



Seal on land for AIIMS at Kalyani

SANJAY MANDAL

Chief minister Mamata Banerjee has written to Union health minister Harsh Vardhan, committing 150 acres in Kalyani along with essential infrastructure to set up an All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) there.

Union health ministry officials said a team would visit Bengal soon for a formal inspection of the land, after which a detailed project report would be prepared.

The 150 acres are adjacent to Kalyani railway station and JNM Medical College and Hospital. "The land belongs to the land and land revenue department," the official said.

Mamata, who is on a three-day visit to north Bengal, confirmed the decision at Bagdogra airport on Tuesday. "AIIMS will be established in Kalyani. We would have been happy if AIIMS was set up in north Bengal. But for that, land has to be available. In the past 10 years, nothing was done to obtain land for the project and there was only politics over the issue."

AIIMS Delhi is spread across 100 acres but a centre of excellence, which the one in Bengal is meant to be, requires 200 acres. The Union health ministry has apparently agreed to make do with 150 acres.

Sources at Swastha Bhavan, the headquarters of the state health department, said Mamata's commitment to arrange for the requisite infrastructure along with land had removed doubts about whether her government was serious about the project.

Union minister Harsh Vardhan had written to the chief minister recently, mentioning that Delhi was "in principle" ready to set up the country's second AIIMS in Kalyani if Bengal could provide land. "Now we can go ahead with the project. An inspection needs to be carried out before a professional agency is hired for the DPR (detailed project report)," a ministry official said.

Metro had highlighted Bengal's offer of land in Kalyani for the proposed AIIMS on June 11.

Kalyani has been on the state government's radar since 2011, when Mamata requested the then Union health minister Ghulam Nabi Azad to shift the proposed Rs 823-crore project from Raiganj to a site closer to Calcutta.

Kalyani was the government's pick because of its proximity to the city and the research environment already created by the presence of the [National Institute of Biomedical Genomics](#) there.

Raiganj is more than 400km from Calcutta while Kalyani is just about 50km away. "It would have been difficult to get top professionals for an institute 400km away from Calcutta," an official said.



Bengal latches on to AIIMS with land offer

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Bengal has offered land in Kalyani for the proposed All India Institute of Medical Sciences within days of Union health minister Harsh Vardhan saying he would be “happy” to consider the project the moment a site was made available.

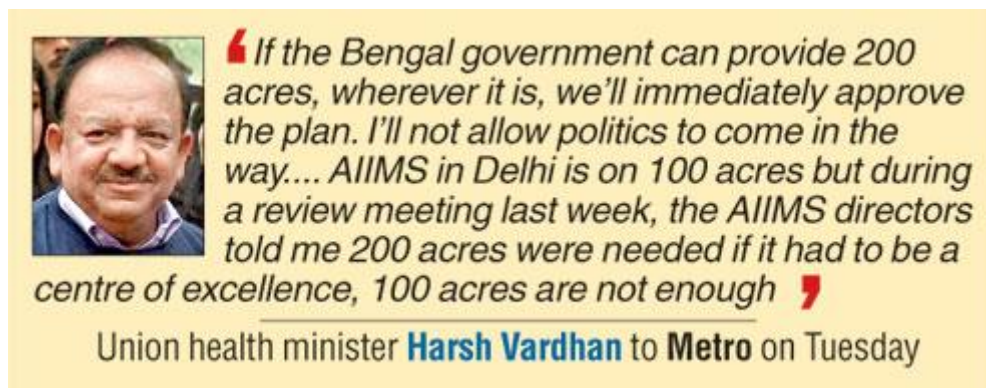
“We have written to the health ministry, requesting it to consider our proposal to set up an AIIMS in Kalyani. We have mentioned that land won’t be a problem and that Kalyani’s proximity to Calcutta would be a huge advantage,” a senior official of the state government said on Tuesday.

Officials in Delhi confirmed that a proposal was sent on Monday by state health secretary Moloy De to his counterpart in the Union ministry, Luv Kumar. “We received the letter this evening. We will put it up for the minister’s approval and take appropriate steps soon,” a source in the ministry said.

Kalyani has been on the state government’s radar since 2011, when chief minister Mamata Banerjee had written to the then Union health minister Ghulam Nabi Azad to shift the proposed Rs 823-crore project from Raiganj to a site closer to Calcutta. She argued that a large tract of privately owned land would have to be acquired in Raiganj, which would be contrary to her government’s policy of not putting agricultural land to any other use.

Sources said the erstwhile UPA government sat on Mamata’s proposal for three years, all but killing off the project until new health minister Harsh Vardhan held out hope for its resurrection if Bengal was able to provide a suitable alternative site.

“If the Bengal government can provide 200 acres, wherever it is, we will immediately approve the plan. I will not allow politics to come in the way,” he told **Metro** over phone on Tuesday.



The union minister said the only condition was availability of land. “AIIMS in Delhi is on 100 acres but during a review meeting last week, the AIIMS directors told me 200 acres were needed if it had to be a centre of excellence; 100 acres are not enough.”

Kalyani is a viable option for an institute such as AIIMS because of various reasons, including proximity to the city and the research environment already created by the presence of the **National Institute of Biomedical Genomics** there, health department officials said.

Raiganj is more than 400km from Calcutta while Kalyani is just about 50km or an hour’s drive away.

The choice of Kalyani as an alternative to Raiganj was apparently made easier by the availability of more than 100 acres of land owned by various departments of the state government.

Raiganj, in North Dinajpur, failed to measure up not only in terms of connectivity but also did not have enough land to offer without the government acquiring agricultural plots.

Doctors and scientists who have returned to Calcutta from abroad over the past few years to join organisations like the Tata Medical Center and the **National Institute of Biomedical Genomics** agree that a site several hundred kilometres from the city isn't ideal for a project like the proposed AIIMS, especially if one of the objectives is to attract the best brains.

Somnath Bagchi, pain management consultant at the Tata Medical Center in New Town, had worked 10 years in the UK before returning to Calcutta a few years ago. "Had the job offer been from an institute located 300km away from Calcutta, I wouldn't have accepted it. The choice was between Calcutta and London," he said.

Officials at the hospital admitted it would have been difficult for them to hire the best talent if the Tata Medical Center were located in a district town. "The first things a potential recruit wants to know are location, schooling and recreation facilities," said V. R. Ramanan, deputy medical director at the facility.

The **National Institute of Biomedical Genomics**, established in 2010, too has a crack team of scientists for whom distance from the city was among the factors to consider before accepting job offers.

"The primary reason for my joining here was the professional challenge. But had the institute been in the middle of nowhere, it would have become difficult for me to relocate," said **Arindam Maitra**, associate professor and project coordinator of the International Cancer Genome Consortium, India.