

# Golden Age of Pakistan International Airline A Case Study of Asghar Khan as A Chairman of PIA

Muhammad Khalid<sup>1</sup> . Dr. Shahbaz Khan<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

*Air travel holds immense significance in today's interconnected world, revolutionizing the movement of people and goods across vast distances. This paper explores the pivotal role of air travel and its various benefits, emphasizing its importance in modern life. The ability of air travel to connect distant locations quickly and efficiently is highlighted, bridging geographical gaps between countries and fostering global connectivity. This connectivity facilitates essential elements such as business interactions, international tourism, cultural exchanges, and family reunions. The aviation industry emerges as a significant driver of economic growth and development, creating job opportunities across sectors such as airlines, airports, tourism, hospitality, and manufacturing. Furthermore, air travel stimulates trade by enabling the efficient transportation of goods, fostering international investments and collaborations. Despite facing challenges and undergoing restructuring phases, Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) stands as a symbol of national pride and a vital component of Pakistan's transportation infrastructure. This study specifically focuses on the period when Asghar Khan served as the Chairman of PIA. During his tenure, the airline continued to strive for excellence in customer service, operational efficiency, and financial sustainability. PIA's growth is evident in its expanded route network, serving diverse destinations across Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and North America. The airline has also forged codeshare agreements with other carriers, enhancing its global connectivity and providing passengers with seamless travel options.*

**Keywords:** *Air Travel, Interconnectivity, Revolutionized, Geographical Gap, Aviation, Pakistan International Airlines, Symbol of National Pride, Asghar Khan, Customer Service, Operational Efficiency, Financial Sustainability.*

## 1. Introduction:

The integral role of air transportation in shaping the trajectory of a newly independent nation is exemplified by the case of Pakistan. In June 1946, during the formative stages of Pakistan, Quaid Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah<sup>1</sup>, the visionary father and founder of the nation, foresaw the imperative need for a national airline. Acknowledging the urgency of the situation, he advised Mr. Mirza Ahmad Ispahani, a distinguished Muslim businessman and industrialist, to promptly establish a national airline. Well before the attainment of independence, Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah grasped the significance of establishing a swift and efficient mode of transportation between the two wings of Pakistan, separated by a considerable distance of eleven hundred (1100) miles (Noureen, 2009). Following his tenure in the air force, Asghar

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<sup>1</sup>PhD Scholar, Pakistan Study Centre, University of Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor, Pakistan Study Centre, University of Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

Khan received a presidential appointment from President Ayub Khan to serve in the Ministry of Defense in Pakistan. Subsequently, he assumed the crucial role of Chief Executive Officer of Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) (PIA History 2012). As the chairman of PIA, Asghar Khan embarked on a transformative journey within a relatively brief timeframe, aiming to propel the airline to the ranks of the world's premier carriers. This period, under the dynamic leadership of Asghar Khan, is etched in the annals of PIA's history as a brilliant and charming chapter (Asgher, 2010). The concerted efforts during Asghar Khan's chairmanship contributed significantly to PIA's evolution, marking it as a pivotal era in the airline's growth and prominence. This paper delves into the nuances of this transformative period, shedding light on the initiatives, challenges, and accomplishments that defined Asghar Khan's tenure as the Chairman of Pakistan International Airlines.

