



An Analytical Study of Service and Operational Issues in Indigo Airlines with Reference to Marketing Practices in the Aviation Sector

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Abstract

The recent operational crisis faced by IndiGo Airlines during the winter travel season of 2025–2026 exposed significant challenges within India's aviation sector. Large-scale flight cancellations and delays, primarily caused by crew scheduling issues and regulatory changes in flight duty time limitations, resulted in widespread passenger disruption. Among the most affected were pilgrims travelling for religious purposes, including Umrah, temple visits, and other sacred journeys, for which travel is time-sensitive and emotionally significant. This article examines the causes of the IndiGo Airlines crisis, its impact on pilgrims and general passengers, regulatory responses, and the broader implications for airline management and customer service. The study highlights the need for improved operational planning, empathetic passenger handling, and stronger regulatory compliance to prevent similar crises in the future.

Keywords: IndiGo Airlines, Flight Cancellations, Pilgrims, Aviation Crisis, DGCA, Passenger Rights, Airline Operations, Religious Travel

Introduction

IndiGo Airlines, India's largest low-cost carrier, has long been regarded as a benchmark for operational efficiency and punctuality. Holding a dominant share of the domestic aviation market, the airline plays a crucial role in connecting major cities as well as smaller towns across the country. However, during the winter season of 2025–2026, IndiGo faced an unprecedented operational breakdown that led to thousands of flight cancellations and delays across India. The crisis coincided with peak travel demand, a period when many passengers including pilgrims travelling for religious and spiritual purposes depend heavily on-air connectivity. Sudden cancellations, limited communication, and inadequate ground support caused severe inconvenience, emotional distress, and financial losses. This situation raised important questions about airline preparedness, regulatory compliance, and the responsibility of airlines toward vulnerable passenger groups such as elderly pilgrims. This article aims to analyze the IndiGo Airlines issue by focusing on its root causes, the impact on pilgrims, and the response of regulatory authorities, while also drawing lessons for the future of airline management in India.

Objectives

- To examine the business dynamics and performance trends of the airline industry index.
- To identify and analyze the major challenges faced by the aviation industry in the current economic and competitive environment.
- To study the operational, financial, and strategic issues encountered by IndiGo Airlines.
- To evaluate the impact of industry-wide challenges on the performance and growth of IndiGo Airlines.
- To propose effective strategic recommendations for IndiGo Airlines to overcome existing difficulties and prevent their recurrence in the future.

Discussion

The IndiGo Airlines crisis was primarily triggered by the implementation of revised Flight Duty Time Limitation (FDTL) norms issued by the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA). These regulations were intended to improve flight safety by reducing pilot fatigue, but inadequate preparedness and aggressive scheduling by the airline led to a shortage of available crew. As a result, flight operations became unstable, causing cascading cancellations across the network. One of the most concerning aspects of this crisis was its disproportionate impact on pilgrims. Many pilgrims travel in groups, follow fixed religious schedules, and often include elderly passengers who require special assistance. Flight cancellations forced pilgrims to wait for long hours at airports, seek alternative transport such as buses and trains, or abandon their journeys altogether. For many, this meant missing important religious rituals that could not be rescheduled, leading to emotional disappointment beyond financial loss.

Passenger dissatisfaction intensified due to poor communication and lack of timely updates from the airline. While IndiGo later announced refunds and travel vouchers as part of a Gesture of Care, these measures were often insufficient for pilgrims whose journeys were spiritually significant rather than discretionary. The situation highlighted a gap between standard airline compensation policies and the real needs of passengers during crises. From a regulatory perspective, the DGCA imposed heavy financial penalties on IndiGo and issued warnings to its top management. These actions signaled a stricter stance on passenger welfare and operational accountability.

However, the incident also revealed systemic issues within the aviation sector, including over-reliance on a single dominant carrier and limited contingency planning during peak travel seasons. Overall, the IndiGo Airlines issue serves as a critical lesson for airline operators. Efficient scheduling must be balanced with regulatory compliance and human-centered service delivery. Special attention should be given to pilgrims and other sensitive passenger groups through dedicated help desks, priority rebooking, and clearer communication.

