

# IndiGo Airlines in India: managing “moments of truth”

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## 1. Introduction

In May 2022, the chief executive officer of IndiGo Airlines – India's largest passenger airline by market share, Ronojoy Dutta, found himself in the eye of a storm over the airline's handling of a specially abled child travelling with his parents from Ranchi – a town in eastern India, to Hyderabad – a South Indian city (Gupta, 2022). An IndiGo staff member, reacting to the tantrums of the child – who was probably disturbed by the unfamiliar surroundings and the prospect of travel – had refused to allow the family of three to board the flight, stating that the boy was in a “state of panic” and that he posed a “risk to other passengers” (Biswas, 2022). In spite of the rebuke, pleas and even threats from several flight passengers – including trained doctors and senior government officials – who insisted that the trio be allowed to fly, the staff member refused to relent. He stated that the boy would be allowed to travel only when he was “normal”. The flight ultimately took off without the boy and his parents (Firstpost, 2022).

The incident provoked widespread anger and condemnation on social media after a fellow flyer who had witnessed the incident first-hand shared a post on Facebook describing it. The Facebook post, which had 3.9k views, attracted 2.2k comments and 3.9k shares (Gupta, 2022). The social media frenzy spread to other platforms, notably Twitter, with India's Minister of Civil Aviation tweeting that there was “zero tolerance” for such behaviour and that he would personally investigate the matter (Scindia, 2022). Within two days of the incident, Dutta issued a statement expressing his regret at the “unfortunate” incident. Yet, he supported the employee, calling it a “difficult decision” that the employee had to take “in line with [IndiGo's] safety guidelines” based on the possibility that the “commotion would carry forward aboard the aircraft” (Business Standard, 2022a). On May 28, 2022, the regulatory body for aviation in India, the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA), slapped a fine of INR 5 lakh on IndiGo for denying boarding to the specially abled child (Indian Express, 2022).

In spite of IndiGo's attempt to differentiate itself through a customer-focused approach and to claim market leadership through service leadership, this was not the first such incident involving IndiGo staff. How could such incidents affect service businesses such as IndiGo? How could Dutta ensure that IndiGo manages the customer touch points over the entire service encounter? How could he prevent such a fiasco in the future so that IndiGo remained, as it claimed, India's “preferred airline”?

## 2. Indigo Airlines

IndiGo Airlines was set up in 2006 by Rahul Bhatia of InterGlobe Enterprises and Rakesh Gangwal (Soni, 2021). IndiGo had positioned itself as a low-cost airline flying primarily in the

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domestic market, focusing on three pillars for creating a superior customer experience – offering low fares, being on time and delivering a courteous and hassle-free experience ([IndiGo, 2023a](#)). In April 2022, of the 10.8 million air passengers flown by various airlines in India, a monthly report by the DGCA placed IndiGo as the largest Indian airline, accounting for 58.9% of the domestic market share ([The Hindu, 2022](#)).

### *2.1 IndiGo's service leadership*

IndiGo had tried to build an edge over its competitors through its customer focus ([Firstpost, 2012](#)). Over the years, IndiGo had been recognized for its service quality elements associated with enhanced customer satisfaction. IndiGo's services included a clutter-free, minimalistic interface on its website, self-check-in kiosks where passengers could avoid standing in long queues, check-in staff with hand-held scanners, which would allow passengers without baggage to avoid long waiting times, a modernistic, sleek boarding pass, ramps that were more user-friendly, appealing in-flight food, the practice of flight attendants addressing even economy passengers by name, and in-flight customer-assisted garbage collection, which helped the airline keep its flights clean at a minimal cost ([Soni, 2021](#)).

