

A looming pilot crisis

With airlines looking to expand their fleet and the country unable to produce flyers fast enough to keep up with the escalating demand, Indian airlines could be heading for a pilot shortage



(Photo: Shekhar Ghosh)



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ISSUE DATE: Dec 16, 2024 | UPDATED: Dec 7, 2024 17:30 IST

As India's aviation industry prepares to become the third largest domestic market in the world and new airlines enter the competition while existing ones expand, a troubling question looms on the horizon: who will fly their planes?

Pilots are becoming a prized resource for the simple reason that there may not be enough of them soon. Currently, India has 800-plus aircraft—mostly narrowbodies—between its airlines, which employ 11,775 pilots. However, while the country was able to issue 5,700 commercial pilot licences or CPLs in the past five years, it produced only 2,982 commanders or captains, who are given the charge of an aircraft and its entire crew, in the same period. And it is a commander crunch that the country has been grappling with at present, something that the ministry has admitted to time and again. To meet the shortfall, 120 foreign commanders have been given Foreign Aircrew Temporary Authorisation (FATA) to work in various Indian airlines.

11,775

No. of pilots presently employed by various airlines in India

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22,400

Pilots needed to fly an estimated 1,400-strong fleet by 2029

2,375

The likely shortfall in the next five years*

***If the DGCA keeps issuing 1,650 commercial pilot licences annually and other factors remain constant**

But the situation is expected to get more acute as India's aviation sector is looking to expand its fleet—primarily on the back of the growth of two of its largest carriers, IndiGo and Air India, as well as Akasa Air, which since 2015 have collectively ordered 1,976 planes. Of these, 324 had been imported by June 2024. As per the delivery schedules, another 1,147 aircraft are supposed to be inducted in phases by 2030 and the remainder by 2034. Even if we account for the existing aircraft whose lease will end in this period, a top ministry official estimates the fleet size to touch “at least 1,400 by 2029”.

Thus the need for men and women to fly these new planes will escalate exponentially. To become a pilot in India, an individual has to obtain a CPL, issued by sector regulator Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA). They then have to undergo airplane-specific training—something called ‘type rating’—of four months that qualifies them to take a position on the flight deck of a commercial plane. But even so, they can only be first officers or co-pilots, not the commander. To become one, they need to get an airline transport pilot licence, or ATPL. “On an average, it takes around 6-7 years of serving as a first officer to become a commander,” says a senior official of the Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Uran Akademi (IGRUA)—the Union ministry of civil aviation's sole flying school, located at the Safdarjung Airport in New Delhi.

A GROWING FLEET

India currently has an 800-plus fleet with 1,147 more aircraft scheduled for delivery to just three airlines by 2030. Their combined order since 2015: 1,976 new planes

■ Aircraft ordered since 2015 () Present pilot strength



Air India Group

470

(5,380*)



IndiGo

1,280

(5,174)



Akasa Air

226

(849)

**includes Air India, Air India Express and Alliance Air*

PLANE MATHEMATICS

As per the industry standard worldwide, airlines generally follow staffing norms of eight sets of pilots (a captain and a co-pilot) per narrowbody or single-aisle aircraft—such as the Boeing 737 and the A320, which ply on domestic routes. That is, 16 pilots in all to fly one plane on multiple rotations per day all year round. And if you consider long-haul international flights, the requirement can go up to 24 pilots per widebody.

India will need 10,900 additional pilots by FY 2030, according to an analysis by aviation advisory CAPA India, when the country's total requirement will be 19,400 pilots. But going by the ministry's estimates for India's fleet size and the industry's staffing norms, the country could very well require as many as 22,400 pilots by 2029. Given the present strength of 11,775 pilots and assuming that the DGCA keeps issuing around 1,650 CPLs each year—1,622 were issued in 2023, up from 744 in 2019—India is looking at a shortfall of about 2,375 pilots in the next five years. And that's a conservative estimate. Nothing stops the airlines from ordering more planes or the manufacturers from speeding

up the deliveries. For instance, Air India CEO Campbell Wilson has recently revealed the plan to take delivery of one aircraft every six days. That is over 50 new ones within a year just for Air India.

But that is not all. “To create more pilots, the country needs more pilot training institutes. And the existing ones need to expand their fleet and employ more pilots as trainers,” says Hemanth D.P., CEO of Asia Pacific Flight Training Academy. “And if you include these flight training schools and the entire gamut of commercial aviation, like chartered services and cargo, our estimate is that India’s requirement will be 3,000 pilots per year over the next 5-6 years.” Even among the licences being issued each year, adds Hemanth, around 50 per cent are foreign ones converted to Indian CPLs. “So, in effect, we are producing only around 700-800 pilots every year,” he says, “and the sad reality is that not all of them are employable.”

