

Resumption of Domestic Air Travel

Why in news?

On 25th May 2020, the domestic air travel in India was resumed with lots of difficulties.

What happened?

- Due to the pandemic, commercial flying was suspended for weeks.
- One-third of regular flights were supposed to reopen on May 25, with due precautions being taken.
- Instead, there were scenes of chaos - many flights were cancelled.
- Many of the passengers found themselves without information of how or whether their bookings would be honoured.

Why was there chaos?

- The Union Civil Aviation Ministry did not obtain consent from state governments involved before directing a resumption of air travel.
- This has placed travellers and airlines in difficulty, and should have been avoided.

How could the chaos be avoided?

- Under these circumstances, rail or air connections cannot be unilaterally resumed without the assent of the receiving state government.
- Instead of a uniform approach, the response has to be differentiated in view of the **specific Covid-19 risk perception of a state**.
- At the end of the day, it is the states that are managing the Covid crisis on the ground.
- More co-ordination between the Union government and the states is needed on several other aspects of inter-state travel.

What were the procedural confusions?

- Besides cancellations, there was confusion over quarantine procedures.
- Most of the state governments decided to put the passengers arriving from other states in an institutional quarantine of 7 to 14 days.
- Others made home quarantine for a fortnight mandatory for the travellers.

- If one rule across the country is impossible or inadvisable, at the very least complete transparency and lucidity are needed.
- Travellers should be informed well in advance what their quarantine requirements will be so that they can decide about travelling.
- If some states impose the full weeks-long quarantine period, then clearly short business trips will be impossible.

What problems did the lack of regulations create?

- Airport authorities and airlines have taken measures to enforce social distancing at the terminals.
- Yet that good work may well be undone by the lack of such regulations on board – many flights are departing relatively crowded.
- If railway chair-class coaches were directed to leave the middle seat empty, it is far from clear why airlines did not receive the same direction.
- This is perhaps linked to the desire to keep them afloat.

What approach should have been followed?

- The **public health** should have been a **priority** and social distancing should have been maintained even on board.
- After this, the airlines should have been allowed to fix prices at a rate that would be remunerative.
- Instead, the government made the mistake of trying to fix a band for prices.
- This approach by the ministry will neither manage the transmission of Covid-19 nor the airlines can minimise their financial turbulence.
- More work has to be done by the Union government to ensure that air travel in the time of the pandemic is properly regulated.

Source: Business Standard