## **2. Historical Background of the Airline**

### **A. Orient Airways**

On October 23rd, 1946, the inception of Orient Airways Limited marked a significant milestone in aviation history. Established in Calcutta, the airline was initially registered as a model project. Mirza Ahmad assumed the role of chairman, while O.K Carter served as the general manager. Orient Airways, with its operational base in Calcutta, made a notable stride in February 1947 by acquiring four DC-3 airplanes from "Tempo," an esteemed aircraft manufacturing company in Texas. The culmination of these efforts resulted in the attainment of its operating license in May 1947, and the airline commenced its inaugural flight operations on June 4th, 1947. The early routes of Orient Airways spanned from Calcutta to Akyab and then from Akyab to Rangoon. A unique historical distinction was achieved as Orient Airways became the first international airline registered in India post-World War II. However, a mere two months into its operation, the landscape changed dramatically with the creation of Pakistan, giving rise to the largest migration in history between the newly independent states (Hassan, 2016). In response to this historic moment, Orient Airways, with the support of aircraft hired from the British Overseas Airways Corporation by the government of Pakistan, swiftly pivoted to undertaking relief operations and facilitating the transfer of people between the capitals of Delhi and Karachi. Adapting to the changed geopolitical scenario, Orient Airways relocated its base from Delhi to the newly formed state of Pakistan. In doing so, it forged essential air links between the two capital cities of Dacca and Karachi. Operating with a modest fleet comprised of two DC-3s, three aircrew supporters, and a mere twelve mechanics, Orient Airways executed its scheduled operations with commendable efficiency, earning recognition for its service during this crucial period (Orient Airways, 2019).

The initial routes included flights from Karachi to Quetta and then from Quetta to Lahore. Simultaneously, the airline operated routes from Karachi to Lahore and then from Lahore to Peshawar. Expanding its network further, Orient Airways connected Karachi to Delhi, Delhi to Calcutta, and Calcutta to Dhaka. As a testament to its commitment to growth, by the close of 1949, Orient Airways had bolstered its fleet by acquiring ten additional DC-3s and three Convair 240s, with plans to deploy them on the existing routes. The year 1950 witnessed a rapid expansion as the airline inducted more planes to meet the escalating demand (Ibid).

### **B. A New Flag Carrier for Pakistan**

Orient Airways, initially a private airline in Pakistan with limited assets and capital, faced formidable challenges in independently fostering growth. Given these constraints, the prospect of self-sufficient expansion seemed unattainable. Recognizing the need for a more sustainable approach, the government of Pakistan proposed a strategic solution: the establishment of a state-owned airline. Orient Airways was approached to merge with the government-owned airline, a proposition that was met with acceptance, leading to the successful amalgamation.

This synergistic union, formalized through an ordinance on January 10th, 1955, gave rise to a new entity known as the Pakistan International Airline Company. At its inception, Orient Airways, beyond its core transportation activities, also laid the foundation for comprehensive refurbishment centers and maintenance facilities. Moreover, the company foresaw the necessity of building a skilled workforce, acquiring technicians, engineers, and trained pilots. These strategic initiatives proved to be invaluable assets during the nascent developmental phase of the newly established Pakistan International Airline (Orient Airways History, 2019).

### **C. Pakistan International Airline (First International Airline Service of the Country)**

The year 1955 stands as a watershed moment in the history of PIA as the airline embarked on a pioneering journey, inaugurating its first planned global service to the prestigious capital city of London, Great Britain. The route included stops in Cairo, the capital of Egypt, and Rome, the capital of Italy. PIA's audacious decision to operate a global route in the early days of Pakistan's existence drew substantial criticism from the public. Many questioned the necessity of such an endeavor at a time when, in their opinion, other projects held greater vital importance for a nation with limited resources that had just come into existence. Despite facing skepticism and critique, PIA remained steadfast in its commitment to serving the people of Pakistan to the best of its capacity (PIA History, 2014). Emphasizing its role in serving the expatriate community, PIA considered this a primary concern. Furthermore, the airline's global services played a crucial role in generating foreign exchange, which was judiciously utilized for acquiring airplanes and spare parts, as well as expanding its fleet a critical necessity for the sustained growth of the airline (PIA History, 2012). The ambitious global ventures undertaken by PIA in its early years laid the groundwork for the airline's future as a key player in international aviation.

