

REDEFINING INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS IN AIRLINES INDUSTRY IN INDIA: A CASE STUDY OF AIR INDIA AIRLINES

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Abstract:

With the transformations in business environment, the Industrial Relation system has seen a sea change over a period of time, as a result of which, the job and the function of employer and employees have become more tough and challenging. Of all the human resource management problems that have occurred in the Indian Airlines Industry in recent times, the problem of Industrial Relations is the most noticeable. The reason behind this is due to the fact that Industrial Relation deals with people who are foundation of the Industry. Their action or reaction matters a lot for the Industrial Harmony of the country. Harmonious Industrial Relations are pre-requisite for economic development of a country. Success of the Airlines Industry depends on cordial relationship between the employers and the employees. The Objective of the study is to examine the “Industrial Relations in Airlines Industry in India: A Case Study of Air India Airlines”. Research in this field can be of much practical utility to all those involved in Industrial Relations scene like management, employees and the government. Success of the Airlines Industry depends on cordial relationship between the employers and the employees. This study assesses the state of Industrial Relations in the Airlines Industry and also identifies the factors that affect it. The paper also proposes to redefine the pattern of Industrial Relations in Airlines Industry by suggesting some changes in the role of management, union and government.

Keywords: *Industrial Relations, Airlines Industry, Air India Airlines, Employer, Employees, Strikes.*

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Introduction:

Indian industrial units are greatly affected by disinvestments, privatization, restructuring and takeovers which, in turn, affect the Industrial relations scenario of the country. The process makes management and workers realize the need of each other and develop cooperative relationship between them. Globalization and competitive market economy have changed the scenario of Industrial Relations in India. Downsizing, the use of contract labour, outsourcing and employment externalization are some of the phenomena that have crept in due to these changes (**Mallikarjunappa N. L: 2011**). The world-wide competition for investment and jobs and the new communications technologies are challenging the old paradigms of social protection, stable jobs and industrial relation system. These changes are forcing firms to reinvest themselves and re-engineer their process with new, atypical and non-standard work and employment practices. The new approaches are feared to create jobless growth where labour could become a redundant resource and trade unions are less relevant or more interested for their existence (**Swain, H.K: 2003**).

Inflexibilities in deployment of the workforce, supported by rigidity in labor legislation, have all added to the woes and have now begun to affect employment generation as well. All these changes are believed to have impacted employment and employee relations and therefore, resulted in catastrophic breakdowns in industrial relations across the country. Being held at a time when the business scenario is proving to be a challenge for both employees and employers as businesses come under increasing pressure to keep stakeholders satisfied (**www.itsmyascent.com**). These changes have implications both for the organization and the employees. As a consequence the nature of relationship between the employees and the employer is impacted. Industrial disputes are a menace to industry and society, for during strikes, fascist and violent tendencies increase, such as holding gate meetings and mishandling non-strikers and the management personnel, rowdy demonstrations and processions with slogans of all type, burning effigies of employers, Gheraos of management personnel destroying public property and the machinery in the factory (**Mamoria, C.B: 2009**).

As seen government is not keen to take the risk of managing the public sector units and to play the role of a major employer. Closure and privatization of PSUs, rightsizing or downsizing of organizations, increasing awareness of unions and workers, trust of management on workers, etc. are the characteristics of new IR system. Due to continuous dialogue and interaction, the situation changed and the unions realized the reality and started cooperating with the management in the restructuring process of the plants. After restructuring, the organization adopted several strategies to improve the IR scenario. Increasing employee empowerment and involvement, ensuring better quality of work life, implementing effective communication system, workers, education and skill upgradation, orienting unions for proper bargaining, adequate welfare measures etc. were the major efforts made by the management jointly with the union to bring industrial peace in the organization (**Mallikarjunappa N. L: 2011**). There is need to redefine the Industrial relations scenario.

The Present Study:

Managing an Airline is unique and challenging, the quality of services of Airline heavily depends on the quality of human resource it deploys. Airline companies must have potential human resource policies that help the organization to attain its goals, enable it to employ the skills and abilities of the workforce efficiently, assist to bring about employees job satisfaction and self-actualization and establishing and maintaining harmonious Employer-Employee Relations. The Objective of the study is analyzed the “Industrial Relations in Airlines Industry in India: A Case Study of Air India Airlines. The research study makes an attempt to understand and analyze the problems systematically like strikes, wages and salaries problems and other hand to trace the contribution of Employees, management and union in rebounding IR in Airlines Industry in India.

