

# AIR TRAVEL IN INDIA — SAFETY AND SERVICE

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**“Free Enterprise was born with  
man and shall survive as long as man  
survives.”**

**—A. D. Shroff**

**1899-1965**

**Founder-President  
Forum of Free Enterprise**

## AIR TRAVEL IN INDIA — SAFETY AND SERVICE

**Wing Commander VIJAY MAHAJAN\***

In India there are some things which do not seem to have been given adequate attention with regard to safety and service in air travel. There are four important issues in front of us today :

- (1) We do not have a ‘National Aviation Policy’
- (2) We are not able to attract the best of our youth into aviation
- (3) All our three airlines have developed their own policies and none is complimentary to each other
- (4) There is too much of a political and bureaucratic interference into the day-to-day running of our airlines.

The government must formulate a national policy and make it mandatory for the airlines to adhere to it with particular reference to selection and training of pilots, personnel, purchase of aircraft and equipment. Unfortunately, in our country we do not have a proper selection procedure or

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training system. Selection of suitable persons is not possible under a bureaucratic system, e.g., it is mandatory to take 20 per cent of personnel from so and so community because of the recruitment policy of the government. What we should in fact see is whether that man has the right type of aptitude or not, rather than giving him a preferential treatment on the basis of his community.

We also do not have what is known as "aviation management Science" to train our youngsters to fit into the aeroplanes. For example in the U.S.A., a trainee pilot is selected after a tough selection board examination. Once he is selected he is made to sit in the cockpit as an observer for a couple of months. He observes what the pilots are doing, how the cabin crew are going about their jobs, how the loaders are loading and unloading, how the engineer is going round the aircraft and what is he trying to check, etc. He is only to be seen and not to be heard. After this he is promoted as a flight engineer for a further few months. Now he starts monitoring the aircraft instruments, keeping an eye on engine performance and helping the pilots in airmanship, i.e., keeping a good look outside for any bird or any other aircraft in the vicinity. It is only then that he is permitted to fly as a co-pilot on international routes. In India, however, young boys after their SSC go to USA and join a flying club there for a C.P.L. (Commercial Pilots' Licence). They do about 200 hours of flying on a trainer after paying about 6000 dollars, come back with a C.P.L. to India and start flying straightaway as co-pilots. What can you expect from this man? He is going to be confused and lost in today's high technology transport cockpit.

Another point is that none of our airlines' chiefs have any aviation experience at all. Take the case of the Chairman and Managing Director of Indian Airlines who recently resigned on moral grounds after the Bangalore tragedy. He is an

accounts man. Chairman of Vayudoot who has now been asked to step down after the Dornier crash in December is not an aviation man and the Managing Director of Air-India is not an aviation man either. It appears that these people at the helm are more busy in finding out ways to show only profits for their airlines. They appear to be more concerned for glamourising the image by changing livery and logo and changing the colour and prints of hostesses' saris rather than paying more attention to the capabilities of the men who sit at the controls and in whose hands the lives of so many passengers depend. I am not implying that airlines should not build up their images. By all means 'yes', but flight safety must and always remain a topmost concern of all those involved in the running of our airlines. Therefore, as a result of all this our airlines are eventually suffering. The political meddle is so bad that even the routes are selected by our politicians to ensure that their constituencies get linked with air map.

Let us now briefly examine our support services. Take airports for instance. Before the close of this century, air traffic in India will increase by more than 300 per cent. We may not have so many aircrafts landing here but they will certainly be overflying our country. They will then need our services. We will be required to give them services like radio and radar aids, navigational aids, air traffic control service, fire fighting, rescue and survival and so on. The question is : are we ready with all that will be needed? Our authorities have not even started thinking about the infrastructure that will be needed to cope up with tomorrow's crowded skies. We need more international airports. And they should be 'all weather' airports in accordance with International Civil Aviation Organisation (I.C.A.O.) regulations. Our present four international airports meet only 50-60 per cent of ICAO standards. Take a look at Changi of Singapore, Schiphol of Amsterdam and Heathrow of London. They are all 100

per cent ICAO standard. We do not have a single airport which meets ICAO regulations completely.