### **3. Asghar Khan as Chairman of Pakistan International Airline**

Concerning his assumption of the role at PIA, Asghar Khan shared the following insights:

**"After my retirement from the Air Force, I was initially uninterested in taking on any government position, in any capacity. However, President Ayub Khan insisted that I continue my service as the Head of Civil Aviation and Tourism for Pakistan Airlines. Despite my lack of intention to accept such a position, I presented my arguments to President Ayub Khan, expressing my desire for retirement and my reluctance to engage in employment. Despite my efforts to dissuade him, Ayub Khan remained firm in his insistence. After extensive discussions and debates, I eventually agreed to the President's suggestion. I communicated my willingness to temporarily hold the position until a suitable replacement for PIA could be found. Consequently, I assumed the responsibilities of PIA, dedicating my best skills to enhance its performance and ensure its success during my tenure".**

Asghar Khan's transition to PIA occurred as he was appointed by President Ayub Khan, marking his shift from the Air Force to the pivotal role of Chief Executive Officer of the National Flag Carrier, PIA (Pakistan International Airline) (PIA History 2012). Interestingly, Asghar Khan's brother, Afzal Khan, was engaged in a dairy business and had secured a contract to supply dairy products to PIA. Afzal Khan had previously served as a Naval Commander in the Pakistan Navy. A noteworthy action taken by Asghar Khan upon assuming leadership at PIA was the cancellation of his brother's contract, which accounted for 50% of Afzal Khan's total earnings. Despite having no direct involvement in the contract or the dairy business, Asghar Khan believed that holding a leadership position in an airline while his brother conducted business with the same airline raised ethical concerns. He expressed that such a

scenario was not ethically acceptable to him (Asghar, 2011). Following his appointment, Asghar Khan remained dedicated to the improvement of PIA's operations and sought to uphold ethical standards during his tenure as Chairman. His commitment to transparent and ethical leadership shaped his approach to the complexities and challenges faced by PIA during this period. Similarly, upon assuming the position of the head of PIA, Asghar Khan became aware that his deputy was concurrently serving as an agent for Boeing Aircraft Company, earning a commission on each PIA purchase from Boeing. Asghar Khan found this dual role inappropriate, believing it was not suitable for an airline officer to simultaneously represent an aircraft manufacturing company that supplied products to PIA. In response, Asghar Khan presented the deputy with a choice, insisting that if he wished to retain the agency with Boeing Aircraft Company, he would need to resign from his position at PIA. The deputy opted to maintain ties with Boeing and subsequently resigned from PIA. Asghar Khan considered holding positions in both an airline and an aircraft company to be an unethical act (Ibid).

As the Chairman of Pakistan International Airlines (PIA), Asghar Khan led the airline through a brief yet impactful period, aiming to elevate its status to global prominence. This era, under Asghar Khan's leadership, is revered in PIA's history as the "Golden Age." Serving as the head of PIA for three years, Air Marshal Asghar Khan implemented numerous commendable measures during this transformative period. Notably, he personally appeared before the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) of the USA to secure a commercial pilot license, successfully passing the examination administered by the United States FAA (Asghar, 2010). Asghar Khan initiated crucial steps for the upliftment of PIA, instilling a culture of professionalism within the organization. One of his most significant contributions was the introduction of a new uniform for air hostesses, designed by the renowned French dress and uniform designer, Pierre Cardin. This move marked a colorful and momentous occurrence for Pakistan International Airlines, enhancing its global image and setting new standards in the aviation industry. The new uniform not only symbolized a commitment to modernity but also served as a representation of PIA's dedication to excellence and innovation under Asghar Khan's leadership. The visionary Chairman of Pakistan International Airlines (PIA), Asghar Khan, delegated the task of conceptualizing the air hostesses' uniform for PIA to Mr. Omar Qureshi. Mr. Qureshi, in turn, reached out to the renowned designer Pierre Cardin to bring this vision to life. Pierre Cardin responded to the request with enthusiasm, presenting a distinctive and impressive design that would go on to revolutionize the uniforms of flight attendants worldwide. The summer uniform boasted a sophisticated fawn color, while the winter uniform featured an elegant moss-green shade. Both variations included a "dupatta" to cover the heads of the air hostesses, adding a touch of cultural flair and turning heads wherever they went (Mummanka, 2021). This avant-garde uniform design didn't just make waves; it created a seismic shift in the aviation industry, firmly imprinting the name of Pakistan International Airlines on the global market. The uniforms were an instant hit, receiving widespread acclaim both domestically and internationally. The introduction of these new uniforms for stewards and air hostesses not only raised the aesthetic standards of PIA but also garnered admiration at airports around the world (PIA Photo Gallery, 2012). In the wake of a tragic incident faced by PIA in 1966 involving flight number seventeen in East Pakistan, Chairman Asghar Khan displayed decisive leadership. In response, he made the strategic decision to initiate helicopter services in East Pakistan under the PIA umbrella. Initially, helicopters were deployed to provide air services to around twenty towns in the East Wing of Pakistan. As part of a continuous expansion plan, Fokker F-27 aircraft were later introduced to serve an additional eight cities, showcasing Chairman Asghar Khan's dynamic and proactive approach in the face of challenges (Express Tribune, 2018). This move not only demonstrated PIA's commitment to connectivity but also reflected Chairman Asghar Khan's dedication to adapting and enhancing services in response to changing circumstances. Asghar Khan, during his tenure, not

