got connectivity at the moment. However, as the hon. Member has pointed out, lower Assam and certain parts of North Bengal definitely need higher connectivity. We have, at the moment, started work on the Coochbehar Airport, which is in the northern-most part of Bengal, and which is, as the hon. Member has mentioned, near the Rupsi-Dhubri airfield.

The Rupsi airfield is definitely in a state of disuse. It was an operational airport many, many years ago, but for the last twenty-five to thirty years or so, it has been left in a condition of disuse and neglect. Therefore, a major amount of money would have to be spent to make this airfield operational. Now, that being the case, Sir, as the hon. Member has rightly pointed out, I had convened a meeting of the entire North-Eastern Region MPs and understood their concerns as to how the connectivity issues of North-East could be addressed more effectively. The Coochbehar Airport is also a result of one of those initiatives. However, Sir, I am also in the process of discussion with the North-Eastern Council, which looks after the overall development of that region. As the hon. Members would appreciate—and I am not trying to make excuses—we do understand the need of connectivity to the North-East. At the same time, the Airports Authority of India is already operating several airfields in almost all the States except the State of Arunachal Pradesh. Substantial investments were made in the airfields there, but they do not earn any money from them. Therefore, I wish to say, please, do not get agitated. I am not trying to make any excuses, but the fact remains that investment is continuously being made already in the existing airfields to upgrade them from time to time. That is why, we are

going to sit with the North-Eastern Council and try to see as to how best this issue, especially of the Rupsi Airport, which you have mentioned, could be resolved.

Meanwhile, you had also asked about airlines. Naturally, we would also try to contract airlines, but they would not be in a position to give any commitment because about an airfield which is closed and which is not operational, there would definitely not be satisfactory responses coming from the airlines. But as I said, we shall take up your concerns with the North-Eastern Council and try to find an effective solution to increase connectivity in the southern part of Assam.

SHRI DWIJENDRA NATH SHARMAH: Sir, the second point I would like to know about is, the hon. Minister has said that he had discussed this matter in the meeting. Actually, in that meeting, held one year back, we had been promised...

SHRI PRAFUL PATEL: That was six months back.

SHRI DWIJENDRA NATH SHARMAH: In the meeting held six months back, we had been promised a lot of things, particularly upgradation of the Guwahati airport and other airports and air connectivity to Arunachal Pradesh. All these issues had come up then. Even today, there is no evening flight from Delhi to Guwahati, and the hon. Minister had assured that this would also be taken care of within two months. But as he has stated, already six months have passed.

Therefore, may I know, Sir, whether you would be giving some concrete assurance about the issue of connectivity to Arunachal Pradesh, the Rupsi Airport and the minor issue of afternoon flight from Delhi? When would these things be done?

SHRI PRAFUL PATEL: Sir, the issues of flight connectivity and evening flight between Guwahati and Delhi do not form part of this question. But, I would still endeavour to assuage the feelings of the hon. Member. At the same time, we are all aware that maximum connectivity to the North-East is already being provided by Alliance Air and Indian Airlines, much more than the required minimum for any airlines. But again, it is a national endeavour and it is a national commitment of the public carriers to see to it that there is more connectivity. This opens up a larger issue and therefore, I do not wish to go into much details, but they are also facing constraints on account of shortage of aircraft, shortage of pilots, which we are

all aware of. There is, therefore, as I said, a large issue involved and let us not get into that, otherwise it would go off at a tangent. But at the moment, I would like to assure the hon. Member that I shall try my best to speak to the airlines. The airlines are all free to decide their own schedules and therefore, I cannot, at my level, decide which time table would be applicable to which airlines. However, I will share your concerns with the airlines and try to find a solution.

MR. DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Thank you. This question relates to the North-East and Assam. There are number of requests, but I would like to give preference to the North-East people, and if any time is left, then, I will give it to other people.

SHRI ROBERT KHARSHING: Thank you, Sir. While complimenting the hon. Minister for calling the meeting of the North-East MPs Forum where a very useful exchange of ideas took place, I would like to know from the hon. Minister when will he convene another meeting of that sort to follow up assurances given at that meeting. This is number one. Secondly, I would like to join my colleague who raised a query whether another flight can be scheduled in the afternoon or evening because all the flights leave at the same time at around 10.05 o'clock in the morning.

