

## Welcome move

*The Centre's draft passenger charter will help both passengers and the industry, though some chinks remain*

**T**he Civil Aviation Ministry's draft passenger charter has been a long time coming. Given the NDA government's proactive role in trying to bring some order in an industry where chaos is the norm, such a measure was expected sooner. The charter has several positives especially those relating to compensation for passengers for delays and cancellations. Earlier, the only way for redress was to make a beeline to the consumer courts. A cursory reading of the charter may suggest that the Ministry wants to come down hard on delinquent airlines, but what it primarily does is bring in efficiency in the running of operations. In effect, it forces airlines to become more responsible, which will eventually benefit them and help in expanding their band of loyal customers. These draft norms are not out of the ordinary. Most countries, especially in the US and those in Europe have similar ones. The only difference is that the norms laid out by the European Union and the US Department of Transportation for their respective airlines were brought into force much earlier and since then, these have been repeatedly tweaked to conform to the changing landscape of the travel industry. Both these agencies have also ensured that the norms are implemented strictly without which such regulations remain only on paper.

However, there are a few draft rules in the charter which could be a cause for concern. The one on cancellations could hit the business of travel websites hard. A couple of airlines have pointed out that passengers will receive a full refund only if they book on airline websites and their apps and not on travel booking platforms. This is because travel agents use the global distribution system (GDS) to book tickets for their customers and airlines incur high GDS fee for every booking and cancellation. But the fee is not refunded to the airlines in case of cancellations made on the travel platforms. The Ministry needs to clarify on this aspect if the travel websites are to remain in business. Another such proposed rule is on providing affordable food and beverage outlets at airports. Airlines have little or no control over this, since the licences for setting up such outlets are given out by the airports based on those who bid the highest. Hence, the food served there is also priced higher. Nevertheless, it is time all stakeholders realised that flying is no longer a preserve of the elite and that it has become the common man's preferred mode of travel.

The only way the airlines can adopt some of these norms is by passing these costs to the passengers and this can only lead to a higher cost of flying, which was probably not what the Ministry intended. Hopefully, the 30-day window for consultations among all the stakeholders will iron out these issues before the norms are formally notified.