only emphasized aviation safety but also implemented immediate and comprehensive measures to enhance the overall performance of Pakistan International Airlines (PIA). His strategic efforts resulted in PIA achieving the lowest international aircraft accident rate, a significant milestone that garnered recognition for the airline as a top-profit earning service in Pakistan. This success elevated PIA to a challenging position among global competitors in the airline industry. Under Asghar Khan's leadership, PIA witnessed a period of remarkable financial success. The airline achieved its highest profit earnings, recording a net profit of fifty-five million rupees, according to a report by News International in 2011. This financial success was complemented by the expansion of routes, a strategic move that contributed to the generation of maximum revenue for the airline. One notable aspect of Asghar Khan's impact was his meticulous management of the airline's fleet. Even today, all the jets introduced under his leadership continue to operate, a testament to the sound decisions made during his chairmanship. Beyond the operational success, Asghar Khan fostered a culture of excellence within the PIA family, promoting superior service and resilience among the organization's personnel. As a result of Asghar Khan's effective leadership, Pakistan International Airlines gained widespread popularity and recognition, not only within Pakistan but also globally among Pakistani communities in the 1960s. The airline became a household name, symbolizing excellence and reliability in air travel. The effectiveness and efficiency of PIA were further underscored during the 1965 war between Pakistan and India. As per the foresight of Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, a civilian airline, particularly the Air Force, would require robust support during critical and special circumstances. The war of 1965 validated this prediction, highlighting the crucial role played by Pakistan International Airlines in providing indispensable support to the armed forces and the Air Force during wartime operations. Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) played a pivotal and indispensable role in providing substantial material and logistical support to the armed forces of Pakistan, particularly through the operation of special flights utilizing various aircraft, including Viscounts, Boeings, and Super Constellations. In a significant historical development, the Viscounts were phased out in 1966, making way for the introduction of four Hawker Siddeley Tridents. This marked a crucial shift and enhancement in the airline's capabilities. During the mid to late 1960s, PIA experienced remarkable growth and expansion across various fronts. The airline's route network expanded rapidly, showcasing its robust performance during this period. PIA initiated flights to Tehran, the capital of Iran, in 1965, followed by the launch of services to Cairo, the capital of Egypt, in 1966. The same year witnessed an extensive outreach to additional countries, including France, Turkey, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Kenya. PIA strategically introduced flights to major cities such as Paris, Istanbul, Baghdad, Kuwait, Jeddah, and Nairobi, solidifying its global presence. Bangkok was also added to PIA's route network in 1967, further diversifying its international reach (RCD, 2019). Under the visionary leadership of Asghar Khan in 1966, PIA took a significant step by introducing a system to provide feeder services, thereby connecting the new eight points in the western wing of Pakistan. This initiative aimed at enhancing connectivity and accessibility, contributing to the overall growth of the airline. The robust expansion of PIA during this period posed challenges, particularly in terms of handling increased air traffic. In response to the growing demand, Asghar Khan strategically inducted Tridents into PIA's fleet. Despite these additions, the airline continued its upward trajectory, further strengthening its capabilities. The subsequent year saw the acquisition of one Trident, two F-27 Fokkers, and two Boeing 707s, reflecting PIA's commitment to modernization and growth (News, 2020).