Support Services can be divided into two : Administrative and operational. Under administration, we have broadly passenger handling, fire fighting, rescue and survival and security. Let us take the case of passenger handling : The way air traffic is going on increasing if 10 Jumbos land in Bombay there will be 4,500 passengers. You will not be able to give them a glass of water, leave alone anything else. There will be pregnant ladies, small children, sick and invalid, old people. They will be needing assistance and service. Why have we not yet started thinking about it?

Take fire fighting for instance. If an aircraft comes with a bomb threat, where are we going to park it? Are we going to park it on the tarmac next to the other aircraft? In our country there is not even one airport which has a sterile area to park an aircraft with this kind of an emergency. I have seen it in Palam not many years ago. An aircraft came with a bomb threat and the Controller had no choice than to park it at one end of the standby runway. Now so far as Palam was concerned, it did not have an emergency runway available for either a take-off or a landing because of an aircraft parked there. We must have an area at our airports specifically earmarked for this eventuality and this area should be segregated from the rest of the area of operation.

Rescue and survival for instance : Unfortunately our rescue teams are not properly trained to rescue passengers. There is once again not a single airport in our country which has a fully well-trained rescue and survival team. We do not have any mock-up rescue exercises to train these teams either. There are 30 different types of aircrafts operating today, each with a unique door, and in a crisis, the rescuers may find themselves fumbling with the door handles.

Let us look at our air traffic control. We find that there is an acute shortage of controllers all over the country. At Bombay which is the busiest of Indian airports, the situation is alarming. In 1980 a total of 91 controllers were sanctioned. Air traffic since then has increased by more than 45 per cent plus there are extra demands from Vayudoot and Pawan Hans for ONGC helicopters from Juhu to Bombay high etc. You will be surprised to know that present strength of controllers at Bombay is only 60, and 90 per cent of them are unrated meaning they cannot perform all the duties without the help of a supervisor. Now this is far below the manning level. I must make it very clear that a controller just because he sits on the ground does not mean that he is not an important man. He is as important as a pilot. All of you see it everyday on our roads. Sometimes when there is no traffic constable on the road or the traffic lights are not working, there is virtual chaos and confusion. It is the same situation here. If there is not a good controller on the ground, there will be chaos and confusion in the air. Controllers have to perform in difficult conditions. They work in shift duties, 24 hours a day round the clock, 365 days a year. They do not have holidays like Diwali or Christmas. Because there is a shortage, they are often denied leave and since they do not get leave they are a disgruntled and dissatisfied lot sitting in front of their radar scopes. They have to work under high decible engine noise and many times they are required to man even two channels at a time due to shortage. The condition is so pathetic that they can not even get a cup of tea at their posts because there are no peons. What are we expecting them to do? Leave their radar scope, and go down to the restaurant to have a cup of tea! Someone has to think about it. And who is going to do it? Our aviation authorities, of course.

As far as our aviation authorities are concerned, I am sorry to say that they lack in almost every sphere. Earlier, the

Directorate-General of Civil Aviation (D.G.C.A.) was responsible for all the maintenance of our airports. At that time, when we approached D.G.C.A. for some problem we always got some kind of an answer. It might not have been to our fullest satisfaction but they did give us some answer at least. Now we have three agencies namely D.G.C.A., International Airports Authority of India (IAAI) and National Airports Authority of India (NAAI) and all the three do not see eye to eye with each other. Imagine three people under the same roof with loyalty to three different bosses: then who is going to do the work here? I ask you, has any of our authorities built any runway or an airport on their own? Not even one. Isn't it surprising then that after 43 years of our independence we have not built even one runway on our own? Thanks to the Britishers, they built our runways and left them behind for us to use. And what are we doing? We are only modifying them by extending them by a few feet here and a few feet there, or we are strengthening them so that they can take on the latest aircraft with higher all-up weight.