Objectives of the Study:

The study has the following as its specific objectives:

1. To analyze and understand the Industrial Relations in Airlines Industry in India.
2. To discern and interpret the causes of Industrial Disputes in Airlines Industry in India.

3. To provide insights in to strategic management to promote industrial relations in Airlines Industry in India.

Airlines Industry in India: An Overview

One of the fastest growing Aviation industries in the world is Indian Aviation Industry. India's airline industry is growing at between 15% and 20% a year. The Indian aviation market is the ninth-largest globally, and could become the third-largest within ten years based on current growth predictions (**Pasquali, V:2012**).

In 1990s, aviation industry in India saw some important changes. The Air Corporations Act was abolished to end the monopoly of the public sector and private airlines were reintroduced (**www.naukrihub.com**). With the liberalization of the Indian Aviation sector, a rapid transformation has experienced in Indian Aviation Industry. Primarily it was a government-owned industry, but now it is dominated by privately owned full service airlines and low cost carriers. Around 75% share of the domestic aviation market is shared by private airlines. Previously only few people could afford air travel, but now it can be afforded by a large number of people as it has become much cheaper because of rigorous competition (**Arora N: n.d**). Aviation in India supports 1.7 million jobs, 0.5% of GDP and 90% of international tourist arrivals. “That’s impressive but it could and will be much more. Today, India is a market of about 100 million passengers annually. Looking ahead, if Indians traveled as much as Americans, we would see a market potential of over 2 billion travelers,” said Tyler. Despite this great potential, India’s airline industry is struggling financially. Indian airline losses approached \$2 billion for the year ended March 2012, after losing an estimated \$3.5 billion over the three previous years. (**www.iata.org**). Barring a few airlines, most of the operators have been struggling with losses and working capital deficit, which in some cases are so huge that they find themselves perilously close to shutting shops. The increase in the market size has been outpaced by the growing competition between the Indian carriers, leading to intense price competition. This coupled with the high operating costs have made the survival difficult for most of the players (**Thornton, G: 2012-13**).

The airline suffers from low productivity, high costs, poor staff morale, significant unresolved human resource issues and an unviable business model. There appears to be a lack of accountability within management and at the level of the Government. After years of neglect the approach to turning around the airline continues to lack both decisiveness and a willingness to take difficult decisions, in the absence of which no meaningful recovery can occur. CAPA expects that Air India will continue to face industrial action due to a failure to address human resources issues. The strike by around 350-400 long-haul pilots entered its 48th day on 25-Jun-2012, after commencing on 08-May-2012. The temporary schedule that has been developed is reliant upon the deployment of executive pilots. However, this can only be a very short-term solution and the protracted nature of the dispute has resulted in executive pilots raising concerns about the stress under which they are being placed (**CAPA: June, 2012**).

Air India Limited:

Overview:

Air India is the flag carrier airline of India. It is part of the government of India owned Air India Limited. J.R.D. Tata is the founder of Air India. National Aviation Company of India Limited (NACIL) was incorporated under the Companies Act 1956 on 30th March 2007 with its registered office at Airline House, 113 GurudwaraRakabganj Road, New Delhi and corporate office at the Air India Building, Nariman Point, Mumbai 400021(**Annual Reports of Air India 2010-11**).The airline operates a fleet of Airbus and Boeing aircraft serving Asia, Australia, Europe and North America. Its corporate office is located at the Air India Building at Nariman Point in South Mumbai. Air India has two major domestic hubs at Indira Gandhi International Airport and ChhatrapatiShivaji International Airport. An international hub at Dubai International Airport is currently being planned. Air India has the fourth largest share in India's domestic air travel market, behind Jet Airways, Kingfisher and IndiGo. Following its merger with Indian, Air India has faced multiple problems, including escalating financial losses and discontent among employees. Between September 2007 and May 2011, Air India's domestic market share declined from 19.2% to 14%, primarily due to stiff competition from private Indian carriers. In August 2011, Air India's invitation to join Star Alliance was suspended due to its failure to meet the minimum standards for the membership (www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Air_India).