Operational and Strategic Challenges Faced by IndiGo Airlines

1.1 Impact on Pilgrims and Religious Tourism:

The IndiGo Airlines operational crisis had a major impact on pilgrims and religious tourism in India. Pilgrims usually travel on fixed dates according to religious schedules, rituals, and holy events. Sudden flight cancellations disrupted these plans, forcing many pilgrims to miss important spiritual commitments. Unlike leisure travellers, pilgrims cannot easily reschedule their journeys, making the impact more severe and emotionally distressing. Example: Umrah pilgrims missed their scheduled departure after sudden indigo cancellations, making it impossible to attend fixed religious rituals.

1.2 Challenges Faced by Elderly and Group Travellers:

Many pilgrims were elderly or traveling in organized groups. Long waiting hours at airports without proper seating, food arrangements, or medical assistance created health risks. The absence of dedicated support counters for group pilgrims highlighted the airline's unpreparedness to handle vulnerable passenger categories during large-scale disruptions. Example: Senior pilgrims were forced to wait for hours at airports without seating or medical help after group flights were cancelled.

1.3 Communication Gaps and Passenger Handling:

One of the major shortcomings observed during the crisis was ineffective communication. Passengers reported delayed announcements, unclear information regarding refunds, and lack of coordination among ground staff. For pilgrims unfamiliar with digital platforms or airline apps, accessing updates became extremely difficult, worsening confusion and anxiety.

Example: Pilgrims received no clear updates at help desks while the airline app showed delayed information, creating confusion.

1.4 Financial and Emotional Burden on Passengers:

Beyond ticket refunds, pilgrims faced additional expenses such as hotel cancellations, rebooking charges, and alternative transportation costs. Emotional distress caused by missed religious commitments added to the overall hardship. This demonstrates that monetary compensation alone is insufficient to address passenger suffering in such crises. Example: Pilgrims lost money on hotel bookings and missed sacred ceremonies that could not be rescheduled.

1.5 Ethical Responsibility of Airlines:

Airlines have an ethical obligation to ensure passenger welfare, especially during emergencies. As a dominant carrier with a large market share, IndiGo's failure had nationwide consequences. Adequate crew availability. Example: DGCA fined IndiGo for mass cancellations, highlighting regulatory action to protect passenger welfare.

DATA ANALYSIS & INTERPRETATION

This analytical study evaluates the service and operational challenges of IndiGo Airlines based on primary data collected from a sample of 180 respondents, out of which 139 participants provided detailed and structured feedback regarding their experiences. The study focuses on identifying key operational failures such as flight delays, cancellations, and customer service responsiveness, baggage handling issues, ticket refund processes, and in-flight service quality. In addition to operational concerns, the research also examines demographic factors including age, occupation, travel frequency, and purpose of travel to understand how different customer groups perceive and

are affected by these challenges. The responses were systematically analyzed to determine patterns of dissatisfaction, service gaps, and areas requiring managerial intervention. The findings aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of customer grievances and operational inefficiencies, thereby offering insights for improving service quality, enhancing customer satisfaction, and strengthening IndiGo Airlines' overall operational performance.

Passenger category	No of respondents n=139	Percentage of affected group
Elderly passengers	42	30.2%
Pregnant women	24	17.3%
Students (international)	38	27.3%
Business travellers	35	25.2%

Vulnerable Groups: Elderly and Pregnant Women

The data highlights a significant gap in IndiGo Airlines' Special Assistance Services, particularly affecting elderly passengers and pregnant women. Among the 42 elderly respondents, the primary concerns included ground-staff apathy and the unavailability of wheelchairs during flight delays and operational disruptions. As a Low-Cost Carrier (LCC), IndiGo follows a lean manpower strategy, which often results in a shortage of dedicated assistance staff during peak-hour congestion or irregular operations. This limitation disproportionately affects elderly passengers who require mobility support.

For pregnant women, frequent gate changes commonly referred to as "gate-shuffling" during flight delays and cancellations were identified as a major concern. Such disruptions not only create inconvenience but also pose potential physical stress and health risks. The findings suggest that the airline's current assistance framework may be insufficient to address the needs of vulnerable passenger groups during operational instability.