#### **4. Introduction of Technology and Quality Control**

The tenure of Asghar Khan as the head of Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) not only witnessed the accumulation of historical achievements but also marked a transformative period

for the airline. One notable milestone during this era was the installation of Pakistan's first computer system, the IBM-1401, in 1967. This technological leap showcased PIA's commitment to staying at the forefront of advancements in the aviation industry. Additionally, Asghar Khan played a pivotal role in the establishment of the first engine overhaul workshop for Pakistan International Airlines. This workshop, strategically located near the airline's head office, served as a crucial hub for maintaining and enhancing the efficiency of PIA's aircraft engines. The visionary approach of Asghar Khan in introducing cutting-edge technology and quality control measures underscored the airline's commitment to safety, reliability, and operational excellence. In the dynamic landscape of the mid-60s, PIA experienced substantial growth in both air traffic and revenue generation. This period was characterized by the expansion of routes and destinations, reflecting PIA's ambition to connect more regions and serve a broader clientele. Moreover, the airline focused on integrating novel equipment and embracing the latest technologies to continually strengthen its operational capabilities. As part of these expansion efforts, in 1968, a significant milestone was achieved with the completion and commissioning of a new overhauling workshop specifically dedicated to the airframe support of Boeing aircraft. Known as the Jet Hangar, this facility played a crucial role in the maintenance and upkeep of PIA's Boeing fleet, showcasing the airline's commitment to quality control and technological advancement. The holistic approach adopted by Asghar Khan during his leadership at PIA encompassed not only operational growth but also a strategic focus on incorporating technological innovations and ensuring rigorous quality control measures. These initiatives solidified PIA's reputation as a forward-thinking and technologically advanced airline in the aviation industry (Mummarka, 2021). Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) commemorated a decade of success in its official advertisement, celebrating the period between December 1968 and spanning from 1958 to 1968. The official statement emphasized a remarkable transformation, noting that in 1958, the airline served around 200 passengers, whereas, by 1968, this figure had surged significantly to surpass a million passengers. This highlighted the substantial growth and popularity PIA experienced during this pivotal decade (Staff Report, 2015). An additional advertisement in 1969 acknowledged and commended the pivotal role played by the skilled and expert engineers of PIA's aircraft. Their contributions were instrumental in establishing and maintaining the high standards of the airline, achieving an impressive 97.7 percent rate of flight punctuality. This recognition underscored the dedication and professionalism of PIA's technical staff in ensuring operational excellence and reliability (Staff Report, 2015). In parallel to his role as the chairman of PIA, Asghar Khan took on the responsibility of serving as the Director General of the Pakistani Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) for a brief period from 1965 until his retirement in 1968. This dual role showcased Asghar Khan's significant influence and expertise in the aviation sector, contributing to the overall development and regulation of civil aviation in Pakistan during that time. Asghar Khan's tenure as the chairman of Pakistan International Airlines is often referred to as the "Golden Age of the Airlines" in the history of PIA. This period was marked by unprecedented success, growth, and recognition for the airline. Asghar Khan, having served PIA as an employee of the Pakistan Air Force, made the decision to retire from military service in 1968. Consequently, he also stepped down from his position as the chairman of PIA. This retirement marked the end of an era characterized by significant achievements and advancements in Pakistan's aviation landscape under Asghar Khan's visionary leadership (Akhbar -e-Jahan, 2018).

##### **5. During Asghar Khan's tenure, three air accidents occurred:**

1. The first incident transpired on May 20th, 1965, when a Boeing 720 crashed during its landing at the international airport in Cairo. Identified as Incident 121, the crash resulted in multiple fatalities.

2. The second incident unfolded on October 8th, 1965, involving an F-27 Fokker aircraft during a local cargo flight departing from Rawalpindi airport to Skardu. The aircraft crashed into a ridge near the village of Patin, descending more than one thousand feet (three hundred meters) from the impact point. Tragically, four crew members lost their lives in this unfortunate event (Accident Description, 2017).
3. On February 2nd, 1966, the third incident transpired during Asghar Khan's chairmanship. A plane with flight number 17, operated by an S-61 Sikorsky helicopter, crashed in the Eastern Wing of the country due to a failure in its main gearbox. Out of twenty-four passengers on board, twenty-three perished in the crash (Ibid).

