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A boost for better **connectivity**

We are well suited to attract a major portion of the global air traffic revenue from our neighbouring countries like Singapore, Hong Kong and Dubai, but perhaps, what is holding us back, is our less than adequate airports infrastructure, as compared to these international airports, says **Mahesh Mudda**

From the enactment of Air Corporations Act in 1953, thus nationalising Airline Industry in India, to repealing the same act in 1994 allowing private players to operate scheduled air services – we have come a long way.

So, we can say with conviction that, seeds for the spurt in modern day air traffic were sown in 1994, when an act of almost 4 decades was repealed. There exists massive scope for India to become one of the major passenger and goods traffic hub

like Singapore and Hong Kong. Geographically, as well as logistically, we are well suited to attract a major portion of the global air traffic revenue from our neighbouring countries like Singapore, Hong Kong and Dubai.

What perhaps is holding us back is our less than adequate Airports Infrastructure, compared to these international airports. Just glance at these figures, and we will know where we need to improve. India has about 450 airports including small airstrips, however, only about 94 airports

are used for scheduled services. Rest of the airports either belongs to defence establishment, various state governments, or are privately owned

Out of the 94 active airports, only 2 airports (viz. Delhi and Mumbai) account for more than 50 per cent of the 32 million Domestic and International passenger traffic per year. Only about 1 per cent of the entire volume of cargo traffic (though accounting for almost 30 per cent by value) is handled through these airports. Passenger Air traffic has increased by almost 300 per cent in last decade, and is projected to double in the next decade.

Only about 20 per cent of these 94 airports can handle modern wide body aircrafts, and only handful are geared up to accommodate giants like Airbus 380 and Boeing 777. Just imagine, what would happen, if cargo volume as a percentage to total cargo handled by all other means of transport is doubled and the present growth rate of 20 per cent in passenger traffic continues for next decade.

So, for improving the share of India in international passenger and cargo handling, the focus clearly should be on to improve the Airports Infrastructure – both Greenfield Airport projects, as well modernization and upgradation of existing airports. Government of India, through its policy of Privatisation of Airports, has clearly laid the foundation of PPP projects (e.g. GVK Infra and GMR Group) in this sector.

Greenfield projects like Bengaluru and Hyderabad, and modernization projects like Mumbai and Delhi are clear examples of what an integrated airport development approach can do to prosperity of a city.

A good airports infrastructure should have good connectivity, modern communication facilities, uninterrupted power supply, convenient and ample parking spaces, uncluttered approach to terminal building etc. typically airport infrastructure development denotes development of following areas:

Safety

Passenger safety, safety of the aircraft, safety of the population and property surrounding the airport complex, safety of goods/baggage handled by airports, safety of the employees are typical areas which should receive attention under this head.

Each of these safety areas is a separate matter for discussion. However, in view of the world wide threat of terrorist attacks on such sensitive installations and complexes, security of human life, as well as of property, has become an integral part of safety. Creation of proactive security arrangements to deter such terrorist threats, puts additional, however unavoidable strain, on infrastructure required for airports.

Passenger facilities

What separates a good airport from the rest is the attention to details provided for facilities for passenger convenience.

After having visited many airports around the world, I can confidently say that, airport which has clear sign boards, indicating various facilities, clear and audible announcements and friendly airport staff clearly distinguishes the best from the rest

Comfortable and clutter free approach to the terminal building, spacious passenger arrival and departure lounges, efficient passenger check in and baggage handling facilities, speedy security checks, swift embarkation and disembarkation from the aircraft, clean and spacious wash rooms, well spaced food and snack counters, clean and neat accommodation for transit passengers, special facilities provided to physically handicapped, ergonomic spacing of various facilities to ensure minimal cross movements of passengers and goods etc. are some of them.

Again like safety aspect, each of these areas is an industry by itself, and will require separate detailed commentary. However, after having visited many airports around the world, I can confidently say that airport which has clear sign boards indicating various facilities, clear and audible announcements and friendly airport staff clearly distinguishes the best from the rest.

Aircraft and cargo handling

The role of airports is clearly to facilitate transportation of passengers from one destination to other, or from one city to other. However, since the medium of transportation used i.e. aircraft, is different from the other, means of surface transport is more high profile and is more vulnerable to sabotage the precautions of safety and security of the passengers, and



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aircraft have to be more elaborate and comprehensive.

Apron areas of the airports, taxiways, runways, hangars for upkeep and maintenance, refuge areas in case of emergencies, positioning of the ATC tower, fuelling facilities, etc. all determine how efficiently aircraft is handled while on ground, and is readied in the shortest possible time to do its duty i.e. to fly.

A faster turnaround of aircraft from the time it lands, to the time it is ready to fly again, indicates how efficient the facilities for aircraft and cargo handling are. Again like safety and passenger facilities, each of these areas is an industry by itself, and is a separate topic of discussion.

Surface access to airports

How frustrated you would feel, if you take 2 hours to travel from one city to another, separated by a distance of 2000 kms, but take more than 3 hours within a city to cover a distance of less than 50 kms? Well in most of the cities in India this is the case.

That is the reason surface access to airports becomes the back bone of any airport infrastructure project. Unfortunately in many cities, creation of required space for widening of existing roads or for making new roads leading to airports is impossible, either due to space constraints, or due to heavy encroachments.



In all such cases, creating an elevated road with fixed single entry and exit points remains one of the possible solutions. Many cities in the world have dedicated mono rail or conventional rail from centre of the city to the airport.

Traditionally, airports were built outside city limits, when the areas surrounding it were sparsely populated. This made it prone to encroachments.

Clearing these encroachments for augmenting/improving civic infrastructure has become a headache for city planners all over India. Clearing these areas for the growth of the city requires determination and political will.

The purpose of including a topic like Airports Infrastructure in a magazine like this, is a testimony to the importance of the fact that, each airport modernization and upgradation adds substantially to the employment potential, and generates value by way of various civil constructions and other allied services that are required to be set up in the short term,

and by way of sustained offering of various services in the long run.

A Greenfield airports project creates employment and adds value to the city's GDP many times over, as compared to modernization project.

Imagine, what if all civil airports become active and modern like Mumbai and Delhi, and like Bengaluru and Hyderabad there are 2-3 Greenfield airport projects launched every year.

The direct as well as indirect employment that can be generated, as a result of this modernization/Greenfield projects will multiply, tourism potential of the place will get a boost, better connectivity will attract new industries to the place and a brand new airport will do a lot of good to the citizen's civic pride.

If wishes were horses... or shall we say, aircrafts. The day is not far off. ■

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