

04th September, 2023

For the attention of all Indian airlines and the pilots that fly them

The Indian pilot community have been shaken by the tragic demise of two Indian pilots in the last week. The media is in overdrive to publish anything thrown at it by their sources and the managements of all airlines are in their customary denial mode.

There have been a number of articles that have been on social media as well, the latest and possibly the closest to the truth comes from veteran aviation journalist Anjali Bhargava, highlighting the plight of the heavily overworked pilot.

This will last probably a couple of days more and then just like air crashes would be erased from public memory until the next tragic incident occurs.

We at ALPA India would like to appreciate the people who brought this massively underplayed issue of pilot fatigue/ stress and would also like to highlight some of the points missed out due political correctness.

The real contributors to pilot stress

1. The Punitive Regime Stress

The Indian regulator, for reasons best known to itself has transformed into a highly punitive organization which appears to revel in punishing pilots irrespective of whether they are right or wrong.

No chance whatsoever is given to a pilot to defend himself.

The data on the number of pilots suspended in the last few years is staggering and this clearly makes a mockery out of the "JUST" culture that is practised worldwide.

The world's best practices are all available in paper with the Indian aviation authorities but in practice they behave like some of the Khap panchayats that function in rural India.

The one pretty recent incident that comes to mind is, someone on a plane allegedly urinated on his fellow passenger and not one credible witness was found in the sham of an enquiry however, both the pilots were suspended.

The Indian Aircraft act 1935 is a lovely compilation of laws originally written by the British and many clauses therein can put the sedition act of 1870 to shame.

The reluctance shown by the authorities to amend these laws is quite understandable as these organizations are run by bureaucrats who thrive in the background of ambiguous laws and clearly do not think it necessary to possess domain expertise.

The Indian regulator has no suitable team to carry out any study on the aspect of fatigue/stress and has never even attempted it.

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Organizations like NASA and NTSB have carried out extensive studies and Indian agencies would be well advised to cut copy and paste these without adding their own interpretation.

2. The Medical Section stress

India is among the very few countries in the world where aviation medicals for pilots are conducted by the armed forces despite civil aviation being more than a century old.

The ICAO stipulates medical standards for pilots worldwide, but Indian Airforce doctors believe they are a superior breed.

Some of them are excellent however a vast majority appear to be veterinarians at least in their behaviour and the vigour to ground pilots on some pretext or the other.

The medical tests are in complete contrast to what our fellow pilots in the progressive world have to undergo. The FAA medical is done by thorough professionals and it's an enjoyable experience.

Some of the idiosyncrasies of these Indian Airforce doctors and their organizations are

- a) The complex process of getting an appointment when you want because they are overburdened.
- b) Making people jump from tables 4ft high to check if they have recovered from a fracture or ACL tear.
- c) Some of the doctors will order test simply because he believes that pilots are guinea pigs who will further his cause in the speciality that he is studying to get his higher degree, eg. sleep apnoea study, spirometry etc.

3. The Airline Management and HR/ rostering stress

The Indian Institute of Management Bangalore under Prof. Raghunath identified more than 5 years back the lack of qualified professional managers in airlines.

A specialized curriculum tailored to the specific needs of the airline industry was curated, however it appears that none of the airline managements took cognizance of it.

The airline HR dept are filled with highly incompetent people who move from one industry to the other and believe that the same policies and practices that a tech company adopts can be juxtaposed on an airline workforce.

Little wonder that the pilot community refer to HRs as HUMAN REMAINS.

The top Management of airlines also appoint pilots based on their seniority to management positions and Indian aviation is rife with examples of the most incompetent

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pilots rising to the top. This is also done with a misconception that the management pilots would be out of the workman category and hence out of the ambit of ID act 1947.

A cursory glance at the erstwhile national airline in the pre 90s era would clearly indicate that the candidate for director operation must have at least crashed a plane once.

The new breed of managers emerged post the 90s who believed that the more they punish their subordinates, the better their chances of climbing the corporate ladder.

This is the only industry where the regulator approves (decides) the appointment of managers and post holders. This has given rise to a set of pilots with very well developed salivary glands and can often be seen hanging around regulatory offices.

The rostering departments are mostly run by people devoid of common sense and keep recommending the procurement of new rostering software which can be tweaked to allegedly optimize operations.

It would be a highly lopsided observation on our part, if we did not mention the GREEDY, MANIPULATIVE and OPPORTUNISTIC pilots who, in collusion with one another and the rostering department connive to bribe, coerce, and beg in order to fly overtime for that extra salary.

4. The family induced stress

A regular pilot undergoes tremendous stress on the family front. A clear indicator of this is the large number of failed marriages. A pilot is never home when any family function or kids PTA takes place.

A pilot is never asked about his domestic conditions and no counselling of any sort is provided to either the pilot or most importantly the spouse and kids.

No amount of sleep in the day time can compensate for a good night sleep which all pilots experience.

A healthy diet is quintessential in maintain the high standard of health and medical fitness required of a pilot however the airline food that is provided is in many cases is unfit to be consumed by humans.

5. Miscellaneous Stress

This is provided in good measure by

a) CISF which is a force consisting of highly uncouth personnel unfit to have direct interaction with airline staff and passengers.

b) BCAS believes that all pilots are terrorists and must prove otherwise on an annual basis.

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- c) Passengers who are aviation experts armed with a smart phone and a social media account.
- d) The constantly changing weather and the most unreliable Indian meteorological department.
- e) Airport closures due VIP movement.

These factors mentioned above need not cause stress and fatigue in a linear fashion but cumulatively can cause chronic fatigue leading to unfortunate cases like the ones we had last week.

Remember we have all been pilots for a long time and at various stages have had our feelings of invincibility.

We have very often lived by:

IT WON'T HAPPEN TO ME

AND

WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME.

We at ALPA India, through this message, request all pilots to take cognizance of the aforementioned facts, recognize the danger we are facing and act accordingly.

For the sake of brevity, we would like to limit the examples under each heading. We believe firmly that unless these very pointed and specific issues are addressed on an urgent basis, we will unfortunately have to deal with the periodic news of sudden pilot deaths with alarming regularity.

We also appeal to you to help your colleagues, particularly junior pilots and request a show of support to pilot organizations that are coming together to protect the lives of Indian pilots.

Wishing all pilots, a safe, healthy and joyful festive season!

For: Team ALPA India



Capt. Sam Thomas
President ALPA India & IFALPA Director