Going beyond mere customer satisfaction, IndiGo had been a pioneer in adopting diversity and inclusion in airline operations, especially with its focus on passengers with disabilities. In an emerging economy like India, other airlines shared passenger-stair vehicles; even Air India, the top airline, had to resort to plane crew carrying disabled passengers up the staircase into the aircraft. IndiGo, on the other hand, had sought to offer disabled-friendly infrastructure and an environment for disabled passengers right from the early days ([Brown, 2013](#); [Business World, 2017](#)). In January 2013, IndiGo was the first Indian carrier to introduce a specially designed guide for special-needs passengers, including a Braille menu card. In a Facebook post in 2013, IndiGo announced, "Happy Birthday Louis Braille! You not only overcame your own disability but devoted your life to a remarkable achievement that brought in literacy, independence, and productivity to millions of blind people across the globe. On this day, we renew our commitment to every individual who needs special attention while travelling" ([IndiGo, 2013](#)).

In 2014, IndiGo pioneered stairlifts for disabled passengers at airports where ramps were unavailable ([Global Accessibility News, 2014](#)). Later, it introduced boarding ramps without steps, which allowed caretakers and attendants to take wheelchair or stretcher-bound passengers directly into the aircraft effortlessly. It also equipped its buses with an "auto step", which could help senior citizens and passengers with disabilities board these buses without strain. Their offerings also included a Web Content Accessibility Guidelines-certified website, which disabled passengers could easily access. IndiGo had been awarded "The Annual Disability Matters Award – Asia Pacific" thrice since 2015 for its pioneering efforts in mainstreaming disability in the aviation sector and for making travel convenient and hassle-free for disabled passengers with limited mobility ([Business World, 2017](#)).

Given the company's emphasis on a discrimination-free environment, its Corporate Social Responsibility mission, gender diversity as a priority, the inclusion of Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and Queer and differently abled employees, and the diversity of its governance bodies and employees, IndiGo, in its Annual Report 2022 ([IndiGo, 2022](#), p. 88), identified Diversity and Inclusion as an opportunity area.

IndiGo also regularly conducted various training programmes for all its employees, not restricted merely to the Board of Directors and Key Managerial Personnel (KMP) (see [Table 1](#)). In 2013, with an eye on moving beyond the usual conception of a budget airline and gaining customer loyalty, the airline moved from running role-specific training programmes for its employees to a centrally operated training programme comprising three segments: a functional training segment for roles such as that of pilots, in-flight crew,

**Table 1** Details of training provided to employees and workers on human rights issues and policies of IndiGo

Category of employees	FY2020–21		FY2021–22	
	Total	No. of employees/workers other covered (%)	Total	No. of employees/workers other covered (%)
Permanent	29,551	14,351 (49%)	30,165	14,411 (48%)
Other than permanent	1,414	87 (6%)	1,838	335 (18%)
Total employees	30,965*	14,438 (47%)	32,003*	14,746 (46%)

**Note:** \*These data also include employees who were trained during the reporting period and are no longer with the organization

**Source:** IndiGo (2022)

ticketing attendants, baggage handlers, etc.; a segment to coach employees for customer service and soft skills; and finally a leadership training segment for employees at all levels, which could encourage all employees to handle customer issues within their respective domains (Brown, 2013).

In 2017, the airline commissioned a 75,000 square feet state-of-the-art learning and development academy in Gurugram, a city in North India, named “ifly” for training employees and developing the customer service orientation of the organization. IndiGo’s Annual report 2016–17 stated, “This is where we train and uphold standards of customer service delivered by Inflight Service (IFS) and Airport Operation & Customer Services team (AOCS), develop an internal customer service culture and inculcate behaviors required at the workplace aligned to the service culture” (IndiGo, 2017). IndiGo launched a second ifly learning academy in Bengaluru, the capital city of Karnataka, a state located in South India (The Free Press Journal, 2019).

The Annual Report 2021–22 identified that IndiGo’s KMP had gone through 464 h of training and awareness sessions. Such sessions included anti-discrimination, sensitization and skills upgradation training, among others. In contrast, employees other than the Board of directors and KMPs had gone through 2,068,333 h of training and awareness sessions, including license renewal, safety protocols, anti-discrimination and sensitization training, among others[1] (IndiGo, 2022). The expenses related to training, however, reduced from INR 1,132.87m in FY 2017 to INR 489.87m in FY 2021 to INR 435.30 in FY 2022 (IndiGo, 2017, p. 143; IndiGo, 2022, p. 173). Furthermore, it was only in the Annual report 2021–22 that IndiGo referred to sensitization and anti-discrimination training (IndiGo, 2022, p. 96).

