

**Air Marshal Brijesh D. Jayal on the state of**



## **Civil Aviation in India** **“On a wing and a prayer”?**

*Air India Boeing 787 Dreamliner*

**N**ot that very long ago, air travel in the country was the subject of a raging debate, not just in the public domain, but in the rarefied political atmosphere of Lutyen’s Delhi as well. The reason was unruly behaviour of an MP who chose to attack an Air India staffer with his slippers, for not being accommodated in Business Class. Air India legitimately barred the MP from its flights and other carriers rightly followed suit. But because the issue had taken on political overtones, the Ministry of Civil Aviation, which controls both Air India and the DGCA had to fall in line and the ban was lifted. More recently another parliamentarian chose to assault and abuse an Indigo staff member for being denied boarding due to late arrival.

On 22 July 2017, the crew of an Air India Airbus 320 flight from Kolkata to Mumbai observed abnormally high fuel consumption and decided to divert to Nagpur. Judging by media reports, it was only when preparing to land at Nagpur that it dawned on the pilots that they had forgotten to retract the landing gear after take-off from Kolkata ! Without going into the finer points of their unbelievable incompetence, negligence and total absence of situational awareness, both these pilots should never ever have qualified to be sitting where they were. How they got there reflects on the entire civil aviation system from the flying training academies, many of which are money-making enterprises, to testing and certification standards and methods, to

our regulatory systems involving the DGCA and indeed the apex body of Ministry of Civil Aviation.

With air travel being in the news for all the wrong reasons, it is perhaps an opportune time to delve a little deeper into what essentially has come to be taken for granted as just another mode of travel in India; the corollary being, that if we can abuse our other public transportation systems, what’s so different about air transport?

There is, however, a difference. The medium of air, unlike that of surface or sea, is seamless and extends into the third dimension. This requires those using this medium to follow uniform protocols of navigation, communication and safety to ensure a controlled air traffic environment with orderliness, which must be all encompassing and international in nature. A deviation by one can endanger the skies for many. In addition, unlike surface modes of transport, faced with an emergent or crisis situation, aircraft in the air cannot stop midway to take stock and address the issue. These and many such considerations have resulted in the International community joining together to bring about standards and protocols for commercial air travel.

Two primary agencies are the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) and the International Air Transport Association (IATA). The former is a specialised agency of the United Nations,

which codifies the principles and techniques of international air navigation and fosters the planning and development of international air transport to ensure safe and orderly conduct and growth. The latter is a trade association of the world’s airlines consisting of 274 airlines representing 117 countries. It supports airline activity and helps formulate industry-wide policy and standards.

According to IATA, safety is the first priority for the Organisation and the main instrument of it is the IATA Operational Safety Audit (IOSA), which has been mandated by many countries. A recent example of its concern towards aviation safety is its response to the disappearance of Malaysian Airlines Flight 370, which still remains untraced, by setting up a special panel to study measures to track in real time aircraft in flight.

The issue of unruly passenger behaviour is one significant industry concern and the international community is serious about facing it head on. In 2014 the Tokyo Convention of 1963, dealing with the subject was modified to improve airlines’ ability to deal with unruly passenger incidents and enhance aviation security. Called the Montreal Protocol 2014, this was officially adopted by ICAO with 100 governments participating in the process and which will come into force once 22 states ratify it. Since VIP as a tribe is virtually unknown outside India, neither the Tokyo Convention nor the Montreal Protocol make any exception on this score.