Seaplanes: Future of travel over water

India is ready to use seaplanes in daily life despite it not being commercially viable for commoners. ■ by DP Sabharwal



PM Narendra Modi on a seaplane during Gujarat Assembly Elections 2017 campaign a.

Before every election, almost all political parties raise a lot of '*hungama* and *shor-sharaba*' over trivial as well as non-issues that die a natural death once the elections are over and the results are declared. Everything said and done is forgotten. More or less the same thing happened during the recently concluded Gujarat elections, except one thing.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi had flown in a seaplane from the Sabarmati River to Dharoi Dam in Mehsana district on the last day of campaigning for the Gujarat Assembly elections. It was a single-engine machine, and it was against the laid-down protocol since VVIPs are allowed to fly only in twin-engine or multi-engine aircraft. Though the din raised by the opposition parties has died out, the issue remains alive; the issue of using seaplanes over river bodies. The central government is aiming to start commercial seaplane operations before the 2019 general elections.

Seaplanes operate from the vast expanses of water using it as a runway. It was because of this reason that they were used extensively during the earlier years of World War II. However, as the war progressed and runway were built, their role and usage diminished. In the present times, seaplanes have very specific



and designated roles like dropping water on forest fires, transportation of people around archipelagos and to undeveloped or road-less areas and in rescue operations because of their better ability than helicopters to spot and rescue survivors.

Present scenario

Looking at the present scenario, introduction of seaplanes in the country is going to be a long haul since practically nothing exists on the ground. The government however appears to be working seriously and that too on a fast track to make it happen. "We will formulate a policy for this in just a few months. It has been a dream that I have nurtured. Conversion of 111 rivers into waterways and the availability of lakhs of lakes and dams which can be converted into airports with minimal expenditure on small floating jetties,' said Nitin Gadkari recently, who holds multiple portfolios of road, transport, highways, shipping and water resources in the central government.

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Ministry of Shipping to set the norms for infrastructure which would include building of temporary or floating jetties and navigational aids, Director General of Civil Aviation to lay down detailed rules and regulations for safe operations, training institutions for training of pilots and finally the operators who have to identify viable routes.

Operation of seaplanes is not entirely new in the country. There have been few previous attempts in this area. In 2014, a seaplane service was



Touring on a seaplane.



A seaplane in service.

launched to connect Mumbai to tourist destinations in the Western Ghats, providing an alternative to four-five-hours long drives on the Mumbai-Pune expressway. However, the service did not find a market and failed to draw fliers. Another attempt was make by Maritime Energy Heli Air Service Pvt. Ltd (MEHAIR), which had the backing of the state government. It too failed primarily due to permission issues from government agencies. Single engine seaplanes have earlier operated in Andaman, Kerala and Maharashtra, but faded away due to high maintenance cost and steep cost prices.

Spice Jet, one of the budget-carriers seems to be ready to start seaplanes operations in Mumbai within a year from Girgaum Chowpatty to Juhu airport a distance which during peak hours needs about 90 minutes to cover. With the seaplanes, the flight time is supposed to come down to around five minutes in addition to 10-15 minutes for security procedures.

The company has already signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Japan's Setouchi Holdings for starting operations in India. The development comes against the backdrop of Nitin Gadkari riding the trial run of Setouchi's 10-seater Kodiak Quest 1000 seaplane by SpiceJet at the Girgaum Chowpatty off the Mumbai coast a day prior to the much talked about flight of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The future

The Proposed seaplane project would be sustainable only if it is scaled up to a fleet of about 100 seaplanes. The single pilot, 10-14 seater seaplane would cost around Rs 25 crore. SpiceJet Chairman has made it clear that the company would not do anything unless the operations are profitable. The company is exploring ways to seek low-interest loans from Japan similar to the one provided for bullet train project connecting Mumbai with Ahmedabad. The government is aware of this and it is said that the policy would be framed keeping economic viability in mind.

As on date, the regulatory authority in India does not permit single-engine seaplanes to be used for scheduled commercial operations. Since globally there is a move towards allowing single-engine seaplanes to be used for scheduled commercial operations, India is also looking along these lines. As per an official, Nitin Gadkari has requested the civil aviation minister to explore a regulatory regime for single engine seaplanes, keeping in mind all safety aspects.

Sooner or later, seaplanes would fly over Indian waters. Whether it would be a luxury ride only for the neo-rich and time-started officers or the common would also be able to enjoy the thrills, would only be known in the near future.