## 2.2 Service reliability

With 279 aircraft flying over 100 destinations in 2022 – with 74 domestic and 26 international destinations, operating more than 1,600 daily flights and carrying more than 300 million passengers, the airline prided itself on its operational reliability. Its website stated, “A uniform fleet for each type of operation, high operational reliability and an award-winning service make us one of the most reliable airlines in the world” (IndiGo, 2023a). Indeed, IndiGo had been ranked as the 3rd most punctual airline globally in 2021 by the OAG Punctuality League” (IndiGo, 2023a). Data released by the DGCA in March 2022 confirmed this assertion domestically as well, with IndiGo clocking the best on-time performance (OTP) of 95.4% at four metro airports in February 2022 (Zee News, 2022).

IndiGo had delivered the promise of reliability through a “short-haul and point-to-point route structure, a shared fleet with single-class seat arrangements and high staff productivity” (Savage & Palmer, 2022). Furthermore, it used technology such as the Aircraft Communications Addressing and Reporting System (ACARS) to monitor OTP diligently in real time for every flight, ensuring reliability (Phadnis, 2013).

The promise of reliability meant that even as a budget airline that did not offer business class, IndiGo attracted business travellers who sought OTP above comfort (Savage &

Palmer, 2022). In 2011, in an interview, IndiGo's co-founder, Rahul Bhatia had articulated the airline's value proposition, when he asked, "Would you like to be on time, or would you like to be three hours late and have the nicest champagne and caviar on board?" (Upadhyay, 2011). IndiGo not only did not serve champagne and caviar, but it also did not – unlike its peers like Air India and Jet Airlines – provide any complimentary meals or other services, and in fact charged for all additional services. Yet, people looking for reliability were willing to pay for the additional services charged (Savage & Palmer, 2022).

### 3. Indigo: in the eye of a storm

The controversy concerning the handling of the specially abled child by the airline staff was not the first one IndiGo had encountered in the past few years.

In October 2017, an IndiGo passenger was dragged by airline staff at the Delhi airport and beaten in broad daylight, even as another staffer – who claimed to be a whistleblower – captured the entire incident on video. The incident drew severe flak from all quarters. The Union Civil Aviation Minister had condemned the incident and ordered an enquiry (India Today, 2017). The former chairman of Air India, Ashwani Lohani, had taken to Facebook to call out IndiGo over the passenger's "manhandling". He had stated, "It is apparent that such an act is borne only out of the false sense of pride that the company has started displaying since their market share has started knocking on 50%. Indifference towards the very passengers who took them there is indeed sad". (ANI News, 2017). The president and wholetime director of IndiGo had apologized for the incident and clarified that the employees involved had been suspended (Airline Suppliers, 2017).

Then, in November 2017, a series of incidents involving the misbehaviour of IndiGo staff occurred. An Indian badminton player and celebrity, PV Sindhu, tweeted regarding the rude behaviour of an IndiGo staffer who refused to keep her bag in the overhead bin. IndiGo responded by saying that the bag in question was oversized, and hence it was not allowed, and also stating that customers' safety was its primary concern (Sindhu, 2017). In the same month, the Airports Authority of India (AAI) pulled up IndiGo for the "gross negligence of [its] staff", which had caused injury to a woman passenger of IndiGo who used a wheelchair, when she fell from the wheelchair while being ferried by its staffer at the Lucknow airport. While initially the airline tried to blame the accident on a crack in the floor in the airport, it later apologized (Mint, 2017). In yet another incident, IndiGo staff misbehaved with a woman passenger at Guwahati airport, snatching her mobile phone to delete certain pictures clicked by her. IndiGo suspended these employees (Outlook, 2017a). Historian Ramachandra Guha slammed IndiGo for "unprovoked rudeness", tweeting, "Three times this time, I have been subject to unprovoked rudeness by an @IndiGo6E staffer. Different people, different airports, same airline. Absolutely shocking". He further stated that, as confirmed by his friends and family, "rudeness has become a habit with IndiGo". The airline chose not to respond to these allegations (Outlook, 2017b).