If the pilot shortage is not appearing serious at the moment, it’s only because new airline orders have been delayed due to supply chain constraints and more than 125 planes have been non-operational due to technical issues for months now, affecting carriers like IndiGo, Air India and SpiceJet. The Go First (formerly GoAir) fleet of 54 aircraft has also been grounded after it suspended operations completely in May 2023. “Currently, aircraft are grounded, new planes are delayed, and airlines have been working on their bench strength for a robust pilot pipeline,” says Kapil Kaul, CEO of CAPA India. “But the shortage will start manifesting from FY27 onwards.” IndiGo CEO Pieter Elbers has already indicated that 50 per cent of its grounded fleet will be back in business by early 2025.



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KAPIL KAUL
CEO, CAPA India

THE OTHER THREATS

These are not the only causes for worry for airlines. New regulations to address pilot fatigue could trigger a shortage of around 15 per cent, estimates CAPA India. There are limitations on how long a pilot can be kept on flight duty at a stretch. In January 2024, the DGCA came out with new norms—Flight Duty Time Limitation (FDTL)—to rationalise duty hours for pilots in India. Under these norms, weekly rest periods are to be increased from 36 hours to 48 hours for flight crew to give them sufficient time to recover from cumulative fatigue. The definition of ‘night’ has been amended to include an extra hour up to 6 am. It also mandates that airlines cannot ask a pilot to be on duty beyond the prescribed time limit. “Over the past five years, there have been many instances of pilots dying of heart attacks and stress. Even now, there are days when a pilot does 4-5 landings,” claims Capt. Sam Thomas, president, Airline Pilots’ Association of India (ALPA India).

If the airlines have breathing space, it’s only because the new norms remain on paper for the moment. They have petitioned the DGCA for more time to prevent massive flight

cancellations in view of staffing issues. In a mediation meeting on November 13, Air India reportedly informed the regulator that the new norms will hurt the interests of the cockpit crew as their flying hours and salaries will decrease. India today reached out to Air India for a comment, but the queries remained unanswered.

Another threat comes from poaching by bigger international carriers. Like in India, pilots are also a coveted resource in other countries where civil aviation is booming. The West Asian region, for instance, where the newly launched Riyadh Air, backed by deep pockets of the Saudi Arabian government, is seeking to employ 700 pilots over the next three years. The region is also home to some of the biggest airlines, be it Qatar Airways or the Dubai-based Emirates, which are in need of more pilots, according to a forecast by the global management consulting firm Oliver Wayman. The agency also estimates a worldwide shortage of around 80,000 pilots by 2032. A chunk of India's experienced crew, therefore, is likely to fly to greener pastures. "It's just a matter of time," warns Kaul.

THE PILOT PIPELINE

Over the past few years, the Indian government has been taking steps to augment pilot supply. Foremost among them has been the liberalisation of the Flying Training Organisations (FTO) policy. Earlier, the Airports Authority of India (AAI) would take a share of the revenue of the flying schools as airport royalty to let them use its facilities. That has been abolished. It has also lowered the rentals on its land. Following this shift, the government claims that India's pilot training landscape expanded significantly in 2021-22, with 15 new flying schools opening across 10 regional airports. This has taken the number of such schools in the country to 37. Besides the Centre's IGRUA, four are owned by state governments—Bihar, Gujarat, Telangana and Madhya Pradesh—four are registered societies and the rest are commercial institutes.

Global players have sensed the opportunity. "Despite such remarkable growth, India is facing a critical pilot shortage, and the rapid growth of the aviation sector demands high-quality training," says Marijus Ravoitis, chief executive officer, BAA Training Aviation Academy, a multinational aviation training company expanding its footprint in India with local partnerships. BAA opened its third consultancy centre in Bengaluru in October and has tied up with banks to secure 100 per cent loans for aspiring pilots to fund the course that costs around Rs 1.16 crore.

In comparison, IGRUA charges Rs 45 lakh for its two-year course. But Pragya Priyadarshini, vice president of the consultancy firm Primus Partners, feels airlines should consider partnering with educational institutions to make pilot training programmes more accessible through sponsorships and scholarships. It has, in fact, become an urgent imperative. For, on November 17, more than 500,000 domestic passengers took off across the country in a single day, the highest ever.