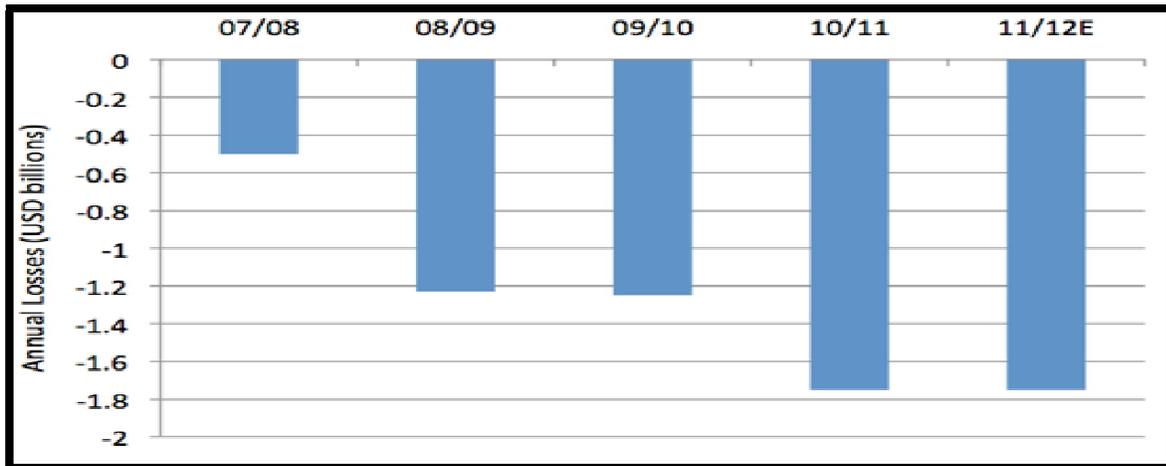
Merger with Indian Airlines:

In 2007, the Government of India announced that Air India would be merged with Indian Airlines. As part of the merger process, a new company called the National Aviation Company of India Limited (NACIL) was established, into which both Air India (along with Air India Express) and Indian Airlines (along with Alliance Air) will be merged. On 27 February 2011, Air India and Indian Airlines merged along with their subsidiaries to form (www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Air_India).

Market share

Air India's domestic market share declined from 17.1% in FY2011 to 16.5% in FY2012. International market share also fell, from 19.5% in FY2011 to 18.6% in FY2012. The passenger load factor on domestic routes, however, improved from 66.1% in FY2011 to 68.5% in FY2012. Domestic market share stood at 16.2% in May-2012 with an average load factor of 70.6%. However, Air India experienced a strong 30-35% year-on-year improvement in revenue in the period from Jan-2012 to Apr. 2012 as a result of the downsizing of Kingfisher Airlines and due to benefits generated from better integration of the route network. Average domestic revenue per passenger has been strengthening since the beginning of this year (www.profit.ndtv.com).

Air India ranked fourth with a share of 17.6%, followed by GoAir with 7.3% and Kingfisher registering only 5.4% of the total market share. Air India had the highest percentage of flight cancellation at 5.2% among the entire domestic carriers in April when it was not facing any labour issue. Kingfisher followed the national carrier in flight cancellations as 3.3% of its flights were cancelled. Air India's passenger load factor, or average percentage of passengers carried on each flight, was the worst at 70.5%, while Indigo's was the best with 82%. The national carrier also registered the worst on-time performance out of all the six scheduled operators with less than 80% (www.profit.ndtv.com).

Graph 1.1: Showing the Air India financial losses: FY2007/08 to FY2011/12 (estimated)

Source: CAPA, (13 FEB., 2012) “Financing of Indian airline losses approaching a dead-end,” Retrieved from <http://centreforaviation.com/analysis/financing-of-indian-airline-losses-approaching-a-dead-end-67992>, Assessed on 24.1.13.

Indian carriers need to raise up to USD2.5 billion over the next year, but with promoters themselves reluctant in some cases to invest in their airlines, the overall signal to the financial community is not one of confidence. This is likely to impact the growth prospects of the entire sector (CAPA: 2012).

