

Aviation Safety - The FDTL Crisis and India's Regulatory Malaise

Mains: *GS III - Disaster and Disaster Management*

Why in News?

The recent turmoil in India's aviation sector triggered by mass flight cancellations by private airline IndiGo and followed by a controversial government response has raised serious concerns about the state of aviation safety.

What is the issue?

- **Large scale flight cancellation** - Starting on December 2, IndiGo flights were delayed and cancelled due to apparent pilot shortages.
- Flight disruptions were recorded in New Delhi, Mumbai, Hyderabad and other cities.
- On December 5, at least 1,600 flights were cancelled in one of the worst aviation crises in India.
- **Noncompliance with new regulation** - Early last year, the government announced new flight regulations, called the *Flight Duty Time Limitations or FDTL* - to improve the working hours of the Indian airlines' pilots.
- However, when the November 1 deadline arrived, IndiGo airline was not prepared.
- As a result, it was first forced to delay and later cancel flights, as there were not enough pilots available
- The decision of the Minister of Civil Aviation to place Flight Duty Time Limitation (FDTL) orders "under abeyance" has renewed debates on regulatory integrity, crew fatigue, and the prioritisation of commercial interests over passenger safety.

What is FDTL Norms?

- **FDTL** - Flight Duty Time Limitation (FDTL) norms were introduced as a *Civil Aviation Requirement (CAR)* to ensure that pilots receive adequate rest and operate fatigue-free.
- Fatigue management is globally recognised as a non-negotiable element of flight safety.
- Despite this, the DGCA appealed to pilots' bodies to cooperate and simultaneously hinted at diluting FDTL requirements.
- This appears to be aimed at easing operational pressures on IndiGo, which failed to plan for upcoming regulatory changes.
- Such actions cast doubt on the regulator's commitment to safety and create an

impression that commercial interests have overshadowed passenger welfare.

- **New Norms** - FDTL was finally implemented in two phases this year, and the rules include:
 - Increasing pilots' mandatory weekly rest period from 36 to 48 hours.
 - A pilot's personal leave request, however, cannot be included under the mandatory rest period.
 - Capping pilots' flying hours that continue into the night to 10 hours.
 - Capping the weekly number of landings a pilot can make between midnight and early morning to 2.
 - Submitting quarterly pilots' fatigue reports to the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA).

What are the issues in abiding to FDTL norms?

- **Historical Pattern** - This is not the first instance of such regulatory backtracking.
- In **2007**, the DGCA rolled out a robust CAR addressing crew fatigue.
- However, Airline owners protested to the Civil Aviation Ministry
- The Ministry ordered the DGCA to keep the CAR in abeyance
- In **May 2008**, DGCA officially suspended the CAR
- This pattern showcases a long-standing approach where aviation safety standards are subordinated to commercial pressures, even at the cost of risking passenger lives.
- **Judicial Intervention and Its Contradictions** - The 2008 suspension of CARs prompted pilots' associations to approach the Bombay High Court.
- The high Court:
 - Condemned the government for endangering pilots and passengers
 - Described the decision as arbitrary and safety-compromising
 - Suggested reducing flights instead of stretching pilots' duty hours
 - Emphasised that "safety has been overlooked to protect financial interests of airline operators"
- However, in a surprising reversal, the same High Court later upheld the Ministry's action — further weakening regulatory enforcement.
- **Failure of Planning** - Both IndiGo and DGCA were fully aware that the new FDTL regime would come into force from **November 1, 2025**.
- In spite of that:
 - No adequate preparation was undertaken
 - No additional pilots were recruited despite clear requirements
 - Resulted in mass cancellations and nationwide chaos
 - Passengers may get ticket refunds, but the losses due to hotel stays, rescheduled travel, and personal disruptions remain unaddressed.
- **Violation of Minimum Crew Requirements** - DGCA's own CAR (Series C, Part II, 2022) mandates:
 - **At least 3 sets** of crew per aircraft under regular employmentBut in reality:
 - A minimum of **6** sets of pilots are needed even under existing FDTL rules
 - **12** sets are needed for long-haul wide-body operations
 - Airlines have deliberately underemployed crew to cut costs, with IndiGo as a major violator

- The absence of enforcement underscores regulatory capture and the failure of oversight.
- **Lack of Accountability and Regulatory Capture** - In 2006, the *International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO)* recommended that India establish an **independent aviation safety authority**, free from government interference.
- Nearly two decades later, this recommendation has not been implemented.
- **Recent actions** — Including the December 5, 2025 abeyance order — highlight:
 - DGCA's inability to enforce its own safety standards
 - Ministry's willingness to override regulatory safeguards
 - Airlines' confidence that violations will go unpunished
 - Even developing nations with weaker aviation systems rarely dilute safety norms to this extent.
- **Recurring Tragedies and Unlearned Lessons** - India has witnessed three major aviation accidents since 2010:
 - **Mangaluru (2010)**
 - **Kozhikode (2020)**
 - **Ahmedabad (AI 171 crash)** — report still delayed
- Instead of strengthening regulatory systems post-accidents, the government's recent moves indicate regression and misplaced priorities.

What lies ahead?

- The suspension of FDTL regulations and continued prioritisation of commercial interests reveal a fundamental flaw in India's aviation governance.
- Regulatory dilution, absence of accountability, judiciary inconsistency, and weak oversight collectively threaten passenger safety.
- Unless India establishes an independent regulator and enforces strict compliance, aviation safety will remain a myth — and the skies will be navigated not by robust systems, but merely "on a wing and a prayer."

Reference

[The Hindu| FDTL norms and its Violation](#)