

AAI's Unused Airfields Yet to be Put on Use

Till 2019, the state-run Airports Authority of India (AAI) is left with 126 airports, which include 50 unused airfields, including non-operational ones, which do not generate any productive value. Three years ago, the Government had come up with an ambitious plan named UDAN wherein it proposed to put such airports under some utilisation. But, the scheme could not take off as anticipated.

Also Read: [84 Routes Under the UDAN Scheme Have No Operator Now](#)

Today, the government has realised that the country needs more number of airline pilots. It feels that there is a burgeoning demand for pilots in India and overseas. A new school of thought has emerged in the aviation ministry. That is, more schools for pilots should be opened up because India does have adequate human capital and it can produce enough pilots to meet not just its own demand but also supply pilots to the world!

India's pilot shortage

India's shortage of pilots, especially of commanders, is increasing as airlines expand aggressively. According to industry estimates, the country now has about 8,000 pilots and its airlines will require an additional 17,000 in the next 10 years. There is also global demand for pilots, especially from carriers in China and the Middle East.

India's current pilot producing capacity is not enough to meet the country's needs. It has 32 training institutes that produce about 300 pilots against the requirement of 800 a year. The country's fast expanding carriers have to hire foreign pilots otherwise they have to cancel flights at

times. Jet Airways pilots, for instance, found jobs quickly with other carriers when the airline went bankrupt recently.

AAI's disused airfields may be turned into pilot academies

As such, the government has started work on a plan to turn the AAI's ideal airfields into pilot academies. It is not considering their Real Estate virtues even after the flopped UDAN show. Those properties could have been utilised much more profitably by recognising its real-estate value and setting up a suitable industry by utilising judiciously the locally available resources.

The said plan envisages to activate as many airports – either non-operational or the ones used only sparingly – as possible. There could be various other airports or airstrips that could be used for pilot training.

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The AAI board has recently approved the proposal and formed a three-member panel headed by former Indian Air Force chief Fali H Major to decide on the number of airports that can be offered to pilot schools. It has not yet clarified how it will mobilise funds for such a venture. There is still no co-ordination among the general education system, and the Industry. Flying training in India is more expensive than many other countries, and one reason is taxation on fuel for trainer aircraft. The government must come up with a viable plan, it may have to look at the option of providing subsidies to make this scheme a success.

Air Force chief Fali H Major is an independent member of the AAI board. The others on the committee, which is to submit its report in three months, are Vineet Gulati, AAI's member (air navigation services), and Anil Gill, deputy director, Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA).

The idea came from director general of civil aviation Arun Kumar, also a member of AAI's board, said persons with knowledge of the matter.

The team headed by the former IAF chief Fali H Major now has a challenging task in hand. It has to justify the government's decision of opening up more pilot schools like this on three main counts:

- the pilot training program must be cheaper than the prevailing rates
- a commercially better utilisation of the land that other real-estate schemes could have provided
- should not depend upon the government's sops, subsidies or any other form of concessions

This has become more significant since the UDAN scheme has flopped miserably before. In all probability, the Team Fali may like to consider an option which stems from the potential of non-aeronautical revenue which is inherently associated with every airport – functional or non-functional.

Experts said the initiative will need to be augmented by other measures. Shakti Lumba, a former pilot who used to head operations at Air India and IndiGo says, "There are things like weather, visibility and Air Traffic Control factors that should be taken into account while deciding on the airports that will be shortlisted for flying institutes. The government should also provide incentives."

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