Regarding the availability of navigational aids in our country, the less we say about it the better. V.O.R. oscillates 5 to 10 degrees, DME is erratic many times, VHF/HFR/T breaks down frequently and NDB invariably keeps going round and round without any lock. We have out-of-date runway equipment and our communication network, it is the biggest joke of the day. All of you fly as passengers. Do you know many a times as your aircraft taxi out of the tarmac what is the conversation going on between your pilot and the controller? The controller tells the pilot 'My dear Sir, I am sorry to inform you that I have not been able to get in touch with your destination because my communication lines are down. Will you please after climbing through your level contact your destination and tell them that you are coming'. What can the poor pilot do at this stage? He is



getting late and he has to stick to his schedule. So he takes off, and when he levels out he changes to his destination frequency. Many a times, two way R/T contact does not get established. But if he is lucky and he gets in touch with his destination, the controller at the other end gets surprised. 'My dear Sir, where are you coming from? I have no information about you. What time are you expected to arrive?' And in the meantime, one aircraft has descended through your level. A situation most dangerous in aviation. A situation called 'air miss or near miss'. So what, if that aircraft was just a quarter mile here or there but an airmiss is an airmiss. This happens and this is not something light-hearted.

We have nil radar coverage. For example, in Australia an aircraft is covered under the radar say from Perth to Sydney: from West Coast to East Coast. There the position of the aircraft is known to the radar controller at every stage of the flight. Here if you are flying from say Bombay to Delhi, a distance of 700 nautical miles, Bombay radar will track you out 150 miles and once you are 150 miles inbound Delhi the other radar will track you in. So you are actually covered for 300 miles. But what about the 400 miles you are transiting? You are just hanging up in the air and should something go wrong with your aircraft at that stage no one will know your position.

We have very bad runway lights at most of our airports. Can you imagine we are in the nineties and at many of our airports we do not even have standby generators to give the pilot emergency lights in the event of a power failure. Imagine a scenario! Your aircraft is about to land at your destination in the night. It is raining very heavily and you had a very comfortable flight. The airline looked after you very well and even served you Chinese food on board. Your pilot is just about to touch down and suddenly the runway

lights disappear because there is a power failure. Since there is no standby generator the controller is not able to give emergency lights. Imagine this scenario in front of you. What can happen? Two things. If you are lucky, your pilot will land and keep the aircraft straight with the help of his landing lights and if you are not you all know what can happen. Such is the sorry state of affairs in our country today. We are flying State-of-the art aircraft with World War II ground facilities. What is the reason? Are we not having enough funds to take care of our runways and equipments? We have. Why don't we merge IAAI and NAAI? We find that IAAI is making huge profits and chunk of its profits is going away by way of taxes to the Government. NAAI on the other hand is so much short of funds that it is most of the times borrowing money from IAAI. With this merger, the tax liability of IAAI will come down, NAAI will get more funds and it will be able to take better care of our national airports. I took up this issue very strongly with the media and the ministry. I was told that "You see Wing Commander, your idea is good but both these agencies cannot be merged because they have a different working culture." I think its high time we stopped wasting our time in such trivial issues and started giving flight safety the due importance that it deserves.

Another important point is that our DGCA sadly does not have an inspectorate which checks the flying crews. For example, in Quantas the inspectors from civil aviation give pilots surprise checks. They send in reports after landing and quite a few of the pilots have been reportedly suspended for lack of knowledge. In India, unfortunately, since there are no such inspectors to check them at random, the pilots are at liberty to do what they want. Who is going to find out what we are doing anyway and so let us keep on flying the way we like. DGCA should at least bring in inspectors and these inspectors should be independent.

The best solution for all the maladies of our airline industry was given by Tata Commission recommendations which our bureaucrats have consigned to the dustbin. *If our IAAI and NAAI follows the just recommendations given by the Tata Commission then our country does not need anything else in aviation.*

In conclusion there appears to be only three following options :

- (a) make our corporations autonomous, or
- (b) deregulate the airlines, or
- (c) Privatised the airlines.

Privatisation of the airlines seem to be the best alternative. For example, look at British Airways. It was in doldrums three years ago. It was running at a tremendous loss because of political and bureaucratic interference. It was owned by the British Government. Can you believe they are now buying the latest aircraft with their own money? They are operating 16 different types of aircraft all over Europe and the world. There are no strikes, no accidents or incidents and they are making money without jeopardising flight safety. They are even handling Air-India in London. Today they are next to Aeroflot. Aeroflot is the biggest airline in the world and they are number two. Indian Airlines and Air India are operating only three types of aircraft and look at the problems the industry has. It has also been seen that privately owned airlines have less accident rate than the ones which are owned by the Government, e.g. Quantas, British Airways, Lufthansa, KLM and Singapore Airlines. All these airlines are making money with best flight safety records.

