

Pilot paucity stalling aviation's flight

Akasa Air's recent legal stand-off with a group of its former pilots and the operational consequences of their departure spotlight a core issue that has wider implications across India's fast-expanding airline industry: the mismatch between aircraft fleet growth and pilot numbers, especially captains

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NEWS ANALYSIS

Akasa Air's initiation of legal action seeking ₹21.6 crore as compensation from 43 of its former pilots for leaving without serving their six-month notice period, and India's youngest airline consequently suffering significant flight cancellations – 600 in August and about 700 in September – have again spotlighted a core issue airlines in the country are facing: pilot shortage.

India is now the third largest aviation market, with the UDAN Yojana (the Regional Connectivity Scheme) playing a role.

India's airlines are also making periodic announcements of aircraft deals, fleet inductions and pilot additions – Air India (AI) recently inducted a few hundred pilots who include expatriates – but beyond the headlines, the hard truth is a mismatch between aircraft and availability of (experienced) crew. As an aviation expert says, 'It is easier to get planes than pilots.'

Rise in CPL issuance

Data by the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) show a gradual rise in the issuance of commercial pilot licences (CPL): from 640 in 2018 to 1,061 in 2022. In FY22, there were 8,508 pilots flying in India.

A single aisle aircraft requires 12 to 14 pilots and a twin-aisle about 25 pilots

for an airline to ensure regular operations. Given Indian airlines' 1,100-plus new aircraft orders (a mix of single and twin aisle), the number of flight crew needed is estimated to run into a few thousand.

As of November 2022, there were 34 DGCA approved Flying Training Organisations (FTOs) at 52 bases being run under central or State authority, and the private sector.

Also, about six aviation training centres operate 40 simulators. The difference now is that private flying academies are also getting licences. Airlines too are going ahead with their training plans. In an interview in May, AI CEO Campbell Wilson highlighted plans for a pilot training academy and creating an aviation ecosystem that looks at flying schools. IndiGo too has its own plans for an academy.

Aviation consultants have highlighted the need for more flying institutes, airlines having their own training and even enhancing a tried and tested third route, namely, hiring foreign pilots. As of now, there are less than a 100 foreign nationals flying in India as per DGCA data.

While the plans look rosy, senior crew and cadet pilots highlight the serious issues dogging industry.

"The present shortage of pilots is because it is so difficult to run a flying training centre as the corrupt officials throw the book at you that was published way before Independence," says Captain



Cockpit concerns

The third-largest aviation market faces the prospect of a crunch in the number of experienced pilots needed to fly the hundreds of aircraft on order

■ DGCA data shows CPL issuance rose to 1,061 in 2022, from 640 in 2018

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■ AAI has introduced an integrated flight planning website where cadets have to pay for every flight plan filed for cross-country flights

Sam Thomas, President, Airline Pilots Association of India. "The medical standards are managed by Indian Air Force doctors, grounding quite a lot of civil pilots. Airlines have also begun to charge cadets for type rating. A course that costs ₹18 lakh jumps to almost ₹1 crore with airlines charging fees under one pretext or the other. [And] the airlines pressurise the DGCA to promulgate rules that are blatantly illegal," he asserts.

Captain A. (Mohan) Ranganathan, a former airline instructor pilot and a former member of the Civil Aviation Safety Advisory Council, says the pilot shortage is most acute in the captain's category. There are many commercial pilot licence holders who can be trained as copilots, but this requires detailed planning. Airlines are cutting corners in training and safety measures. The civil aviation requirements for scheduled transport were written when flying was a lot less and air-



It is unfair and immoral for huge airlines to profit out of trainees who take loans to start a career

SENIOR COMMANDER

craft numbers were low. Another issue is gaps in training and a shortage of qualified trainers.

The next area of impact is in operations and training. Another senior commander (close to 20,000 hours of flying, with 5,500 on the Airbus A320 simulator as trainer/examiner) says that with a pilot shortage, attempts have been made to reduce the minimum requirements for a copilot to commander upgrade, resulting in a less experienced pilot, which in turn could seriously impact safety. An opinion seconded by another senior commander (16,000-plus hours in 35 years of flying).

With more aircraft induction and thereby high-

er costs in terms of training, there is pressure from airlines on the regulator to reduce pilot flight duty time limitations "to achieve higher output in terms of hours". That the expansion of the aviation industry should be structured, planned and regulated is a point echoed by the commander. Training facilities in India, adds the commander, can be described in one word: 'inadequate'. The senior pilot also adds the point that pilot cadet programmes need to be strictly monitored, with a transparent break-up of the money being charged. "It is unfair and immoral for huge airlines to profit out of trainees who take loans to start a career."

Cadet pilots' issues

The cadet pilot in general also faces many issues, as two cadet pilots training in the private sector (one with close to 140 hours and the other who has finished 185 flying hours) highlight. The core issues are the av-

erage cost of pilot training – close to ₹1 crore; flying clubs raising their flying charges without any notice and the DGCA having no norms on training costs.

The Airports Authority of India has introduced an integrated flight planning website where cadets have to pay for every flight plan filed for cross country flights and checks to controlled aerodromes. Earlier, they say, flight planning was free for general aviation and flight schools.

On the ground, the instructor-student relationship needs to be on an even keel or else there are many unpleasant repercussions. Examinations are, most often, conducted without proper planning. But the DGCA's e-governance platform, they add, has made handling issues easier especially when it comes to licence issue and renewal.

Both cadet pilots also highlight that foreign training is very different from what it is in India: while a cadet pilot overseas has much freedom in planning their flying, cadets here face restrictions in certain manoeuvres and where they can land.

Most training bases too operate from uncontrolled aerodromes which do not have established navigation aids, forcing cadet pilots to depend on controlled aerodromes for instrument training. And these aerodromes in turn face pressures from commercial flights.

The aviation ecosystem needs clear visibility and a runway to viable solutions.