In April 2018, IndiGo got into another controversy when a Bengaluru-based cardiologist was allegedly maltreated and deplaned by IndiGo staff at Lucknow airport when he complained about the mosquitoes on board the flight. IndiGo responded with a statement blaming the passenger for being aggressive, using threatening language, and saying they had deplaned him for his unruly behaviour (Khan, 2018).

In February 2020, a group of five passengers on a Delhi-Jeddah IndiGo flight had been deplaned for unruly behaviour when one of them tried to forcibly open the aircraft door as it was taxiing for takeoff. They insisted that the airline allow their two companions, who had lost their boarding passes and had not been allowed to board, to take the flight (NDTV, 2020).

In 2021, the IndiGo crew had to tackle a passenger who had insisted on going to the airline lavatory during takeoff, in spite of the staff's repeated requests to remain seated. IndiGo

decided to take no action against the man because he was found to be “mentally unstable” (Manju, 2021).

### 3.1 Customer complaints and redressal at IndiGo

In 2015, the Indian regulatory authority, the Securities Exchange Board of India (SEBI), had made it mandatory for all listed companies to report on their environment, social and governance (ESG) parameters through the Business Responsibility Report (BRR) (SEBI, 2015). In its 2015–16 annual report, IndiGo, as a listed entity, reported its stance on customer focus as part of the Principle 9 requirements of the BRR and initiated a process of reporting customer complaints publicly (IndiGo, 2016, p. 95)[2].

Indigo’s statement on principle 9\* of the Business Responsibility Report, 2015–16:

- The company places its customers at the centre of all its business conducts. Customer service is core to our business and the industry we are in. Since our inception in 2006, our philosophy has been simple: offer fares that are always low; flights that are on time; and a courteous, hassle-free travel experience. A critical aspect of the above has been handling the complaint redressal procedures. The positives of having a unique redressal procedure have helped us set an example in the industry and for others to follow. With time, we have also had the opportunity to improve our standards, revisit the processes and enhance the same. To ensure a hassle-free process for customers, we have opened various channels of communication, from a call centre, to info boards/check-in counters at the airport, feedback forms and, most recently, social media and email processes. All customer interactions funnel to a central location.
- A robust customer relationship management (CRM) system ensures the tracking of communication, not only with customers but also internally. Details of customer feedback are collected every week, and a briefing is conducted in the presence of our President and some of our key leadership team members. The focus is not only to see specific complaints but also to look at trends to see if there are any changes required to prevent the occurrence of such issues. Employee counseling and corrective training are also embedded in the system to facilitate the entire improvement process.
- Some of the initiatives taken to ensure complaints are received in time, addressed and answered to the satisfaction of the customers are as follows:
- Social media desk: We have set up our Social Media desk right at the nerve centre of operations. This is the hub where all information regarding aircraft, delays, crew, airports, etc. is coordinated from. With the social media team strategically placed here, the turn-around time is monitored faster, and accurate information is given.
- Proactive help desk: Based on the feedback from our inflight team and commander’s trip report or a flight report filled in by our lead cabin attendant, concerns or issues raised by a customer are addressed by a proactive helpdesk that reaches out to the customer even before he/she contacts us.
- Empowerment: While as an airline we must have standard operating procedures to ensure safety, efficiency and consistency, we also understand that certain situations require flexibility and understanding. Therefore, our front line staff is empowered to take decisions under certain circumstances to help customers.
- \*Principle 9 refers to “Businesses should engage with and provide value to their customers and consumers in a responsible manner”.

