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NATIONAL CIVIL AVIATION POLICY 2016: A HELICOPTER PERSPECTIVE

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The Policy

On June 15, 2016 the National Civil Aviation Policy 2016 (NCAP -2016) was released by Minister of Civil Aviation Shri P. Ashok Gajapathi Raju.¹ The primary aim is to provide necessary stimulus to the Indian Aviation sector and the economy by establishing an enabling environment to promote affordable and convenient regional connectivity with expected spin offs in terms of promoting tourism, increasing employment opportunities and regional growth. The policy which has been finalised after due consultation and feedback from public, other stakeholders and experts covers over 20 interconnected policy areas ranging from applicable governing entities such as Airports Authority of India (AAI) and Customs to aspects of Aeronautical 'Make in India' and Aviation education and skill development.

The NCAP-2016 acknowledges that the helicopters play a key role in remote area connectivity, intra-city movement, tourism, law

enforcement, disaster relief, search and rescue as well emergency medical evacuation. The reported figure of less than 300 helicopters² operating in the civil sector is indeed very low as compared to other developing nations and a significant portion of this figure includes helicopters which are operated and are owned by the central and state governments or public sector undertakings.³

The policy while acknowledging the capability of Helicopters in undertaking multiple roles draws much of its structure from the results of a study titled "Promotion of Regional and Remote Area Air Connectivity in India" undertaken by Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu India Private Limited (DTTIPL) on behalf of Ministry of Civil Aviation (MoCA), which was submitted in early 2013.⁴

The DTTIPL Report

The report traces the evolution of Indian aviation sector, the growth of which has been fueled by significant policy changes along with associated factors such as economic growth and



influx of foreign tourists. This has also resulted in a significant increase in the capacity deployment by various airlines over a number of routes. When measured in terms of Available Seat Kilometers (ASKMs) as well as passenger traffic carried over such routes [measured in terms of Revenue Passenger Kilometers (RPKMs)], this has been significant. After the introduction of the Low Cost Carrier (LCC) concept, this rise was over 17% per annum. Quoting the data for the year 2011-12 this report further states that 86% of passenger traffic along with over 80% of total aircraft movement was accounted for by just 18 airports.⁵ This is significant since only 71 of the 4041 Statutory Towns (as per census 2011) have airports with scheduled air connectivity and is indicative of available space for expansion and resultant economic spin offs. Many of the measures suggested in this report have been incorporated in some form in the new NCAP-2016. However the decision on separate regulations for helicopters has been deferred to a later date in the NCAP-2016 probably due to lack of a similar study on the challenges faced by helicopter operations in the civil sector, as also a lack of available data on the numerous helipads spread all across the country.

“Helinomics”

The “Helinomics” or the economics involved in operating helicopters is the single most important factor affecting their viability and can be measured in a similar fashion as in

the case of fixed wing operations. The inherently higher costs of operation of the helicopter and low ASKM as well as even lower RPKMs are the overriding factors which adversely affect helicopter operations and hence most operators charge their passengers on a “per hour” basis. Added to this conundrum is the limited infrastructure in terms of dedicated helipads/heliports and regulatory support in terms of separate department dealing with helicopter related issues in civil aviation governing bodies.

The Regulatory Framework

The first civil helicopter⁶ had arrived in Indian skies by 1953 and the unique potential of this platform was soon realised. However helicopter operations in civil sector got a boost only on October 15, 1985 with the establishment of a public sector undertaking- Helicopter Corporation of India Limited (HCI) which was subsequently renamed Pawan Hans Limited (PHL).⁷ To this day PHL operates the maximum number of helicopters in the civil sector. Their tasks include providing helicopter support services to the oil sector for its off-shore exploration operations, services in remote areas and charter services for promotion of tourism.

The Commercial Helicopter Operations in India are governed by the stringent Civil Aviation Requirements (CARs) periodically issued by the Directorate General Civil Operations (DGCA), the latest one having been issued on July 28, 2014⁸.

Prior to issuing the NCAP-2016, which permits helicopters as well as sea-planes to fly from point to point without prior Air Traffic Clearance (ATC) in airspace below 5000 ft and in areas other than controlled airspace, prohibited and restricted areas, Temporary Segregated Areas (TSAs) and Temporary restricted Areas (TRAs) albeit keeping the provision of obtaining Air Defence Clearance (ADC) mandatory, the DGCA had issued an operations circular on February 11, 2016 aiming to regulate Helicopter Emergency Medical Services (HEMS).⁹ This when seen in consonance with the instructions of creating a separate helicopter cell in DGCA is a statement of intent on the part of the MoCA to provide necessary stimulus to civil helicopter aviation and is an indication of an evolving roadmap for promoting helicopter operations.

The Roadmap

The principal challenge facing civil helicopter operations is to make them economically viable. This would entail following a similar path undertaken for the fixed wing sector such as promoting their use in existing economic hubs and metros by constructing exclusive heliports and roof-top helipads for intra-city (mainly metros) flying to provide connectivity with airports. All new government buildings especially those belonging to the security apparatus must have provision of roof top helipads. Feasibility study of provisioning of such helipads on existing buildings needs to be

undertaken. HEMS as has already been identified would be a good start point with establishment of helipads for single engine helicopter operations within hospital premises.

The use of helicopters in providing access to regional and remote areas may be promoted by having a Viability Gap Funding (VGF) structure specifically tailored for helicopter operations due to their inherently high cost of operation. The operations in remote and inaccessible areas would invariably require active participation by the state governments as well as the Airports Authority of India (AAI) which would need to provide the necessary infrastructure. Further, the extensive data base available with the armed forces, especially the Indian Air Force (IAF) may be utilised to identify potential helipads and landing zones which can promote tourism as well as provide ready connectivity to the local populace.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ Ministry of Civil Aviation, GoI, "New Civil Aviation Policy - 2016", http://www.civilaviation.gov.in/sites/default/files/Final_NCAP_2016_15-06-2016.pdf, accessed June 16,2016

² Ibid., p.22

³ DGCA, "Active Aircraft Register", [www.dgca.nic.in, file:///D:/In%20Focus%20Jun%202016/Active%20Aircraft%20Register%20Enquiry.html](http://www.dgca.nic.in/file:///D:/In%20Focus%20Jun%202016/Active%20Aircraft%20Register%20Enquiry.html) accessed June 17,2016

⁴ Ministry of Civil Aviation, GoI, "Report on Regional and Remote Area Air Connectivity",

<http://www.civilaviation.gov.in/report-regional-and-remote-area-air-connectivity> accessed June 23, 2016

⁵ Ibid, p. 19

⁶ Association of Private Airport Operators, "Chronology of Events in Indian Civil Aviation Sector", http://www.apaoindia.com/?page_id=185 accessed June 23,2016

⁷ Pawan Hans Limited, " Company Profile", https://pawanhans.co.in/site/inner.aspx?status=3&menu_id=74 accessed June 28,2016

⁸ DGCA, "Commercial Helicopter Operations: Civil Aviation Requirements Section 8 – Operations Series 'H' Part I

Issue 1, 28th July 2014 E", <http://dgca.nic.in/rules/car-ind.htm>, accessed June 23,2016

⁹ DGCA, " Operations Circular: Helicopter Emergency Medical Services HEMS", <http://dgca.nic.in/rules/car-ind.htm> accessed June 226,2016

