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August 24, 2022

To,
The Chairperson,
Airports Economic Regulatory Authority,
AERA Building, Administrative Complex,
Safdarjung Airport,
New Delhi- 110 003.

Kind Attention – Shri. Balwinder Singh Bhullar

Subject: Response to Consultation Paper No. 06/2022-23 dated August 02, 2022 on determination of tariff for Ground Handling Services provided by M/s Bird Airport Services (Trichy) Private Limited (BASTPL) at Trichy International Airport (TIA), Tiruchirappalli for the First Control Period (FY 2021-22 to FY 2025-26)

Dear Sir,

We write in response to the Consultation Paper No. 06/2022-23 issued on August 02, 2022 by the Airports Economic Regulatory Authority of India ("AERA") in the matter of determination of tariff for Ground Handling Services provided by M/s Bird Airport Services (Trichy) Private Limited ("BASTPL") at Trichy International Airport (TIA), Tiruchirappalli for the First Control Period (FY 2021-22 to FY 2025-26) ("Consultation Paper" or "CP").

At the outset, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to AERA for inviting stakeholder comments on the Consultation Paper, and further acknowledging the impact of COVID-19 on the aviation sector.

Sir, you will appreciate that airlines which are the 'catalyst' for the global economy including the aviation sector, have been hit the hardest by COVID-19. Since February/March 2020, due to restrictions on the scheduled international and domestic air travel issued by the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Directorate General of Civil Aviation and other restrictions on inter/intra state travel (collectively 'Government Restrictions'), airlines' cash flows have been severely impacted.

While the airline operations showed an upward trend from December 2020, however the brutal second wave of COVID-19 in March 2021 and subsequent emerging variants (December, 2021 onwards), of COVID-19, have again impacted the operations to a certain extent and resultantly prolonged the process of financial recovery.

As per industry estimates issued by IATA and CAPA, it would take almost two (2) - three (3) years for airline operations to reach pre COVID-19 level, in terms of number of flights and passengers. In the current situation, airlines in India are staring at a loss of approximately USD 8.0 billion for the FY 2020-21 and 2021-22 as per CAPA. With limited financial support from the Government, airlines are constrained to implement severe cost control measures to sustain their operations.

You will further appreciate that, while the low passenger demand for air travel coupled with certain Government Restrictions on fare, prevents airlines from generating adequate passenger revenue, airlines continue to incur high operational cost, including on account of high airport charges and taxes.

In the given circumstances, it is humbly submitted that it is imperative that AERA does not take any steps, including by way of approving the proposed high tariffs, during the First Control Period, which would precipitate further adverse financial impact on the airlines.

In this regard, we also humbly request AERA to not implement any y-O-Y increase in tariffs during the First Control Period and defer any increase in the same to the subsequent control period, given the scenario described above.

Without prejudice to the above, and as desired by AERA, please find below our recommendations/ comments on the Consultation Paper:

1. Review of Tendering Process

License Agreements (1.1, 1.2 and 1.3, 1.4 and 1.5 of the CP)

AERA is requested to ensure that Airport Operator does not take the decision to award concession agreements solely on the revenue share being offered. Basing decisions solely on highest revenue share being offered breeds inefficiencies and tends to disproportionately increase the cost.

2. Deferment of Capital Expenditure - Regulatory Asset Base

Stoppage of non-safety/security related capital expenditure (Refer 4.1, 4.2, 4.3., 4.4, 4.5 and Table 4 and 5 of CP)

As projected by IATA and CAPA it will take around two (2) - three (3) years for the flight operations to reach to its pre COVID-19 peak levels. In this situation, in order to support the airlines to continue and sustain its operations, all non-essential CAPEX proposed by BASTPL should be put on hold/deferred to the Second Control Period, unless deemed critical from a safety or security compliance perspective

Without prejudice to the above, in case BASTPL wants to make capital expenditure, then it should be at no additional expense to the airlines until the project is completed and put to use. Similarly, if any proposed Capex projects can be deferred from the First Control Period to the Second Control Period, same should be considered by AERA.

In addition, we recommend that an adjustment of 1% or higher, as deemed fit, is made by AERA for capital expenditure projects of the First Control Period that are not completed/capitalised as per the approved capitalisation schedule other than those affected solely by the adverse impact of COVID-19. Such adjustments can be made by AERA during the tariff determination for the Second Control Period.

3. Abolishment of Royalty Charges/ Concession Fee

Operating & Maintenance Expenditure (5.9 and Table 6 of CP)

Any attempt to award the contracts by the airport operator on highest revenue share basis should be discouraged as it breeds inefficiencies and tends to disproportionately increase the cost.