SHRI PRAFUL PATEL: Sir, I will be delighted happy to meet hon. Members of Parliament from both Houses of North-Eastern Region, from time to time. The first meeting was held at my initiative, and if you are keen, I will be happy to host another meeting during this Parliament Session itself. We will discuss. Of course, the more we meet, the more we discuss. I am sure that better solutions can be found and we also will be more sensitised with the problems which exist there. In terms of evening flights, I have already spoken to Airlines. I will try to speak to them again and we will try to address your concern in the best possible manner.

SHRI URKHAO GWRA BRAHMA: Sir, Rupsi is located in the western-most district of Assam, which is very backward. Due to lack of air connectivity, economic development is not taking place properly. The hon. Minister has given a very detailed answer that the Airports Authority of India has given a very detailed report to the Ministry that they are not going to renovate the Rupsi Airport, and no such operations of airlines have been committed by the Airports Authority of India. I would like to know from the hon. Minister as to what are the reasons that the Airports Authority of India is

not going to take up the matter and is not going to renovate the Rupsi Airport. Why can't the flights be operated from the Rupsi Airport?

SHRI PRAFUL PATEL: Sir, I just mentioned that there is no question of saying 'No'. It is not like a 'No'. We are sitting with the NEC to take up the larger question of connectivity in the North-East. I am sure the concerns of the people of lower Assam, especially in terms of this region, and which you are quite clear that you would like to see connectivity there, will be taken care of. We will sit with the NEC. It is a larger issue. A lot of investment is required and we will have to sit with NEC. My esteemed colleague, Shri Chidambaram, also has to be quite kind to me. I am sure that we will sit with the NEC and the Planning Commission, and some way can be found out.

SHRI MATILAL SARKAR: Sir, we have, time and again, persuaded to have a morning flight from Kolkata to Agartala, and the hon. Minister has put one for that. But it never goes in the morning, and newspapers go to Agartala readers one day later. People who would like to avail of connecting flights and the connecting train journey, have to wait for one day at Kolkata at the expenses of Rs. 700 or Rs. 800. It is an additional burden on their side.

MR. DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Your supplementary is not connected with this question.

SHRI MATILAL SARKAR: I would like to put my question to the hon. Minister whether this morning flight, which is not now flying regularly, will fly regularly. Will the Ministry operate an Airbus between Agartala and Kolkata, all days of the week, not only for two days.

SHRI PRAFUL PATEL: Sir, I am aware of the hon. Member's concern. Again, Sir, it comes back to the point that there is a shortage of aircraft and pilots both, which has led to this problem. I must admit it. This is not something where I am trying to go away from the responsibility which we have. But, the fact of the matter is that this is a serious problem which has affected the Alliance Air operations especially, and therefore, the North-East also. We are trying our best to maintain connectivity in the best possible. But, I will definitely look into your concerns as to the flight which is scheduled and not operating, I will find out the reasons and will definitely come back to you.

SHRIMATI SYEDAANWARA TAIMUR: Mr. Deputy Chairman, Sir, it is said that meeting of the MPs of the North-Eastern Region was held in the Chamber of the Minister and he gave commitment that in the Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi Guwahati Airport, a runway for international flights will be completed. But, till now, no work has been started. Will the Minister give specific assurance when the runway will be completed for international flights?

SHRI PRAFUL PATEL: Sir, the Guwahati Airport, is of course, the most important airport in the entire North-East. It is like a hub for the entire region and it is in the list of major airports which have to be taken up, in the first phase, for upgradation to international standards including extension of the runways, ultra-modern and passenger-friendly terminal building and better navigation equipment. Guwahati Airport does deserve that importance and we are fully aware of it and I can assure the hon. Member that her concerns will be addressed.

MR. DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Next Question, Shri Abu Asim Azmi.

श्री रुद्रनारायण घोषि: सर, इस क्वेश्चन पर पूछना था। ... (व्यवधान)

श्री उपसभापति: नहीं। ... (व्यवधान)

श्री रुद्रनारायण घोषि: सर, हमें मौका मिलना चाहिए पूरे दिन हम बैठे रहते हैं। महत्वपूर्ण प्रश्न है। ... (व्यवधान)

MR. DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: In the beginning itself, I said that I would give preference to the Members from North-East.

*122. [The questioner (Shri Abu Asim Azmi) was absent. For answer vide page 25]

Investment of pension funds in capital market

*123. SHRI A. VIJAYARAGHAVAN: Will the Minister of FINANCE be pleased to state:

(a) whether there is any proposal for investment of pension fund of Central Government employees in the capital market;

(b) if so, the details thereof including the present status of the above proposal;