Source: IndiGo (2016).

In the annual reports for the years 2017–2020, IndiGo reported that it had received complaints relating to “refund, flight problems, baggage, customer service, disability, staff

behaviour, including disputes in relation to loss of baggage/cargo, no-show, cancellation of tickets, incorrect bookings, refund of fares, flight delays, death/injury on board, baggage mishandling and flight cancellation”, and had closed 1,275 complaints in 2017, 1,146 in 2018, 2,337 in 2019 and 3,168 complaints in 2020 to the customers’ satisfaction (IndiGo, 2023b).

In 2021, SEBI introduced new reporting requirements regarding ESG parameters called the Business Responsibility and Sustainability Report (BRSR) (SEBI, 2021). In line with the new requirements, the company started a detailed tracking of customer complaints in 2020–21 (Table 2). It also established a CRM process to screen customer comments and review complaints (IndiGo, 2022, p. 111–112). In 2022, IndiGo claimed that with the attention it paid to enhance customer engagement to augment the travel experience, it was India’s “most preferred” airline (IndiGo, 2023a).

#### 4. Ranchi incident

In May 2022, a specially abled child and his parents arrived at the airport more than an hour in advance to board the flight to Hyderabad. The boy was anxious and possibly hungry, causing him distress. The parents handled him, even while some concerned passengers offered help and support to the parents. The boy’s behaviour caught the attention of an IndiGo staff member, who warned the parents that he would not allow the trio to board if the boy didn’t quieten down and become “normal”. As the boarding was announced, the boy, who was in a wheelchair, again seemed to go through a bout of anxiety, leading to “some big displays of general teenage assertiveness” (Gupta, 2022). The staff now announced that the boy would not be allowed to take the flight because he posed a risk to other passengers. He also equated the boy’s behaviour with that of a drunk passenger who would be deemed unfit to travel.

The co-travellers immediately protested, assuring the staff member that they had no objection to the family boarding the flight. A delegation of doctors tried to handle the situation, offering full support to the family if there was any challenge during the flight and asking the staff member to call the airport doctor, who was the appropriate authority to certify the child’s fitness for travelling. Other passengers logged on to the IndiGo website. They asked the staff member to check whether his decision was in line with the rules for flying as laid down by the airline. Other passengers accessed the internet on their mobile phones to cite articles and Twitter posts on judgements related to discrimination against people with disabilities by airlines.

Reports alleged that throughout the 45-min fracas, the unrelenting IndiGo staff insisted that the child was in a “state of panic” and could not be allowed to board, even as the parents maintained their calm and dignity. Finally, the flight took off without the parents and the child.

In the immediate aftermath of the incident, the CEO, Dutta, in his press statement and several television interviews, cited the DGCA’s “unruly behaviour” clauses (Sections 4.4 and 4.5, Government of India, 2017) to justify his staff member’s decision to deny the parents to board the flight (Business Standard, 2022a)[3]. He stated:

Having reviewed all aspects of this incident, we as an organization are of the view that we made the best possible decision under difficult circumstances. While providing courteous and compassionate service to our customers is of paramount importance to us, the airport staff, in line with the safety guidelines, were forced to make a difficult decision as to whether this commotion would carry forward aboard the aircraft.

He, however, offered his regrets for the “unfortunate experience” and also offered to purchase an electric wheelchair for the boy “as a small token of [IndiGo’s] appreciation of their [the parents’] lifelong dedication” towards their son (Business Standard, 2022a).