It is general perception that service providers have no incentive to reduce their expenses, as most of any such increase would be passed on to the airlines/stakeholders through the tariff determination mechanism process and indirectly airlines would be forced to bear these additional costs. There needs to be a mechanism for incentivizing the parties for increasing efficiencies and cost savings and not for increasing the royalty for the airport operator.

As you are aware, royalty is in the nature of market access fee, charged (by any name or description) by the airport operator under various headings without any underlying services. These charges are mostly passed on to the airlines by the airport operator or other services providers.

It may be pertinent to note that market access fee by any name or description is not practiced in most of the global economies, including European Union, Australia etc. Sometimes it is argued by the airport operators that 'Royalty' on 'Aero Revenues' helps in subsidizing the aero charges for the airlines, however royalty in 'Non-Aero Revenues' hits the airlines directly without any benefit.

It is noted that while the Concession fees chargeable by the Airport Operator from BASTPL is up to 15%, as per the Concession Agreement. AERA is requested to please clarify whether this 15% is applicable both on domestic as well as international flights.

In view of the above, we urge AERA to abolish such royalty which may be included in any of the cost items.

4. Operational Expenditure – Drastic Cost Cutting

Operating & Maintenance Expenditure (Refer 5.2 to 5.8 and Table 6 of CP)

It may be noted that across various industries, instead of cost escalations, all the costs have been renegotiated downwards substantially. We are unaware as to whether BASTPL has taken cost cutting measures including re-negotiations of all the cost items on its profit and loss account. It may be noted that cost incurred by BASTPL impacts the airlines, as such cost is passed through or borne mostly by the airlines.

In order to ensure that there is no adverse impact/increase in the tariff, we request AERA should:

- (a) Put on hold any increase in operational expenditure by BASTPL not related to safety or security (Refer 5.3 and Table 6 of CP);
- (b) Advise BASTPL to review its spending on operational expenditure and re-negotiate all the operational expenditure costs in a significant manner and address any increase in fees sought by BASTPL;
BASTPL may be advised to reduce its costs substantially and no escalation may be permitted; and
- (c) In view of the above, BASTPL may be directed to pass on cost benefits to the airlines.
- (d) Further, we submit that:

- (i) Payroll Costs (Refer Table 6 and 5.5 of CP):

Although the activity level has gone down drastically, rather than significant reduction in the cost, the employee expenses are proposed to increase to 7% YoY basis for the first control period.

It appears that BASTPL wants to recover its full employee cost from the airlines, which are facing significant challenges to meet its operating expenses.

We submit that there should not be any increase in manpower expenses till the existing manpower is effectively utilised as it will take another two (2) - three (3) years to recover. Existing manpower can be reviewed and any additional costs due to contract manpower or otherwise should be reduced.

Without prejudice to the above, BASTPL to consider restructuring its employee benefit expenses and other expenses and hold any revisions at least for the next two (2) years.

- (ii) Administrative & General Cost, Utility & Outsourcing Costs and Repair & Maintenance Cost (Refer 5.6,5.7,5.8,5.9 and Table 6)

AERA may advise BASTPL to rationalize/re-negotiate all the cost/expenditure items or heads as deemed fit since it has been proposed to increase the costs between 4% to 18%, which is too high. Further, it is requested to please clarify the reason of Y-o-Y cost escalation between FY 2023 to FY 2024 on Administrative & General Cost, Utility & Outsourcing Costs and Repair & Maintenance Costs increase by 16%, 18%, and 11% respectively.

We submit that AERA may kindly freeze any increase in operational expenditure after FY 2023, and there should not be any increase in any expense or manpower thereafter.

5. Tariff: - (Refer 6.1 to 6.3 and Table 7,8 & 9 of the CP)

At the onset we submit that the proposed rates of tariff are very high, especially for the scheduled passenger flights and especially in the back drop of COVID-19. It is in the interest of all the stakeholders not to implement such high tariffs in order to encourage middle class people to travel by air, which will help in sharp post COVID-19 recovery of aviation sector. We also humbly request you that no hikes in tariffs should be granted to BASTPL in the First Control Period after FY 2023.

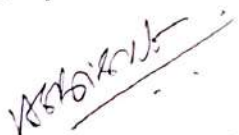
We hope that your good self will positively consider the above recommendations/ comments as it will help in achieving the affordability and sustainability of the aviation sector including airlines, which is also outlined as a key objective in the National Civil Aviation Policy, 2016.

We look forward to your continued support in these challenging times.

Thanking you in advance,

Yours Truly,

For SpiceJet Limited


Suryavir Singh Bisht
Sr. General Manager – Regulatory Affairs

Copy to:
Director (P&S Tariff), Airports Economic Regulatory Authority of India (AERA)