

## Naval Air Stations as Catalysts for State Economies

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In recent days, some newspapers in Goa have reported on issues of No Objection Certificates (NOC) that the Indian Navy provides for certain buildings, development and infrastructure at a specified radius around the Naval Air Station (NAS), Dabolim. As is widely known, NAS (Dabolim) is also the international airport at Goa. All airports in the world have restrictions related to height and purpose for construction around them. There are landing and take-off 'funnels' aligned for the runway (or runways) and height-restrictions for construction, radiating outwards, which are not radially uniform. Besides these, there could be restrictions that relate to the likelihood of increased bird-hits that are caused due to garbage-accumulation, processing and disposal; chimneys and factories that could cause air-flow disruptions, visibility issues, etc. In generic terms, the greater the distance from an airport, the fewer are the restrictions on height and purpose. For very important infrastructure projects, some relaxations are afforded, by the military agreeing to some additional difficulties in landing and take-off paths and circuit-patterns. An example of such relaxations may be seen in the case of NAS (Kochi), where specific and critical port-infrastructure on Willingdon Island needed to be enabled. Nonetheless, there is occasional criticism, sometimes direct and at other times implied, in some sections of print and electronic media, that the Navy is either being obstructionist or is not sufficiently aware of the imperatives of economic-development. This commentary seeks to put the issues into perspective. This is not to deny that there could be an instance or two of malfeasance on the part of one or more individuals in the processing-chain wherein an NOC is given for something that the Navy should have rightly objected-to. Equally, there could be malfeasance or simply 'cussedness' in withholding an NOC even when there was no real justification for doing so. However, these are individual cases where the Navy's own internal mechanisms take corrective and, if required, punitive action. This article is about the larger, positive contributions and catalysing role that naval air-stations have played, and continue to play, in state and national development.

## **Trade and Flag**

The symbiotic relationship between trade, flag and navies, is now increasingly appreciated in India's policy-making levels as well as finding better understanding within Indian society as a whole. Along with a few other agencies and individuals, institutions such as the National Maritime Foundation (NMF) have contributed very significantly to advocating the inextricable linkages between maritime strength, the 'blue' economy, and, indeed, sea power itself, with the country's prosperity and security. As a consequence, there is lesser 'sea-blindness' all around. As the world hurtles through the Twenty-first Century, the seas and oceans are going to be more critical to India's prosperity, and security than at any time in the past. However, this article is not about the sea but about the skies, especially those above the interface between the land and the sea. There is lesser appreciation of the catalysing role played by the Indian Navy and the MoD in regional economic-development through the establishment of Naval Air Stations (NAS) decades ago in Goa, Kochi, Port Blair and Visakhapatnam. There are others in more remote areas and their 'start-up' impact on further development is a story that can be recounted after a few years. Indeed, there may well be a need to enhance 'air-mindedness' of the nation as a whole. While the National Maritime Day has been observed since 1964, there is, as yet, no National Aviation Day, although suggestions for its observance have been made from time to time.

## **Goa and *Hansa*: Touchdown to Prosperity**

Let us consider the state of Goa to illustrate the story. The basic airstrip used by the Portuguese was taken over by the Indian Navy immediately after Liberation in 1961. This became NAS (Dabolim) and, shortly afterwards, INS *Hansa*, when the latter was relocated from its first home at Suler (near Coimbatore) in what was then Madras State, to Goa. It is interesting to note that as they grown in size and capability, several Naval Air Stations are formally commissioned as "Ships" and are named after birds. Indicative examples would include *Garuda*, *Rajali*, *Shikra*, *Utkrosh*, *Dega*, *Baaz*, and *Parundu*. To return to the story of the NAS Dabolim, the MOD provided budgetary-support to the Indian Navy to lengthen the runway and for other related facilities for the NAS, so as to better support air operations by the Navy. Simultaneously, *Hansa* was opened for civilian flights. In the initial years, there were hardly any civilian flights. Air-travel was expensive, tourism virtually nil, and economic-development had yet to gather steam. However, it was that lone runway that triggered — more than anything else — tourism and consequent economic-development in Goa. Compared to the connectivity that we take for granted today, given the broad-gauge railway lines, dozens of daily flights, and the several bridges built or on the anvil, Goa was quite poorly served by transportation-infrastructure right up to the

early 1990s. However, the great beauty of this verdant, coastal state and its charming and friendly people, inexorably made Goa into an attractive holiday-destination. In much of this, the Navy's air station played a pivotal role by enabling millions of visitors to fly in and out. Today, Goa has the sixth-busiest airport in all of India! Two points need to be noted. First, if the Indian Navy had not made significant and continuing investments of men and money into military-aviation infrastructure, civilian air-operations would have increased very slowly — if at all they were slated for expansion in the first place. Military-aviation infrastructure involves airfield emergency-services, high-load runways and taxiways; air-traffic control; navigation aids; radar surveillance; perimeter security — and these are only the more important ones. After all, it is only in recent years that civilian airports have received impetus through both 'push' and 'pull' factors. Secondly, one of the very important roles of a Navy is to keep communications open through knowledge-of trade-routes, shipping, commerce, and whatever it takes to protect sea lines of communications in times of conflict or risk. Therefore, the Navy readily appreciated the need for air-communications as a marker of development and prosperity, especially for coastal regions of a nation. It bears mention here that in most nations, coastal regions are gateways, not only to the hinterland, but for economic activity in general and, as such, they exert a significant and entirely impact on overall prosperity. What sea-ports did in centuries past, airports have been doing in the past few decades.

