

# Keeping the Faith

Bodapati Bhaskar talks about what it takes to be at the helm of affairs and keep his calm

**A**nyone who has transited through Bengaluru's swanky international airport will have a sense of the kind of work that must go on behind the scenes. As India's third-busiest airport, it caters to over 22 million demanding passengers a year. And hemming together a team that ensures that every passenger passes through with a smile is Bodapati Bhaskar, Senior Director Senior Director & Head of Executive Committee, Bangalore International Airport Limited. Since joining the company in 2010, he has led many of the major activities at the Airport, and has played a key role in the 'tariff revolution' that BIAL has helped lead.

## Of successful collaboration, and delivering a world-class product

Bengaluru International Airport has a very complex structure, involving two sets of parties: private promoters, and the government. The promoters are again divided



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Senior Director & Head of Executive Committee, Bangalore International Airport Limited (BIAL)

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into three sets of shareholders, while the government is divided into the Central and state levels. These parties seldom think alike, and their priorities are different. Aligning their thoughts becomes a complex task. The way to address the issue is to figure out the requirements of each stakeholder. Once that understanding is reached, we see how we can work together as a team to collaborate and find a common solution.

When it comes to execution, I ensure that there is absolute transparency. As an independent entity, I cannot afford to be tilting toward the left or the right. It is important to give equal responsibility and respect to each of the stakeholders, and to try to execute things transparently. These three steps are what make each of these stakeholders confide in you. Confidence and trust are the hallmark of any partnership. Once you build that with all the stakeholders, collaboration becomes easy. Convincing and managing the Board can be difficult, but we have been successful in that respect. The results are there to see: over the last few years, we have managed to invest in and substantially expand the airport. Its handling capacity has grown in leaps and bounds from 8 million to 22 million people a year; we are now one of the best – and most profitable – airports in the country.

## Setting new trends in regulation and expansion

Economic regulation of the airports came in only after the signing of the concession agreement for the development of the Bangalore Airport with the government. Normally, regulation comes first, and only then is the agreement signed – but in our case, it was the opposite. Everything about the situation was new, and it was so for each stakeholder. Understanding the regulation became a bit of a task for both the Airport as well as the regulator. This took some time, but it happened eventually, making us trend-setters in the airport sector. We had some innovative ideas, coming up with new business models, such as variable tariff plans. This involves giving a certain discount when an aircraft lands, or when aircraft operate on new routes. For example, we started the Chandigarh-Bangalore sector, where no flights had operated earlier. Once we announced a discount, we went from four airlines to several airlines flying to Chandigarh – almost full.

Development of new routes was implemented through the scheme - it was something that had never been explored before. It enhanced business to an extent unprecedented, globally. Of course, we also had challenges on how to charge the passenger, so there were lots of issues pertaining to the tilt mechanism, which ultimately got sorted out. There are still some barriers, but then, we are still at a nascent stage, and things will continue to evolve with time. As it is, we are evolving very fast. Bangalore Airport has a very major role to play in the evolution of the tariff revolution, and I am fortunate to be able to play a key role in establishing these norms.

## Mandates and beyond...

The most important thing for us is to know and recognise our customers. And knowing their expectations whether it is the airline or passengers, becomes crucial for

us. There are so many things that go on in the airport. For instance, there are over 50 types of services that take place, and we have 10,000 people. The challenge, therefore, is immense. In the end, we all need to collaborate towards one cause - to serve customers at a reasonable cost - one that is commensurate with the service. Overcharging is not right, but at the same time, we cannot render services free of cost. Balancing cost and service is one of the mandates I give my team across the entire organisation. My brief is clear: 'Whatever you do, you have to measure in terms of what is the commensurate remuneration you should get in terms of service.'

Keeping that in mind, my mandate is to serve people - and then, everything falls in place. Service should be the prime motive, and profit follows. I do not measure profit merely in terms of monetary data. Profit can be in terms of providing excellent service. For example, the brand Bangalore Airport has built all over the world as one of the best airports is, to me, one of the biggest 'profits' that I can think of. We regard this as a motive, and because of this, we eventually landed up being one of the most profitable airports on record.

### Management strategies that matter

I take my lessons out of the Bhagavad Gita and various other philosophical books. The Gita's theories and philosophy remain relevant even today - service to humanity, and expecting nothing in return, is the main crux of its doctrine. I derive peace and calm from the Holy Scriptures. The focus is on what you are doing rather than on what you want to achieve. This helps set oneself free from the daily hassles and expectations of the world. If you can accept that you are serving with a purpose beyond expectation, you are spared much of the grief and stresses of life.

Timing is the most important

Bodapati Bhaskar has over 26 years of experience across a diverse spectrum of industry, including with a leading global conglomerate in the healthcare equipment and devices space. He joined Bangalore International Airport Limited in 2010 as Senior Director & Head of Executive Committee. Since then, he has been instrumental in spearheading the first 'Greenfield

PPP airport', and played a key role in BIAL's economic regulation as well as its expansion. A Chartered Accountant from the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India and a fifth-batch Management Trainee from Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL), Mr Bhaskar has worked on diverse assignments in the aviation industry. He also had a three-year stint at the Indian High Commission in London.

thing in any strategy. You might be the best strategist in the world, but if you do not know how to time your strategy, the whole plan can go wrong. Any strategy or business proposal might sound 'right', but remember, it needs to be timed right, and recognising that timing is wisdom. You must be cautious about what you present, to whom, and how.

### Keeping the adrenalin high

I always try and look for a chance to serve, and that keeps me going. To add value - in the strictest sense of the term - is what I seek in any engagement. I focus on my contribution, and whether it would be of value to others, be it when am speaking to others or, counselling or when I am delivering service to the other person. Selflessness without any expectation is ultimately what I want to achieve.

### Of mentors and mentorship...

Over the years, I have had quite a few of them. It is not possible to move ahead without having anybody to guide you or show the way. When I was a management trainee at HAL, I met someone who was due to retire. He mentored me on how I should build my career. One of the most beautiful things he told me was, 'Work like a clerk, think like a manager, decide like a director, and talk like a diplomat'. This became my guiding light, and it is so even to this day.

### Motivation is the key to growth

One of the most important things that your team looks to you for is freedom to think, work, and execute.

When you give them that freedom, there can be room for mistakes and some slip-ups, but you mentor them on taking the right course of action. That is how I believe in motivating others. A person is most motivated when he expresses himself freely, and that ability to express oneself leads to phenomenal results. People are willing to stay on at BIAL for a single reason: that I trust them. Whether good or bad, right or wrong, I trust my team, and they value my trust. There is no question of betraying that trust. They get motivated and execute whatever needs to be done. They also know that the economics follow, in any case. Trust does not come with explaining or tutoring - it comes only by setting an example. You should express trust with colleagues to get their belief in you.

Transparency in communication at an equal level is very important. Trust is something that is intrinsic in my scheme of things. In fact, BIAL's attrition rate is less than 4 per cent, while the industry struggles at 11 per cent.

### Time out with family...

Family time is sacred to me. All of us, including my wife and two daughters, look forward to our time of bonding together. My wife is a doctor and keeps a busy schedule. My eldest daughter is an engineer with a post-graduate degree in international health management. She currently works in the administration department of a hospital. My second daughter is in the 12th standard. Our weekends and travels are spent together as unit, and we all look forward to that. ■