Students and International Connectivity

The study indicates that 27.3% of respondents were students traveling for higher education abroad. For this group, flight cancellations and delays create serious consequences beyond mere inconvenience. Missed domestic connections often result in failure to board international flights, leading to significant financial and academic setbacks.

Unlike leisure travelers, students face high-stakes outcomes such as transit visa expiration, missed university orientation programs, delayed enrollment procedures, and forfeiture of expensive international tickets. The "ripple effect" of a domestic cancellation by IndiGo frequently escalates into compounded losses at the international level. This highlights the need for improved coordination, contingency planning, and rebooking support for passengers with onward global connections.

Business Travel and Operational Failures

Business travelers represent a time-sensitive customer segment that prioritizes punctuality and reliability. In this study, 35 respondents reported that flight cancellations and delays resulted in delayed or missed business meetings. For corporate passengers, On-Time Performance (OTP) is a critical factor influencing airline preference.

Recent operational challenges, including pilot rostering adjustments and technical disruptions during 2025–2026, appear to have affected IndiGo's punctuality performance. These disruptions have weakened business travelers' confidence in the airline's LCC model. Missed meetings not only cause immediate financial losses but also damage

professional credibility and long-term business relationships. The findings indicate that maintaining consistent operational reliability is essential for retaining high-value corporate customers.

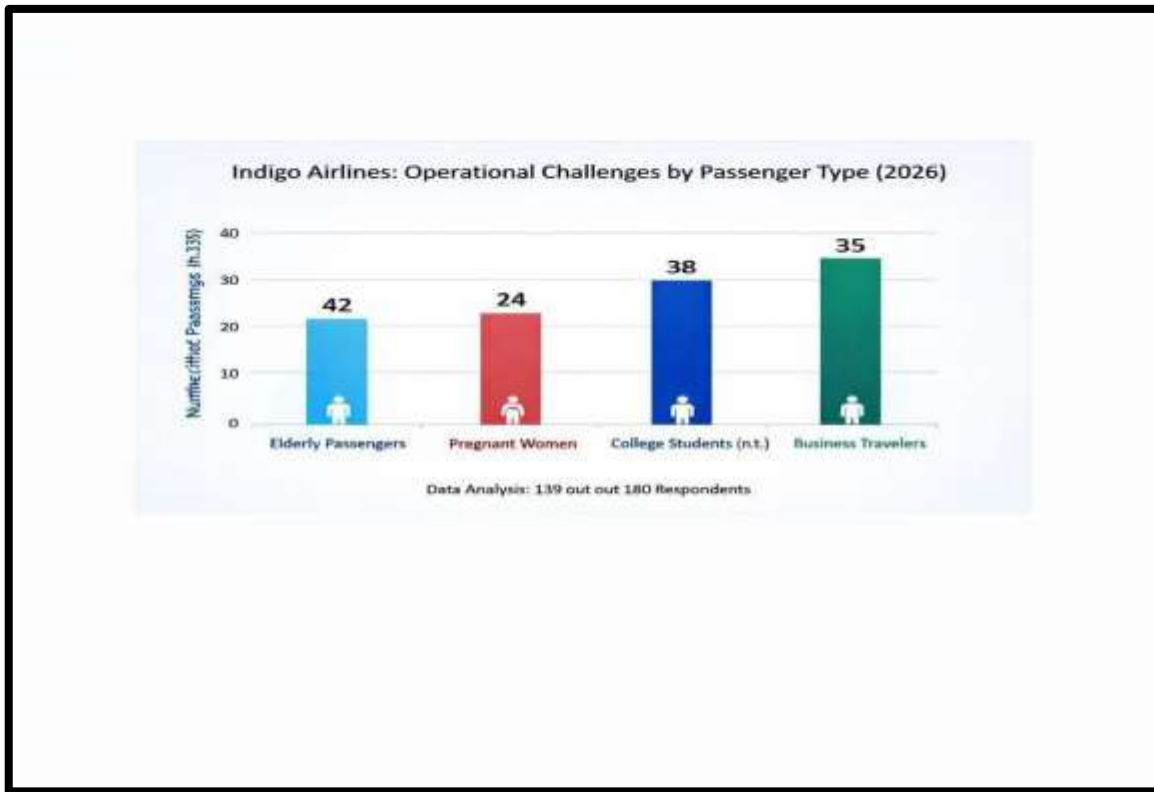


Figure 1 Indigo Airlines operational challenges by Passenger Type (2026)