Staff Strength:

The Staff Strength as on 1 Dec. 2011 was 27,393. The number of local staff at foreign stations as on 31st December 2010 was 237. Pending out of turn Appointments on Compassionate grounds as on 31.12.2010 was 758. The Reservation Policy has been implemented as per the Presidential Directives issued in the year 1975, along with the revised Directives effective 1991 and 1996(MOCA, Annual Reports 2011-12).

Currently, the employee strength of Air India is around 26,481, of which 1,439 are pilots and executive pilots, 1,419 are engineers and executive engineers, 5,064 executives and general category officers, 3,064 cabin crew and executive cabin crew, 3,351 technicians or service engineers and 12,146 general category employees(www.ibnlive.in.com).

Table: 1.1: Showing the Personnel Statistics of Air India during the year 2010-11

Personnel Statistics of Air India during 2010-11			
Category of Staff	No. of Personnel		Total Expenditure (in Rs. Million)
	Mid-Year	Year-End	
Pilots and Co-Pilots	659	690	4,385.21
Other Cockpit Personnel	0	0	0.00
Cabin Attendants	1,894	1,852	3,289.54
Maintenance & Overhaul Personnel	2,971	2,878	4,251.31
Ticketing & Sales Personnel	2,428	2,305	2,170.08
All Other Personnel	5,091	4,929	4,243.89
Total	13,043	12,654	18,340.02

Note: Year ended as on 31st march

Source: DGCA, "Air India" Retrieved from <http://dgca.nic.in/reports/rep-ind.htm>, Assessed on 29.1.13

HR Issue of Merged of Air India

Integration of human resources of erstwhile Indian Airlines and Air India has finally begun after five years of their merger, with the management coming out with seniority lists of about 4,500 officers. Seniority lists of 4,457 officers of the non-technical cadre in various departments have been uploaded on the merged carrier's internal website as per the recommendations of Dharmadhikari Committee, senior airline officials said. The lists have the merged seniority of employees of erstwhile IA and erstwhile AI as on April 1, 2007. "The merged seniority lists of pilots and engineers are yet to be prepared as some technical issues associated with it need to be sorted out," one of the officials said. The employees can go through these lists and point to anomalies within 10 days from the date of its publication, they said, adding that representations received after the deadline would not be considered (www.articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com).

Industrial Relations in Air India Airlines:

Air India Airlines the name of India's national carrier conjured up an image of a monopoly gone berserk with the absolute power it had over the market. Continual losses over the years, frequent human resource problems and gross mismanagement were just some of the problems that plagued the company. Widespread media coverage of the frequent strikes by Air India pilots not only reflected the adamant attitude of the pilots, but also resulted in increased public resentment towards the airline ([www.goodmorningishan](http://www.goodmorningishan.com)). Air India recurring human resource problems were attributed to its lack of proper manpower planning and underutilization of existing manpower. The recruitment and creation of posts in Air India was done without proper scientific analysis of the manpower requirements of the organization. Air India employee unions were rather notorious for resorting to industrial action on the slightest pretext and their arm-twisting tactics to get their demands accepted by the management ([www.goodmorningishan](http://www.goodmorningishan.com)).

Worried over their uncertain future and poor financial condition of Air India, over 600 employees of the national carrier have either resigned or taken voluntary retirement since 2009. Twenty-four pilots and management pilots and 163 cabin crew and executive cabin crew have either resigned or taken VR since 2009, citing various reasons, a senior Air India official said. Six engineers, including executive engineers, 171 executives and general category officers, 59 technicians and 201 general category employees have left the company, he said, adding that a total of 624 employees have either resigned or taken VR. 23 employees resigned or took VR in 2011, 178 in 2010 and 128 in 2009. This year till May, 95 employees have left the company. Of these, 48 employees resigned, while 47 took VR, the official said (www.ibnlive.in.com).

