

AI Express delays Kolkata-Dhaka flight

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Kolkata: Air India Express, the low-cost subsidiary of Air India, is ramping up its efforts to expand its network and fleet, driven by the rising demand for air travel. However, the airline has announced a delay in its plans to launch direct flights between Kolkata and Dhaka, citing the ongoing political turmoil in Bangladesh.

The Kolkata-Dhaka service was initially scheduled to commence in September with six weekly flights. Aloke Singh, Managing Director of Air India Express, explained the decision, stating, "The political situation in Bangladesh has necessitated a postponement of these plans. We remain committed to starting this service once the conditions stabilize."

Despite this temporary setback, Singh underscored the airline's commitment to strengthening its operations in eastern India, highlighting its broader strategy to tap into emerging markets and meet the growing regional demand.

Singh further disclosed that Air India Express is preparing to increase its fleet size to over 100 aircraft by March 2025, up from the current 90. Over the next three years, the airline expects its fleet to grow to about 175 aircraft. This growth comes as part of the wider plans announced by the Air India Group to acquire 400 aircraft over the next three years.

In addition to expanding its fleet, Air India Express is set to launch new international services. The airline's new routes will include flights to Kathmandu, set to begin in March 2025, coinciding with the summer schedule. The airline also plans to enhance its connectivity across India and internationally, focusing particularly on short-haul routes that fall within a 5.5 to 6-hour range. This includes connecting metro cities with tier-II and tier-III destinations, in a bid to cater to emerging demand.

The airline, which already operates 24 daily flights from Kolkata, is set to increase this number by 10 with the introduction of new routes and increased frequencies on existing services. Additionally, Air India Express is expanding its night halt capacity in Kolkata from seven aircraft to nine. Other expansion plans include a new flight from Kolkata to Dimapur, as well as new services to Patna.

Air India Express also aims to enhance its presence in the Gulf and Middle East regions, and is eyeing Southeast Asia as a key area for future growth. New destinations such as Bangkok, Singapore, Vietnam, and Colombo are under consideration, with potential flights to Vietnam expected to start within the next two years. The airline is also exploring opportunities in the CIS countries.

As per news agency, the airline's overall growth is evident, with weekly flight frequencies from Kolkata and Bagdogra rising by 37pc, from 168 flights last winter to over 230 this year. New direct routes from Kolkata include Port Blair, Indore, and Agartala, while Bagdogra will soon be connected to Hyderabad and Chennai.

With a fleet comprising 90 aircraft, including 61 Boeing 737s and 29 Airbus A320s, Air India Express operates over 400 daily flights, serving 36 domestic and 15 international destinations. The airline's market share in Kolkata stands at 12pc, which rises to 24pc when combined with parent company Air India.