**Table 2** Consumer complaints received by IndiGo

Complaint themes	2020-2021		2021-22	
	Complaints received during the year	Pending resolution	Complaints received during the year	Pending resolution
Data privacy	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
Advertising	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
Cyber security	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
Delivery of essential services	195	0	273	0
Restrictive trade practices	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
Unfair trade practices	Legal notices: 113, consumer complaints: 114	None	Legal notices: 44, consumer complaints: 35	None
Other (product related)	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil

Source: [IndiGo \(2022\)](#)

One of the co-travellers on the Ranchi-Hyderabad flight put up a Facebook post the following day, slamming IndiGo for its actions. She also tagged IndiGo, the Ministry of Civil Aviation, the Civil Aviation Minister Jyotiraditya Scindia, the Government of India and social activists working in the disability space. More than 3.9k viewed the post; there were 2.2k comments and 3.9k shares (Gupta, 2022). Netizens responding on Facebook slammed IndiGo's actions as "inhumane", called for its boycott, and compared IndiGo unfavourably to its newest rival - Vistara, besides demanding an apology[4]. They also cited other similar incidents involving IndiGo's callousness. The post was shared on Twitter by a netizen, who tagged the Prime Minister's Office, the DGCA and the Civil Aviation Minister, and urged them to act. In response to this tweet, the Civil Aviation Minister tweeted, "There is zero tolerance towards such behaviour. No human being should have to go through this! Investigating the matter by myself, post which appropriate action will be taken." (Scindia, 2022).

## 5. Directorate General of Civil Aviation action

The aviation regulator, DGCA, set up a fact-finding enquiry committee to investigate the incident, which reported that the IndiGo staff had handled the passenger inappropriately, resulting in certain non-conformances with the applicable regulations (The Hindustan Times, 2022). It then imposed a fine of Rs 0.5m on IndiGo for denying boarding to the specially abled child at Ranchi airport on May 7. It also stated that it would make it mandatory for airlines to consult the airport doctor and get a written opinion on the passenger's fitness before taking action to deny boarding. The staff would also need to consult the aircraft's captain with the latter's written opinions on allowing such a passenger on board (Indian Express, 2022).

How could incidents like the Ranchi incident affect IndiGo's perceived service quality even as IndiGo strove to improve its actual service quality? What would Dutta need to do to manage the "moments of truth better"? How could he prevent such incidents and mitigate the reputational loss arising from such incidents?

**Keywords:**  
Corporate communications,  
Service management,  
Customer service

## Notes

1. This included the training hours data of employees who were trained during the reporting period but were no longer employed with IndiGo.
2. There is no reference to customer complaints in annual reports before 2015–16.
3. The Ministry of Civil Aviation in India, in September 2017, had issued a set of rules to handle the problem of disruptive and unruly passengers. The Civil Aviation Requirement (CAR) clause for handling unruly passengers applied to all domestic and foreign carriers operating in India. It defined an unruly passenger as one "who fails to respect the rules of conduct at an airport or on board an aircraft or to follow the instructions of the airport staff or crew members and thereby disturbs the good order and discipline at an airport or on board the aircraft". The rules allowed for staff to refuse embarkation or even offload unruly passengers who were deemed to pose a security threat to the flight, fellow passengers, or staff while on board the aircraft. The CAR also sought to sensitize airlines to focus and act on 'early signs' of unruly behaviour rather than deal with an escalated event later. It, however, warned airline staff/crew members not to resort to discourteous behaviour when dealing with such cases.
4. The DGCA's Civil Aviation Requirement for People with Disability, issued in February 2014, set out the guidelines for carriage by air of persons with disability (called Divyangjan) and persons with reduced mobility. These rules included within their scope people who had a physical or mental impairment (any mental or psychological disorder, such as mental retardation, organic brain syndrome, emotional or mental illness, and specific learning disabilities). The rules sought to protect them against discrimination and ensure they received all possible assistance during travel. The CAR forbade airlines from refusing to carry persons with disability or reduced mobility, provided such persons, or their representatives informed the airline of their requirement(s) at the time of booking. Furthermore, under section 4.1.35 of the Act, while airlines could not refuse carriage to such persons, they could insist on a doctor's medical opinion regarding whether or not

such persons were fit to fly. They could then decide regarding the carriage of such passengers. In case the airlines refused carriage to such passengers, it was supposed to inform the passenger in writing with the reasons therein immediately (Government of India, 2014).

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