Most of the pilots left the company in 2011, when they found their future "uncertain" in Air India as it was facing cash crunch and other human resources related issues after its merger with Indian Airlines in 2007. Of the 223 employees who left the company during 2011, 92 resigned and 131 took VR. In 2009, 61 employees resigned and 69 took VR, while in 2010 17 resigned and 118 took VRS. With Air India having the highest aircraft to employee ratio of 1:258, it has launched a VR scheme for permanent and confirmed employees who are above 40 years of age and have rendered a continuous service of 15 years. The VRS aims to target around 5,000 employees in a bid to rationalize manpower, as per the recommendation of Justice Dharmadhikari committee

setup for merging of human resources, as part of its turnaround plan, for which Air India board has also given in-principle approval(www.ibnlive.in.com).

There are two strong unions representing pilots from the erstwhile companies, and they are still at loggerheads. One is the Indian Pilots' Guild, representing Air India employees, and the other is the Indian Commercial Pilots' Association for pilots from Indian Airlines. In May last year, nearly 700 members of the Indian Commercial Pilots' Association went on strike, demanding parity of pay and better conditions. They alleged that their colleagues on international routes earned up to \$4,500 a month more than them. The striking pilots were from the former Indian Airlines and were allowed to fly mainly domestic routes while the Air India pilots flew mainly international routes. That meant the latter group received added incentives like international allowances, stay and other benefits. Now it is the other way round. Staffs from the Indian Pilots' Guild, representing pilots from the Air India faction, are striking. This time it is about who gets to fly which aircraft (**Kannan, S: 2012**).

Strikes:

Fresh from the success of two strikes by pilots of Jet Airways and Air India, the country's 50,000 airline employee's plans to form a nation-wide trade union that will represent pilots, engineers, maintenance staff, cabin crew and ground handling staff. The proposal, put forward by the trade unions of Air India and Jet Airways, is expected to elicit good response from the airline staff that face job losses and salary cuts, with the domestic airline industry troubled by losses looking to cut employee costs. Frequent cuts in fares due to cut-throat competition and high fuel prices have seen the industry's accumulated losses mounting to around Rs 10,000 crore at the end of the last financial year (**Roy, M: 2009**).

Since 2009, AI employees have organized six strikes-three by pilots and the rest by disgruntled ground staff demanding salary payment. According to experts, now that a partial lockout is apprehended due to the chain of strikes, the government should immediately start an aggressive plan to offer voluntary retirement scheme (VRS) to reduce the workforce and contain the unrest by offering an attractive package. "The government's decision on the VRS will be a laudable step if the motive is to ensure that Air India does not expand or maintain its present level of

operation. The government needs to trim the non-operational workforce and not in operations areas where there is manpower shortage," said Jitender Bhargava, former executive director, AI (Mishra, L: 2012). Pilots owing allegiance to the Indian Pilots' Guild (IPG), representing cockpit crew of erstwhile Air India had gone on a 58-day strike on the issue of career progression. Their counterparts from erstwhile Indian Airlines, led by Indian Commercial Pilots Association, had also struck work last year on same issues (www.articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com).

The much delayed demerger proposal of strategic business units-engineering and ground handling-if immediately implemented, will reduce the number of employees to 16,000 from 27,000. While 7,000 employees will be moved to the engineering subsidiary called Air India Engineering Services Ltd, the balance will migrate to the ground handling arm called Air India Transport Services Ltd. This would bring down AI's employee strength to 10,000 and with 122 aircraft in its fleet, the employee per aircraft ratio will come down to 82 from 221. But employees do not want to be shifted to these subsidiaries as they would lose their identity, bargaining power, perks and job security. AI's turnaround plan has become a casualty. "There is nobody taking ownership of the turnaround of AI. For the last two years, CAPA has advocated that AI should be placed under special administration similar to that adopted for Satyam if any meaningful progress is to be achieved," said Kapil Kaul, chief executive, South Asia, CAPS (Mishra, L: 2012).

On 25 May 2010, All India Aircraft Engineers Association (AIAEA) went on a flash strike and around noon the Air Corporations Employees Union (ACEU) also joined the strike in sympathy against the Office Order dated 2 July 2009 advising employees holding position as office bearers of Unions/Association to desist from going public with their statements that had the potential of harming company's image and revenue earning prospects (Annual Reports of Air India 2010-11). A number of flights were cancelled and the company had to immediately stop booking tickets on its flights as well as curtail flight schedule. The flash strike caused serious inconvenience and harassment to a large number of our esteemed passengers besides causing revenue loss to the company. The management took a serious view of the above action and 55 employees terminated, 24 employees were suspended and 13 employees who were on probation on promotion were reverted to their substantive posts (Annual Reports of Air India 2010-11).

