

07/2009: Times Of India "Super mopper to clean runway of rubber tracks"

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KOLKATA: This monsoon, pilots will feel more assured of the tarmac at the Kolkata airport when they touch down or take off from here. The slippery surface that they encountered now and again is now a thing of the past, with the airport pressing into service a mopper that can sweep the runway so clean that it feels as good as new.

Keeping the runway clean is critical to operational safety at any airport, as a slippery surface could cause an aircraft to skid, particularly during the rains. For medium-range Airbus and Boeing aircraft that land at 230 km/h and take off at 250 km/h, even a minor skid can trigger a disaster.

"When an aircraft operates, some rubber from the tyres get deposited on the runway. In the course of a few months, an entire 600-metre stretch at the end of the runway gets covered with rubber coating, bringing down surface friction. When friction reduces, the aircraft wheels have less grip on the surface, and is thus prone to skidding when the pilot brakes after landing. So, whenever a plane lands, the pilot reports the feel' of the runway to the air traffic controller," Kolkata airport director R Srinivasan said.

Whenever a captain reports poor braking effect, a friction test vehicle is used. If the friction level is below the norms prescribed by the International Civil Aviation Organisation, the runway has to be shut after issuing a notice to airmen for clearing the rubber stains.

"Till now, the runway had to shut down and operations shifted to the alternative runway, as the cleaning had to be done manually. It was possible to clean only 5 sq metre of a runway in a day. To complete the entire stretch, it would take a month. When grooving was done for the grip to last, airlines complained of greater tyre wear," Srinivasan said.

Now, the airport has imported TrackJet, a state-of-the-art German machine for Rs 8 crore to scrape the rubber off the tarmac and leave it spotless. "The wonder machine cleans 550 sq metre of tarmac per hour. The entire runway can be cleaned in a day. And there's no need to shut down operations because it can be operated in between flights," the official added.

Pilots have welcomed the introduction of TrackJet and confirmed the runway surface, post clean-up, was restored like new. "After the machine was used, the grip improved markedly. Captains feel that we bit more confidence to operate in the rain," said a veteran pilot.

Dieser Artikel erschien im Juli 2009 in der [Times Of India](#)

Subhro Niyogi, TNN 5 July 2009, 03:40am IST