And last but not the least, if we privatise our airlines then 90 per cent of our top airline management personnel will not be there. They do not want to be accountable to anyone. They are best suitable for cocktail circuits.

## II

### ALKA SEN\*

WE are discussing here safety and service of air travel in India, which covers all our national carriers, Indian Airlines, Vayudoot, Pawan Hans and Air India.

Coming to safety first, and since Indian Airlines is a "hot news" today, I would venture to state that the safety of that airline, which basically depends on training, does not seem to be due to inadequacy in training syllabus - at least to my mind. It is mainly due to lack of discipline among a large section of the employees.

There are of course areas where measures should be taken, such as those recently identified by the National Transport Safety Board, the ones like frequent random sample checks of Cockpit Voice Recorder (CVR) to identify deviations from safety rules and practices; more stringent procedure for pilot-in-command rating to those pilots who fail to obtain it in their first attempt; facilities at airports to ensure optimum safety; no pilot be allowed to fly more than one type of aircraft, etc. Also, Ramdas Committee Report, which has reported to have stated that Indian Airlines was not fully prepared to induct so many Airbus A320s in such a short span of time, should also be studied thoroughly and action taken.

I shall particularly like to emphasise on the fact that our commercial pilots and aircraft maintenance engineers are

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\* The author, Mr. Sen, is a veteran journalist and is Editor of the well-known journal "Indian Aviation - Civil and Military". The text is based on a talk delivered by him at a public meeting arranged by the Forum of Free Enterprise in Bombay on 13th March 1990.

competent to handle any sophisticated aircraft produced in the world : and why not, when Indian Air Force pilots are also flying the state-of-the-art machines, including the Mirage 2000s which also has similar fly-by-wire system that the A320 has.

I deplore strongly that Capt. Xavier Baral, Vice-President of the French Pilots' Union, stated that "selling the A320 to India was like selling a Mercedes Benz to a camel driver." He obviously does not know that his Indian counterpart is as efficient as he is - if not more.

In a recent talk to a section of Rotarians in Bombay, Capt. V. K. Mehta, a former deputy Managing Director of Indian Airlines, a pilot with some 28,000 hours of flying over 35 years, stated that an incident or accident could happen because of several factors, not necessarily due to incompetence of pilots: as an example, referring to the Ahmedabad 737 crash in October 1988, he stated that the visibility reading given from the control tower misled the pilot, and the plane crashed.

According to reliable statistics, it is nevertheless a fact that 20 per cent of accidents are due to technical snags and the rest on account of human error. . . . . even the best trained man make mistake at times, and not in airline industry alone.

I personally feel, Indian Airlines should commission some experts, may be from some reputed airline, as they have done for the training of their cabin crew, to identify the areas which have scope for revamping in the training systems of pilots and engineers.

The main cause for the woes of the air travellers is indiscipline in the airline - the indiscipline that plays a major role in safety, or the lack of safety: in an environment of

agitation; which was almost a continual phase in Indian Airlines lately - first on the issue of which pilots should go for training for the A320 and who would not according to the Indian Commercial Pilots' Association, and then that of the engineers who insisted on all of them should be sent abroad for training that culminated in an illegal strike - proper attention to the maintenance of the aircraft was not possible.

Credit must be given to the new Civil Aviation Minister Arif Mohammed Khan who gave a strict directive to the airlines, not Indian Airlines alone, and other establishments in civil aviation sector that stringent action must be taken against indiscipline and disruptive actions by employees, even if it led to curtailment of flights and facilities. And that warning worked at least with the Aircraft Maintenance Engineers who withdrew the agitation.

To quote Mr. Khan from this week's Illustrated Weekly of India, "discipline is a basic requisite of all employees of the airline . . . . there is a lot of room for improvement. I have made it clear to the management that discipline is a non-negotiable issue and should be strictly enforced."

The government, however, has to be blamed for not taking urgent decisions at times on various important matters.

For instance, Mr. Khan is aware of the fact that important posts like the Director-General of Civil Aviation and the Chairman of International Airports Authority of India have been lying unfilled for long - and now the post of Managing Director of Indian Airlines since the resignation of Mr. Prasad after the A320 crash, which was accepted by the government.

