Reform in Civil Aviation in India

Mains: *GS II – Government Policies and Interventions for Development in various sectors and Issues arising out of their Design and Implementation*

Why in News?

Recently, The Department-related Parliamentary Standing Committee on Transport, Tourism and Culture, led by MP Sanjay Kumar Jha, presented its 380th Report on the 'Overall Review of Safety in the Civil Aviation Sector.

What is the status of civil aviation in India?

- **Civil aviation** - It refers to all non-military and non-governmental aviation activities.
  - It encompasses the operation of aircraft for commercial purposes, such as *passenger and freight transport.*
  - It also includes non-commercial activities like *recreational flying and aerial work like agriculture or search and rescue*.
- **Administration and regulation**
  - **The Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) –** It is the *regulatory body* in the field of Civil Aviation, primarily dealing with safety issues.
  - It is responsible for *regulation of air transport services* in India and for enforcement of civil air regulations, air safety, and airworthiness standards.
  - It operates under the **Ministry of Civil Aviation (MoCA)**
- **Airports Authority of India (AAI) –** The AAI is *responsible for managing and maintaining airport a*nd air navigation facilities and infrastructure.
- This is done in coordination with and under the regulatory purview of the DGCA.
- **Bureau of Civil Aviation Security (BCAS) –** The BCAS focuses specifically on the security aspects of air transport.
- **Growth**



- **Future prospects –** Passenger traffic expected to cross 300 million annually by 2030.

What are the issues with the Indian aviation sectors?

- **Absence of autonomy** – Without considerable freedom the DGCA is *unable to address critical technical staff shortages*-a long-standing issue highlighted by past expert committees but never resolved.
- **Inefficient recruitment model** – The current recruitment model prevents the regulator from attracting top talent and offering salaries commensurate with industry standards.
- This undermines *its ability to enforce compliance in a complex and growing sector.*
- **Over dependence on foreign companies** – The report addresses the strategic vulnerability caused by *India's 85% dependence on foreign Maintenance, Repair, and Overhaul (MRO) facilities.*
- **Human fatigue** – The report highlights the much-debated human element of *exhaustion amongst Air Traffic Controllers (ATCOs).*
- **Infrastructure and technological gaps** – The report underlines an imbalance where *aircraft induction is outpacing airport growth*.
- It is putting pressure on existing facilities and dangerously straining safety margins.
- **Backlogs of safety complaints** – This is a direct response to a growing backlog of unresolved safety findings that indicates *a critical weakness in the post-surveillance rectification process.*
- **Critical governance failure** – The *most safety-sensitive function,* air traffic control, has historically *lacked expert representation at the highest decision-making level.*
- **Increasing potential for accidents** – Unchecked fleet growth, workforce fatigue, and outdated infrastructure could create conditions ripe for catastrophic accidents.
- **Understaffing** – The Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) is grossly understaffed only 553 of 1,063 sanctioned posts are filled.
- Nearly 45% of technical staff are on deputation, leading to high attrition and loss of

institutional memory.
- **Inefficient audit mechanism** – India's International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) audit placed it below the global average in safety oversight.

What are the recommendations of the committee?

- **Reduce safety deficiencies** – On the enforcement front, the committee urges a time-bound mechanism to close all safety deficiencies, especially serious Level I matters.
- **Fatigue management system** – There is a need for immediate development of a Fatigue Risk Management System for ATCOs to ensure their well-being and operational safety.
- **Promotion of health and wellbeing** – It recommended for urging strict compliance with Flight Duty Time Limitation (FDTL) regulations and promoting mental health awareness for both pilots and ATCOs.
- **Imposing penalties** – It proposes stricter penalties, including financial fines, for non-compliance.
- **Capacity alignment plan** – It recommends a National Capacity Alignment Plan to synchronize airport development with airline fleet expansion.
- **Repeal of obsolete systems** – It also calls for a comprehensive restoration of outdated Air Traffic Control (ATC) automation systems.
- **Staffing audit** – A comprehensive staffing audit *is needed to combat operational overload* and the "long-standing and high-risk practice" of seeking exemptions from mandatory duty time limits.
- **Whistle blowers protection** – In a move to foster a more proactive safety culture, the report calls for the establishment of a "*Just Culture" and a robust whistleblower protection framework.*
- This aims to counter a punitive environment that currently deters operational personnel from openly reporting errors-an essential practice for proactive safety management and learning.
- **Technological solutions** – It advocates for the integration of modern, *AI-driven tools to reduce controller workload*.
- **Committed air traffic control (ATC)** – The report recommends the creation of a new, dedicated post-Member (ATC)-on the Airports Authority of India (AAI) Board.
- **Encourage domestic companies** – The committee urges a policy review *to provide incentives and rationalise taxation* to promote domestic capability.
- **Independent regulatory body** – The central and primary demand of the committee is the need for a stronger, more effective regulatory body.
- **Increased autonomy** – The committee demands full administrative and financial autonomy for DGCA and *recruitment independence from UPSC to attract technical experts.*

What lies ahead?

- The reforms in the Indian civil aviation *could change the overall capabilities of the sector.*
- The sector could meet the international standards only if *systemic reforms are urgently undertaken.*

References

NDTV| India’s civil aviation sector

NEWS 18| Air Safety at Risk

