

Grounded, and not the foggiest notion of how to take off

As certain as the turn of season every year is the thick fog that descends over large parts of north India come winter. And with equal regularity every year, airports, especially Delhi's busy Indira Gandhi International Airport, turn into a battle zone with harried passengers and powerless airlines officials cursing each other and the weather.

The fog not only upsets the travel plans of thousands but more importantly spells major losses for airlines with hundreds of flights cancelled, delayed or diverted.

Just last year, civil aviation authorities decided to crack the whip and directed private airlines operators to train their pilots to operate the ILS Cat-III systems that help them fly planes in poor visibility and foggy conditions.

At the parliamentary standing committee in April 2006, civil aviation officials even said that training pilots from private airlines would be mandatory.

Civil Aviation Secretary Ajay Prasad went a step ahead and told the committee: 'We have made it very clear to the private airlines that if by the coming winter season they are not ready with some kind of training and upgradation of skills, we may have to discontinue some of their schedules during the foggy situation in Delhi, so as to avoid inconvenience to passengers.

'We have also requested the Director General Civil Aviation to examine the legal possibilities of making this kind of a training mandatory,' he said.

But nothing, absolutely nothing, has changed. For three days beginning this New Year's Eve, chaos and mayhem reigned at Delhi's airport and it was a veritable action replay. Sample this: 100 flights were cancelled, 87 diverted and hundreds rescheduled in three days from Dec 31 to Jan 2.

Last year, ministry figures for delays, diversions and cancellations because of fog made for even more appalling reading. Jet Air-227, Sahara Airlines-64, Air Deccan-805, Kingfisher Airlines-43, Spicejet-72 and Go Air-06.

Aviation officials estimate that the domestic airline industry loses approximately Rs.40 million a day because of delays and diversions. A single flight diverted costs an airline close to Rs.450,000. Total the costs for the delays and diversions this year and the losses are mind-boggling. And this does not factor international flights where costs caused by delays are higher as passengers have to be put up in hotels.

Considering that the civil aviation sector in the country is growing at a rapid rate and more and more private carriers are joining the field, one fails to fathom these avoidable delays.

India has seen a nearly 30 percent increase in domestic air travel during the last one year, primarily due to the launch of a host of low-cost airlines such as Kingfisher Airlines, SpiceJet, Go Airlines, Indigo and Paramount Aviation.

Despite this rapid increase, just over 60 pilots of Air India and 90 pilots of Indian have been trained and approved by DGCA for CAT-III A and B operations, say civil aviation officials

Private airlines, which have been told to train their pilots so that they can land in foggy conditions, are hesitant to obey the government directive. Training a single pilot on the Category III B Instrument Landing System costs upwards of Rs.1 million and many are not ready to invest such huge amounts for a two-week fog problem.

The rated capacity of IGI airport's domestic area is said to be 7.15 million passengers per annum whereas the actual capacity throughout last year was an estimated 10.4 million passengers.

With [New Delhi](#) and [Mumbai](#) accounting for 50 percent of the country's air traffic, it has now become all the more necessary to cope with growing congestion and traffic.

But then the problem with fog remains. And again, next year, passengers will go through the same drill of screaming, shouting and tearing their hair as they wait for inordinately long hours in Delhi for their flights.

And to think that a rising India is going to host the Commonwealth Games in 2010, the Cricket World Cup in 2011 and make a bid for 2014 Asian Games. One shudders at the thought!

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