Incidentally, on the other hand, the decision on the resignation of Harsh Vardhan, Managing Director of Vayudoot, after the Dornier 228 crash near Pune in September 1989, is yet to be taken by the government. (Incidentally, it was after almost six months that the government has appointed Justice Kotwal of the Bombay High Court to investigate the cause of the crash.)

If Indian Airlines has been caught unprepared for the A320 induction with inadequate facilities, Vayudoot and Pawan Hans did not even have the necessary infrastructure set up before the Dornier 228 fleet - a total of ten - and as many as 42 helicopters were inducted by them, respectively. No wonder, there is chaotic operation of these two carriers. Also, it has been a common practice to provide re-employment of retired officials from the office of the Directorate-General of Civil Aviation to various operators, particularly Pawan Hans and Vayudoot, which should be discontinued. An enforcer of law cannot overnight look after the interest of the operators.

Lastly, unlike Indian Airlines, Vayudoot and Pawan Hans, Air India's safety record has been satisfactory.

On the service that are offered by the Indian carriers, I have only one observation to make - it is lousy, be it of Indian Airlines, Air India or Vayudoot, both on ground and in flight. Mercifully, Pawan Hans has not entered the public transportation arena yet.

Incidentally, as an aviation journalist, I have been travelling extensively, at home and abroad, for the last forty years - not even on one occasion have I been warned by our national carriers of a delayed flight, yet my telephone numbers were meticulously noted down by the airline concerned each time.

Until and unless the airline employees own their responsibility for the punctual operation of their services, as well as to meet the legitimate needs of passengers, in flight or on ground, the misery to the traveller would continue.

The government is equally indifferent in the matter of infrastructural facilities, both for air traffic control and terminal capacities. For example, even an approved programme of modernisation of Bombay and Delhi airports at a cost of Rs. 300 crore has yet to be given the go-ahead signal by the authorities: hopefully, according to indications, this would be done by the end of this year. But that is for Bombay and Delhi airports: but what about the other airports?

Lastly, it is time that all concerned authorities, the DGCA, IAAI, NAA, different airlines as well as employees to take necessary steps, keeping in view of the past to make air travel in India safe and comfortable. Better late than never!



### III

#### R. N. KINI\*

First and foremost, I would like to thank God for giving some of us a fresh lease of life. I am extremely sorry that a good number of my co-passengers have not survived the crash.

From my extensive flying experience and particularly what happened in Bangalore when the A320 crashed for all passengers I would like to lay down some broad guidelines.

#### TEN COMMANDMENTS

- (i) Fasten seatbelt always. As far as possible do not remove it at all.
- (ii) Airlines should examine the possibility of changing the present seat belts to something similar to those available in imported cars.
- (iii) Passengers should read how to open the emergency/exit doors. Passengers as a rule are always allergic to reading such literature.
- (iv) Always listen carefully to the announcements by air hostesses on safety regulations, oxygen masks, etc.
- (v) When in time of danger, do not attempt to remove hand bags from the overhead rack. Run as fast as you can to the door.
- (vi) This is not the time for decision-making on a participative basis.

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\* The author is a frequent traveller by air and is General Manager of Voltas Systems Ltd. He is one of the lucky survivors of the Indian Airlines' A-320 aircrash at Bangalore on 14th February 1990. The text is based on a talk delivered at a public meeting arranged by the Forum in Bombay on 13th March 1990.

- (vii) As soon as you get off the aircraft, do not look back. Keep running.
- (viii) No smoking sign should be strictly observed.
- (ix) When you are taken to the hospital, tell the doctor about previous medical history particularly blood group/allergies, etc.
- (x) Be Alert at the time of taking off and landing. Don't create panic.

I would like to record publicly appreciation of the presence of mind of the air hostesses who opened the door as soon as the plane crashed, and the attention given to the injured by the hospital authorities in Bangalore and the Indian Airlines staff.

*The views expressed in this booklet are not necessarily the views of the Forum of the Enterprise.*

“People must come to accept private enterprise not as a necessary evil, but as an affirmative good.”

—**Eugene Black**

## FORUM OF FREE ENTERPRISE

The Forum of Free Enterprise is a non-political and non-partisan organisation started in 1956, to educate public opinion in India on free enterprise and its close relationship with the democratic way of life. The Forum seeks to stimulate public thinking on vital economic problems of the day through booklets and leaflets, meetings, essay competitions, and other means as befit a democratic society.

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