

# Airport language controversy: What's the ground reality?



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This article seeks to find answers to several questions that have arisen over the operations of the Central Industrial Security Force at the airports.

Launched with about 3,000 personnel way back in 1969, the CISF, one of the paramilitary forces functioning under the Union Home Ministry, has grown into an important and multi-skilled organisation boasting 1,63,590 personnel. It has been safeguarding 353 organisations including nuclear plants, space research centre etc.

## **Security at airports**

The Indian Airlines flight IC-814 was hijacked in 1999. Consequently the Home Ministry proposed to entrust the CISF with the job of providing security to the airports. The National Democratic Alliance's union government led by Vajpayee approved the proposal.

The responsibility of airport security was thrust on the CISF in 2000. If the security management at airports in India has improved manifold in the past 20 years, the credit goes to the CISF. Along with the CISF, the Bureau of Civil Aviation Security (BCAS), the state police forces and other departments have jointly been functioning to ensure security at the airports.

### **Ground reality**

In these circumstances, politicians and personalities from other walks of life have, through social media, been making complaints for the past few years over the language spoken by the CISF personnel. They have been alleging that the CISF personnel are speaking only in Hindi as they don't know English and Tamil. Yet there are people attributing these complaints to a language-oriented political game.

Let us try to find the ground reality.

Most of the CISF personnel, particularly, the Assistant Sub-Inspectors and the Sub-Inspectors are graduates who have joined the service, passing the relevant competitive examinations. So, no doubt, they know English. The best part is that they have been trained in the Aviation Security and Safety Management (AVSEC) as well.

It is all but natural that the personnel, whose mother tongue is not Tamil, cannot converse in the language. Yet it cannot be denied that at best they know English. So, it is manifest that the non-

Tamil CISF personnel from other states are competent enough to speak in English to the non-Hindi air passengers.

There is another allegation that the air passengers, who don't know both English and Hindi, find it very difficult to talk to the CISF personnel from other states who don't know Tamil.

It should be recalled that according to the circular on the transfer of the CISF personnel, transfers are distributed as follows: 30 per cent for those from native states, 30 per cent for those belonging to South India (home sector) and 40 per cent for those from other states. So, 30 per cent of the CISF personnel at the Tamil Nadu airports are belonging to Tamil Nadu.

### **Security of paramount importance**

It is also alleged that the CISF officials don't get on smoothly with air passengers. The truth is that the officials are not receptionists at the airports. We must understand that they are actively engaged in vigilance and security missions at the airport, always on alert. It is part of their primary duty to get clear answers to some vital questions from air passengers during checks. If there is a small misstep or error in their work, it will likely give room for some untoward incidents such as terrorist attacks and the personnel may be caught on the wrong foot. If this reality is understood clearly, one can empathise with seriousness and sincerity of the CISF personnel on duty.

### **Changes needed**

It is a given that an organization needs changes to catch up with the changing times and mores. The CISF is no exception on this count.

It is imperative that whenever air passengers lodge complaints over the functioning of the CISF personnel, proper enquiries must be conducted and necessary changes effected in the set-up.

After the recent controversy, I tried to call up the CISF public relations officials, but in vain. It is shocking to know that a massive force employing over one-and-half lakh personnel has just two PR officials in Delhi. So, one cannot help but infer that apart from the voices of the politicians and celebrities, the voices of the people cannot reach the ears of the CISF.

When complaints, allegations and controversies arise against the CISF, the airports' security organization must proactively come forward to give clarifications. The PR officials, who know the languages of the state must be appointed in every states so the air passengers access them easily whenever needed.

All said and done, the passengers must understand that an airport is the place that needs more security and safety and the CISF must also pay heed to criticism and accordingly effect changes in its operational methods.

Let us get our act together regardless of differences over religions, languages and races to uphold the security of our country and welfare of our people. That is of paramount importance, above all.

**Translated by V. Mariappan.**