#### **6. Establishment of Emirates Air Line by Asghar Khan:**

Air Marshals Asghar Khan and Nur Khan, prominent figures in the Pakistan aviation sector, played instrumental roles in transforming PIA into one of the world's top airlines. Their expertise and leadership also contributed significantly to the establishment of the Emirates Air Line, currently recognized as the preeminent airline globally.

#### **7. Retirement from the Service:**

In 1968, Asghar Khan made the pivotal decision to resign from the chairmanship of PIA. Despite the government, led by Ayyub Khan, offering him an extension to continue his service with the organization, Asghar Khan declined this proposal. Opting for retirement, he subsequently entered the realm of politics. The mantle of PIA's leadership was passed on to Air Vice Marshal Akhtar, a trusted associate of Asghar Khan. Upon relinquishing his role as PIA chief after a commendable three-year stint, Asghar Khan candidly communicated to President Ayub Khan his perception that the entire governmental system seemed geared towards impeding his efforts. He emphasized to President Ayub Khan that any accomplishments during that period were achieved not by adhering strictly to government directives, but rather by strategically bypassing them. Throughout those three years, Asghar Khan not only faced the challenges of a bureaucracy perceived as paralyzing but also amassed invaluable experience in navigating and managing its complexities (Asghar, 1998). One noteworthy episode during Asghar Khan's post-service travels with PIA involved the discovery of his damaged suitcase upon arrival at the airport. Promptly writing to the airline seeking repairs, Asghar Khan, however, received no response. Undeterred, he took matters into his own hands and repaired the suitcase personally. Surprisingly, six months later, he received a cheque from the airline, compensating him for the full purchase price of the suitcase. In a display of integrity, Asghar Khan returned the cheque, explaining that since he had already repaired the suitcase, there was no need for a replacement (Asghar, 2011).

#### **8. Conclusion:**

In today's interconnected world, air travel stands as a linchpin, fundamentally altering the dynamics of global movement for both people and goods. This paradigm shift has not only brought about a host of benefits but has also become integral to various facets of modern life. At the heart of this transformative landscape is Pakistan International Airlines (PIA), the flag bearer of Pakistan, playing a pivotal role in connecting the nation with the rest of the world. Established in 1955, PIA has grown into a preeminent airline, operating a comprehensive network of both domestic and international flights. Headquartered in Karachi, it strategically operates from major airports across Pakistan, including Islamabad, Lahore, and Peshawar. PIA has been a crucial enabler of connectivity, fostering tourism, trade, and cultural exchanges between Pakistan and the global community. The chapter under Asghar Khan's chairmanship marked a transformative phase in PIA's history. His visionary leadership elevated the institution



to new heights, solidifying its status as one of Pakistan's finest and most profitable entities. One of his notable contributions was the global expansion of PIA's network, enhancing its reputation on the international stage. Asghar Khan's influence extended beyond operational considerations; he introduced a distinctive and impressive uniform for air hostesses, which not only enhanced the airline's image but also garnered global recognition. Asghar Khan's emphasis on aviation safety was a defining aspect of his tenure. Swift and effective measures were implemented under his guidance, resulting in PIA achieving the lowest rate of aircraft accidents, a feat internationally acknowledged. The airline's financial success during this period established it as a top net profit earner in Pakistan, positioning PIA as a formidable competitor in the fiercely competitive global airline industry. The years under Asghar Khan's leadership at PIA are fondly remembered as the "Golden Age" in the institution's history. The three-year span witnessed unparalleled growth, financial prosperity, and international acclaim. Even today, PIA continues to wield significant influence in the global aviation sector, boasting a rich history and contributing substantially to Pakistan's connectivity, economy, and global standing. With an expansive route network, an unwavering commitment to safety, and ongoing efforts to enhance customer experience, PIA serves as a vital bridge between Pakistan and the world, leaving an enduring impact on the nation's global presence.

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