

• Civil Aviation in India

A century old — but flying strong!

IT WAS AN OCCASION TO REMEMBER: A COMPARATIVELY YOUNG NATION CELEBRATING A HUNDRED YEARS OF AVIATION. A GRATEFUL NATION REMEMBERED ALL THOSE STALWARTS WHO HAD CONTRIBUTED TO MAKING THE INDUSTRY WHAT IT IS.



Airports all across India had a special glow on February 18, 2011. On that landmark day, tasteful illumination marked the completion of 100 years of Indian civil aviation. The day also marked the commencement of Civil Aviation Centenary Year.

It all began on February 18, 1911, when French pilot Monseigneur Henry Piquet flew a Humber biplane from Allahabad to Naini, just across the Yamuna River, and back, covering a distance of about 10 km. He carried nearly 6,000 letters, many of which were addressed to King

CELEBRATING AVIATION: Snapshots from the inaugural function of the Indian centenary celebrations; (top) the then Minister for Civil Aviation Praful Patel at the first meeting of the Civil Aviation Centenary Celebration Committee

George V of England with 'First Aerial Post' as the postmark. This was also considered to be the world's first airmail service.

A year later, in 1912, the first domestic air route between Karachi and Delhi became operational. The service between the two cities was operated by the Indian State Air Services with the Imperial Airways (a UK-based airline). In 1915, to expand the horizons of the aviation industry, Tata Sons Limited started regular airmail services between Karachi and Madras (now Chennai). They also founded Tata Airlines, which was rechristened Tata Air Services in 1938 and then Tata Air Lines, the same year.

On October 15, 1932, JRD Tata flew a single-engine aircraft from Karachi's Drigh Road Aerodrome to Bombay's Juhu Airstrip via Ahmedabad. The aircraft continued to Madras via Bellary, flown by former Royal Air Force pilot Nevill Vincent. Tata Air Lines did not, however, survive for too long after the end of World War II. On July 29, 1946, it became a public limited company called Air India and the government acquired 49 per cent stake in it, making it the country's designated flag carrier. Air India operated its first international flight on June 8, 1948, from Bombay to London.

Speaking during the inaugural of the Centenary Celebrations of Civil Aviation in India, Civil Aviation Minister Vayalar Ravi said: "Today, India is considered to be one of the safest countries in

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(Top) Union Civil Aviation Minister Vayalar Ravi lauding the participants of the street play held during the Centenary Celebrations of Civil Aviation in India; and (left) Congratulating awardees on International Women's Day during the Centenary Celebrations.

had held for 25 years. Amongst the other pioneers who were remembered were:

- First Indian woman pilot Sarla Thakural;
- Air Marshal Aspy Merwan Engineer who won the Agha Khan Trophy for being the first Indian to fly from London to Delhi in a Gypsy Moth aircraft;
- Senior flight purser of Pan Am flight 73, Neeraja Bhanot, for her exemplary courage displayed after the plane was hijacked. She was killed in 1986 while saving the lives of three children from bullets;
- Former Orissa Chief Minister and an avid aviator Biju Patnaik. After being entrusted to evacuate Sutan Sjahrir, the Prime Minister of Indonesia, during the country's struggle for independence from the Dutch rule, he flew to Java and brought him from Java islands on his own Dakota;
- Ravi also paid tribute to industrialist and Chairman emeritus of Raymonds Group and a former Sherriff of Mumbai Dr Vijaypat Singhanian. Singhanian holds the world record for highest altitude gained travelling in a hot air balloon;
- Air India for its services to the nation;
- DGCA for its signal contribution in regulating Indian airspace;
- Captain Saudamani Deshmukh for helping women get into the cockpit;
- GVK and GMR for their seminal contribution in PPP; and,
- The Aeronautical Society of India for its role in spreading greater awareness on the complex issues of aviation.

Ravi paid tributes to the pioneer of Indian aviation, JRD Tata, who obtained the first pilot's licence issued in India

terms of civil aviation. Recently, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) of America even cited India as a role model in the Asia-Pacific region." In order to retain this position and to assure all travellers the guarantee of safety, the Minister said: "It would be necessary to redefine the parameters of regulation. We are already looking into this matter and considering to restructure the DGCA into a more comprehensive system, which works well above international standards. One of the biggest challenges before us was to lend renewed vibrancy to public sector undertakings like Air India and Airports Authority of India."

Ravi also paid tributes to the pioneer of Indian aviation, JRD Tata, who obtained the first pilot's licence issued in India and also founded the first commercial airline which later became Air India.

Tata also launched India's first international carrier — Air India International and later when the government took over, he was appointed the Chairman of Air India in 1953, a position which he