Out of the 180 individuals surveyed, 139 respondents, representing 77.2% of the sample, actively reported experiencing significant challenges while traveling with IndiGo Airlines. This high response rate underscores that the operational and service-related issues identified

such as flight delays, cancellations, gate changes, and insufficient special assistance are not isolated incidents or minor inconveniences. Instead, they reflect deeper structural and systemic barriers that disproportionately affect vulnerable groups, including the elderly and pregnant women, as well as time-sensitive travelers such as students and business professionals. The data highlights that these challenges have tangible consequences, ranging from physical stress and missed connections to financial losses and reputational impact, emphasizing the urgent need for targeted operational improvements and strategic interventions to enhance passenger safety, satisfaction, and reliability.

Visual representations can be employed to demonstrate how operational and service-related Challenges intersect at IndiGo Airlines. Bar charts can illustrate the frequency of key issues such as flight delays, cancellations, and gate changes, while pie charts can depict the proportion of affected passenger groups, including elderly passengers, pregnant women, students, and business travelers. Flowcharts or process diagrams can highlight the cascading effects of flight disruptions, such as missed domestic connections leading to international travel delays or missed business meetings. Heat maps can identify critical problem areas across specific routes or airports, and integrated info graphics can provide a comprehensive view linking passenger segments, specific issues, and their consequences.

Findings

- I. Passengers reported frequent flight delays and cancellations, affecting domestic and international travel, especially for students and business travelers.
- II. Elderly passengers and pregnant women faced inadequate special assistance, including unavailability of wheelchairs and stress from frequent gate changes.
- III. Students traveling abroad experienced missed connections, visa issues, and forfeited tickets due to flight disruptions.
- IV. Business travelers missed or delayed important meetings, leading to revenue losses and reduced trust in IndiGo Airlines' reliability.
- V. Negative passenger experiences during operational disruptions created a gap between IndiGo's marketing claims and actual service delivery.

Suggestions

Minimize Operational Disruptions

Implement advanced scheduling and predictive maintenance systems, optimize crew rostering, and establish contingency protocols to reduce delays and cancellations. Provide real-time updates and notifications to passengers.

Enhance Special Assistance for Vulnerable Passengers

Introduce dedicated Special Assistance Teams, ensure sufficient availability of wheelchairs and mobility aids, prioritize boarding and stable gate allocations, and train staff on empathy and rapid response during disruptions.

Support International and Student Travelers

Develop a proactive rebooking system for passengers with international connections, coordinate with partner airlines, provide emergency support desks, and offer flexible ticketing policies to reduce high-risk consequences.

Rebuild Trust among Business Travelers

Strengthen on-time performance through predictive crew scheduling and technical monitoring; introduce corporate priority services, compensation policies for delays, and loyalty incentives to retain high-value customers.

Align Marketing with Operational Reality

Emphasize reliability initiatives and customer support improvements in marketing communications, conduct regular feedback surveys, and publicly report on operational performance metrics to enhance transparency and brand credibility.

Conclusion

The IndiGo Airlines operational crisis of 2025–2026 stands as a significant event in the history of Indian civil aviation, highlighting the vulnerabilities of large-scale airline operations during periods of regulatory transition and peak demand. While the revised Flight Duty Time Limitation norms were introduced to enhance safety, the lack of effective implementation and contingency planning led to widespread flight cancellations and passenger distress. The impact on pilgrims was particularly severe, as religious travel is often time-bound, emotionally significant, and non-



negotiable. For many pilgrims, the disruption resulted not only in financial loss but also in missed spiritual commitments, emotional strain, and physical hardship. The situation underscored the need for airlines to adopt a more empathetic and inclusive approach toward passengers with special travel purposes, such as pilgrims, senior citizens, and group travelers. In conclusion, the IndiGo Airlines issue serves as a critical reminder that operational efficiency must be balanced with regulatory compliance, ethical responsibility, and customer centric service.

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