

Delhi lobby can hit Chandigarh airport takeoff

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It is time to resolve the issues pertaining to the naming of the international airport in Mohali. Shaheed Bhagat Singh Chandigarh International Airport, according to the writer, will be an appropriate name for the airport.

SITTING in Zurich on the 50th Anniversary of Corbusier passing away, I read that the international airport at Chandigarh has, finally, been inaugurated by the Prime Minister. The occasion fortuitously got linked with the memories of Corbusier, who is being celebrated in Chandigarh, as in Europe and particularly in Switzerland.

The argument over the improvement of Chandigarh airport, has been on for more than a decade. I have been a Punjab MP since 2004. In the last 10 years of the last government, I tried very hard, with the then Aviation Minister, to improve the situation. The small civil airport at the Air Force Station needed to be expanded. Contracts were given for modest changes, but the doings of the contractor, and the casualness of the Aviation Ministry, delayed it for many years. Work was also stopped for a long time over a quarrel between the contractor and the government. I tried hard, but the Aviation Minister's energies, were focused on Nagpur and elsewhere. Finally, modest expansion was undertaken.

In the meanwhile, lobbying started for an international airport. That issue also took its own time. Elsewhere in India, be it the East, West, North or South, a number of international airports came up. After all, an airport is simply a place for an air taxi that is no different from a land taxi; they both take passengers from A to B for a charge. The opening up of aviation did much for the country, but Punjab was always denied its due.

Amritsar International Airport was an airport in name only. The privatisation of



Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the airport during his recent visit to the city.

the New Delhi airport strangled Amritsar. It is well known that half the passengers of Delhi come from the Punjab on their way to the West, the Middle East, Newzealand and Australia. The owners of Delhi Airport and the Tourism Industry in Delhi insisted that the Punjab passengers suffer every hardship for the economic benefit of the Capital. Amritsar-Singapore flights were stopped. Direct flights to the UK, Canada and America were not allowed. Even an Amritsar-Birmingham-Toronto flight faded.

Punjab has great potential and it tried to export fruits, vegetables and flowers. Sadly, this too was scuttled. All agro-exports clearances were held in a tight control in Delhi. I should know. As a former Agriculture Secretary of India, all my efforts with the Aviation Ministry got nowhere. Punjab did not have any voice in the Cabinet. The Prime Minister sitting at an Olympian height, preferred to stay above all such mundane battles,

though all prime ministers have been known to take an active interest in promoting development in their home states. Therefore, while the opening up of aviation benefited the country, the first out migrants from India were left stranded in a nowhere land.

I am happy to see that Chandigarh will have an international airport. The Punjab government took a positive step by giving 300 acres of land free, in order to get the international terminal in Punjab, just across the Chandigarh boundary. Now that the airport has been inaugurated, a few points need clear and positive resolution. First, the international character of the airport should be firmly pushed forward. International flights from Singapore, Hongkong, Australia, the UK, Canada and the USA must be allowed freely to fly direct into Chandigarh, if the international airport is to have any meaning. This airport should not be treated the way Amritsar has been. Ahmedabad International Airport has

progressed rapidly, so too should Chandigarh and Amritsar airports. The Punjab are well recognised as 'Flying Dutchmen'. If, however, economic interests in Delhi continue to prevail, then Amritsar International Airport and Chandigarh International Airport will both languish.

The second point is about the name of the airport. When the issue was taken up in the last government, Punjab and Haryana had indulged in a petty debate. One point was finally settled. Both states agreed that the airport must be named after Shaheed Bhagat Singh. However, a niggle rose, over whether it should be stated to be in Chandigarh or Mohali. In the last government this was not resolved and the issue continues to fester. Punjab argues that it should be named after Mohali. Haryana demurs, and the Centre continues to look away. It is true that the international terminal is on the Punjab-gifted land, but I am not sure it makes any sense to talk of Mohali International Airport. The village of Mohali disappeared 25 years ago in the expansion of the city. Giani Zail Singh long ago renamed it as Sahibzada Ajit Singh Nagar. The Sahibzada made a supreme sacrifice close to this township. The name failed to take off, because no name can be so long. The Punjab Government itself started writing, SAS Nagar (Mohali). It occurred to me many years back that SAS Nagar should be dropped, and the town should be named as Ajitgarh. You need a pithy name which rolls easily off the tongue. As it happens, Ajitgarh would nicely fit with Gobindgarh and Chandigarh. We would have a trinity of Gobindgarh, Chandigarh, Ajitgarh. I pressed this with a number of Chief Ministers of

both parties, and even through The Tribune. I spoke to President Zail Singh. He accepted my point and asked if he should intervene, but I thought it would not be correct to bring him into the argument now. Sometime back Ajitgarh was officially accepted by the Government of India, and so reported in the Punjab press. I once talked to the Chief Minister, requesting him to make the name Ajitgarh effective, but it appears the old situation continues. Finally, as a former Agriculture Secretary of India, I pray that the Government of India will no longer continue the centralised Delhi control of exports of agro products for which Punjab has a great future. The clearance of agro exports should be decentralised every where. All clearances for such exports should be given on the spot in Chandigarh and Amritsar. These exports will recover Punjab's expenditure on the international terminal. An international airport must recognisably link with the name of a well-known city. The truth is that Chandigarh is, and will continue to be on the world map, for achievements in city planning in the 20th century. Corbusier is accepted in the world as a great town planner and architect. Chandigarh and Corbusier are linked by an umbilical cord. I, therefore, suggest that the argument should be dropped, and it should be called Shaheed Bhagat Singh Chandigarh International Airport. The world will recognise it and come to Chandigarh for Corbusier. The name Mohali should be finally buried, and the Sahibzada's memory given full play, with the Government of India-sanctioned name Ajitgarh for the district and the town.

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