The government had also acknowledged that Air India's precarious financial situation had led to delays in resolving HR issues in the airline. Replying to a question in Parliament last month, former Civil Aviation minister Vayalar Ravi had said, "Some part of the delay in harmonizing is due to the critical financial condition being faced by the company has also contentious issues like level-mapping, compensation harmonization etc. for all employees" (www.m.financialexpress.com).

Suggestions:

The following measures should be taken to achieve harmonious Employer-Employee Relations in Air India Airlines:

Sound Personnel Policies: The policies should be framed in consultation with the employees and their representatives if they are to be executed successfully and unambiguously so that there is no confusion in the mind of anybody. Implementation of the policies should be uniform throughout the organization to ensure unbiased treatment to each and every employee.

Strong and Stable Union: A strong and stable union is essential in Air India Airlines for harmonious Employer-Employee relations. The employers can facilely neglect a weak union on the pretext that it hardly represents the workers. Therefore, there must be strong and stable unions in Air India to represent the majority of workers and collaborate with the management about the terms and conditions of employment.

Mutual Trust: Both management and labor should support in the development of an environment of mutual cooperation, self-reliance and admiration. Management should adopt an impartial attitude and should acknowledge the rights of employees. Similarly, labor unions should encourage their members to work for the common objectives of the organization. Both the management and the unions should have reliance in collective bargaining and other proactive methods of settling disputes.

Workers' Participation in Management: The participation of workers in the management of the industrial unit should be encouraged by making effective use of works committees, joint

consultation and other methods. This will improve communication between managers and workers, increase productivity and lead to greater effectiveness.

Mutual Accommodation: The employers must be familiar with the right of collective bargaining of the trade unions. In any organization, there must be a massive stress on mutual accommodation rather than conflict or rigid attitude. One must clearly understand that conflicting attitude does not lead to harmonious Employer-Employee relations; it may promote union aggressiveness as the union responds by engaging in pressure tactics. The management should be eager to co-operate rather than threaten the employees.

Government's Role: The Government should play an effective role for promoting industrial peace. It should make law for the compulsory recognition of a representative union in each industrial unit. It should intervene to settle disputes if the management and the workers are unable to settle their disputes. This will reinstate industrial harmony.

Progressive Outlook: There should be progressive outlook of the management of Air India. It should be aware of its duties and responsibilities to the employees, the passengers and the nation. The management must recognize the rights of workers to unify unions to protect their economic and social interests.

Conclusion:

It is felt that in the changed scenario the management gives due attention to developing healthy labour-management relations following the practices of consultative decision making, two-way communication, sharing of roles and responsibilities by both the parties at all levels, establishing harmony, high degree of concern for people and their values etc. Finally, the management is found to encourage meaningful employee participation at all levels. It can be seen that Air India suffers from heavy losses, and also the relations between the employer and employees are not very cordial because of the flash strikes, delay in payment of salaries, mismanagement and poor working conditions. There's a need that the Air India Airlines must have potential human resource policies and sound industrial relations that help the organization to attain its goals, enable it to employ the skills and abilities of the workforce efficiently, assist to bring about

employees job satisfaction and self-actualization and establishing and maintaining harmonious Employer-Employee Relation which are essential for the Industrial Peace.

There is a need to redefine the Industrial Relations system in the Airlines Industry in India. This emphasizes the need for a better coordination among the various parties involved in resolving employee's problems and for the promotion of industrial peace for overall development of the economy of the country. The government is under pressure to become a facilitator rather than a regulator or controller. The role of government should not be laissez-faire but pro-active in case of employees availing VRS, suffering due to lay-off, retrenchment, closure and outsourcing. Creation of alternative employment opportunities, extending social safety net and providing rehabilitation measures will be more helpful in removing the insecurity and anxiety from among the working class and developing a better labour relations system in the state. Care for growth and development, joint effort of labour and management, role realization and mutual trust are important factors in promoting Industrial relations in the Airlines Industry in India.

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