### **Pan-India Contribution of Military-Aviation to “Incredible and Resurgent India”**

Whether they are citizens, policy-shapers or policy-makers, readers once again ought to answer for themselves a 'what if?' question: How much slower would economic development have been in Goa or in the Kochi region, in Andhra or in the remote Andamans, if there had been either zero or reduced naval initiatives leading to these Naval Air Stations? It was not only the Indian Navy, the Indian Air Force as well, whose expanding network of air-bases was similarly a key trigger for the opening-up of the North-East, Punjab, Rajasthan, Jammu and Kashmir, and even of cities like Hyderabad and Pune. With new, well-appointed and efficient airports in Cochin/Kochi or Hyderabad (Shamshabad), one needs to pause and acknowledge what NAS Kochi or the IAF Station at Begumpet have contributed in terms of economic opening-up and consequent prosperity. It ought to come as no surprise that in the havoc and human tragedy that followed in the wake of the recent devastating floods in Kerala, it was NAS Kochi which handled relief and passenger flights when CIAL, Nedumbassery, was inundated for several days.

## **Civil- Military Cooperation at its Daily, Quiet and Barely Noticed Best!**

The fact that military and civilian aviation have coexisted over decades is, in and of itself, a fine example of strategic-, operational- and tactical-level cooperation. This cooperation evolves from policies, strategic-planning, operational coordination of routes, flying areas, broad schedules and air-space management. At the level of air stations and their associated civilian air-enclaves, 'tactics' connote daily-schedules, air-traffic control, safety-services and drills, tarmac-coordination, and other minutiae. Despite occasional hiccups, this multi-level, multi-ponged relationship between various ministries, authorities and organisations has worked well.

### **Some Areas of Concern**

Of course, there are aspects that we need to be concerned about. Growing prosperity and increasing air-traffic has created issues of 'crowding' in the air as well as on the ground. Willy-nilly, military flying comes under pressure, not only in terms of restricted timings, but also in terms of airspace. Combat flying, quite obviously requires readiness for training at all times, in bad weather, in different types of terrain, and sometimes, in large numbers, where coordination between different air-stations is necessary for massed-impact on the enemy. Often, there is a need to simulate 'enemy' forces, too, which, in many ways, doubles the problems. Civil aviation has its own, generally-regular rhythm, but the tempo increases every year! Consequently, military flying is constantly under urging and pressure to 'adjust' to these realities. *De facto*, this means that time-slots as well as air-spaces shrink. The situation in India requires understanding and addressing, but the issues are by no means unique. Due to a posting as Defence Adviser in the Indian Embassy in Australia, the author is aware that in that vast island-continent, with a national population only slightly more than that of Greater Mumbai, the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) maintains air-stations that are also used for civil-aviation. Amazingly, some of these are under pressures similar to those that we experience, and the airlines and departments that speak for them sometimes seem to have greater lobbying power than those that speak for the RAAF. Given these contradictions, how is military flying to be done so that the pilots and ground-crew keep themselves trained for combat? This is not a question that can be or should be brushed aside.

### **Some Other Positives**

And yet, there are several positives from this 'dual-use' approach to aviation. Speaking for the Navy, quite a few 'civilian' airports set-up in recent times, or being planned, have some areas and

facilities set aside for naval-aviation enclaves. Such facilities enable flexibility in peace-time operations for disaster-relief and logistics, and, during war-time, for operational purposes. One hopes that one day we may fly more indigenously-produced helicopters and passenger/ transport aircraft with versions for civil as well as military aviation. These could benefit from common or overlapping MRO (Maintenance/ Repair/ Overhaul) facilities that could be set-up near such airports.

## **Conclusion**

The millions of passengers who touch-down and/or take-off from Goa may hardly be aware of the complex arrangements for flying, services, security, infrastructure upgrades and maintenance, payments, etc. Their ability to “sit back and enjoy” their flights requires continuous attention, arrangements, monitoring and execution by unnamed-individuals, whether in uniform or in civilian attire, and that too, in a number of diverse places, ranging from ministries and headquarters, right down to control-towers and tarmacs. They all contribute to ‘Happy Landings’. Perhaps that needs to be kept more firmly in mind.

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