

Institutional Failure in Indian Aviation Safety

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Institutional Failure in Indian Aviation Safety: A Case for Reform

Context

Aircraft accident investigations play a critical role in ensuring aviation safety, transparency, and accountability. In India, however, the investigation process often lacks independence, clarity, and credibility. Despite having a formal structure, India's aviation safety system is undermined by **institutional conflicts of interest, opaque functioning, and limited accountability**. The recent **June 2025 aircraft accident in Ahmedabad** has reignited discussions on the urgent need for systemic reforms.

Key Flaws in India's Aircraft Accident Investigation Framework

Illusion of Autonomy

- . The **Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau (AAIB)**, though autonomous on paper, functions under the **Ministry of Civil Aviation (MoCA)**.
 - . MoCA also oversees **airlines, regulatory bodies like DGCA**, and appoints officials in both regulation and investigation arms, creating a **clear conflict of interest**.
 - . This structure contrasts with sectors like railways, where **safety investigations enjoy greater institutional independence**.
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Reactive, Not Preventive

- . The aviation safety system responds only after accidents, rather than working on **risk anticipation and prevention**.
- . The Ahmedabad crash is the latest in a series of incidents, including **helicopter crashes, flying school failures, and weather emergencies**.

. India's aviation growth has **outpaced the regulatory framework**, including an outdated **National Civil Aviation Policy (NCAP)**.

Ignored Warnings: The Seth Committee Report

. The **1997 Air Marshal J.K. Seth Committee Report** identified critical issues—fragmented oversight, lack of independence, inadequate training, and regulatory capture.

. Despite its importance, the report was sidelined as it **challenged institutional comfort zones**.

. The structural deficiencies it highlighted remain **largely unaddressed**, resulting in repeated failures and cosmetic reforms.

Other Major Deficiencies in Investigation Practices

Contradictory and Incomplete Reports

. Many accident reports are marked by **inconsistencies and omission of facts**.

. In a **2001 crash involving a former Union Minister**, cloud cover was blamed, even though **meteorological data indicated clear skies**.

. The **1993 Aurangabad crash** saw overloading concerns diluted in the final report.

. **Data requests from the 2018 Air India Express incident** were not met, indicating a **lack of transparency**.

Misuse of Investigation Findings

. As per the **Aircraft (Investigation of Accidents and Incidents) Rules, 2017**, investigations are meant to improve safety, not assign legal blame.

. However, **law enforcement agencies and courts misuse AAIB reports** for criminal prosecution, often without aviation expertise.

. The judiciary tends to focus on **pilot error**, ignoring larger systemic failures, leading to **simplistic conclusions and institutional impunity**.

Concentration of Power and Loss of Public Trust

. The **MoCA controls policy, regulation, investigation, and appointments**, eliminating checks and balances.

. Families of victims often receive **contradictory findings** and **no clear accountability**.

- . The **2020 Kozhikode crash**, which killed **21 people**, contradicts the **ICAO State Safety Briefing's zero fatal accident claim**, and **its recommendations remain unimplemented**.
 - . Such institutional silence damages **public confidence and international credibility**.
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Reform Agenda: Restoring Integrity and Accountability

- . **Ensure institutional independence** by separating the **AAIB and DGCA from the MoCA** and making them accountable to Parliament.
 - . **Prohibit ad hoc parallel committees** that undermine the credibility of formal investigation agencies.
 - . **Introduce legal safeguards** to prevent misuse of AAIB findings in criminal cases unless reviewed by independent aviation experts.
 - . **Amend Rule 19(3) of the Aircraft Rules, 1937**, to protect pilots under a no-blame safety culture unless **gross negligence is proven**.
 - . **Appoint an independent ombudsman** to examine past reports and strengthen future accountability mechanisms.
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Conclusion

India possesses the technical expertise and institutional structures required to become a leader in aviation safety. However, it lacks the **political and bureaucratic will** to embrace uncomfortable truths and drive genuine reform. Aircraft accident investigations must go beyond procedural formality and serve as a meaningful process that **honours lives lost and strengthens public trust**. By ensuring independence, transparency, and reform, India can restore faith in both its aviation system and its governance institutions.

