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Beyond black box: Air India crash was imminent. Safety lapses, unheeded warnings raise questions.



From left: Hardeep Singh Puri, minister of civil aviation; Ashwani Lohani, former chairman and managing director, Air India; and Harpreet Singh, ch at Air India; image credit: Civil aviation; Getty Images; Air

Synopsis

Air India's brush with mishaps seems to be unending. Last week, another flight crashed, bringing back memories of the Mangaluru accident. The question is: could the disaster have been averted? An exclusive ir by ET Prime reveals that warnings issued on serious lapses in safety standards to Air India's top brass an authorities were overloo

It was the summer of 2019. As **AK Chopra** entered the Airlines House, **Air India**'s leafy headquarters next to the Election Commission's office in New Delhi, he was drenched in sweat and worry lines were evident on his forehead. The retired joint director-general of civil aviation was rushing for an important meeting with Air India's then chairman and managing director, **Ashwani Lohani** .

Chopra, 69, had been India's most-experienced aircraft accidents' investigator — having probed all major crashes in the country over the last four decades. He had investigated accidents at Charkhi Dadri, Patna, and even looked into the 2010 Mangaluru crash in which an **Air India Express IX812** flight with 166 passengers on board overshot the runway and fell off a hill before being engulfed in a ball of fire. Chopra retired that year.

But despite all the years of experience under his belt, Chopra had been feeling a burden like never before on his shoulders. It all had started a couple of years ago.

A warning that went unheeded

The veteran, whose advice was taken as the final word in the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA), was requested by the state-owned carrier's then chairman and managing director Pradeep Singh Kharola (who is now the civil aviation secretary) to "take up the challenge" and make recommendations based on his findings to a committee set up to assess safety at Air India.

Though initially apprehensive, Chopra



BY

Tarun Shukla

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finally agreed and began the work in October 2018. But by February 2019, Kharola was promoted as the aviation secretary and Lohani took over as the airline's new chairman.

"If I pointed out something, Lohani would just say that I had done a 'great job' in the railways [and] I would do so here as well," Chopra recalls in an exclusive interview with ET Prime, adding that the then airline chief never acted on his findings.

"I told him the [Indian] Railways is not aviation, but nothing happened," he laments.

Chopra says he continued the work despite facing constraints imposed internally by what he calls the "the Air India coterie" which was worried that his findings could cause the airline embarrassment. For instance, Chopra recounts that he was told not to go to the airline's Mumbai office for auditing since "it was raining there and the safety department was busy".

Then, one fine morning he got a call from Lohani. The airline's new boss told Chopra that his services were no longer required.

"Obviously, they didn't like what I was showing them. But before leaving, I had told him that you are headed for an accident," Chopra recalls.

Exactly a year since Chopra's warning went unheeded, another Air India Express flight has met with a fatal accident — bringing back the chilling memories of the Mangaluru crash. Last week, Air India Express flight

IX-1344 broke into two pieces as it went down a gorge after overshooting the runway at the Kozhikode airport, killing 18 people including both the pilots. And the question on top of everyone's mind right now is: could the disaster have been averted?

Before he was shown the door, Chopra had put down all his observations in writing and submitted them to Lohani as well as Air India board member RK Tyagi, director of operations Arvind Kathpalia, engineering director ABK Rao, finance director V Hejmadi, and aviation ministry bureaucrat Satyendra Mishra, who was part of the committee.

ET Prime has accessed copies of several mails written by Chopra that clearly indicate that the ministry was fully aware of the poor safety standards at Air India and had asked the then chairman Kharola to appoint a committee.

So, what were the findings that Chopra submitted to the committee?

A can of worms

The committee was told that Air India's chief of flight safety since 2015, Harpreet A De Singh, who was the face of the airline at press conferences following the Mangaluru crash, was not qualified for the post. As per the DGCA regulations, while flight crew member or an engineer or a defence officer or a person with more than 15 years of experience in accident investigations can become the chief of safety with mandated training, Singh did not qualify on any of these criteria.

“She has the DGCA approval, which might have been obtained by misrepresenting facts or by exerting pressure on the DGCA,” Chopra wrote in an e-mail dated August 11, 2019, to Air India chairman Lohani and committee members.

Singh’s husband, Pushpinder Singh, a senior pilot in Air India, was also the chief operating officer of the airline’s subsidiary Air India Express between 2012 and 2019.

“She does not have a valid CPL (commercial pilot’s licence), also how she can do [the] checking/surveillance of senior pilots, whatever reason Air India may put, it is serious violations of regulatory proviso. If she has been authorised to do so, it is not correct and is illegal,” Chopra had noted in his letter.

The chief of safety was allegedly unfair and biased as well. “There were more than 60 confirmed unstabilised approaches in year 2018 in Air India. Why [the] same serious action was not taken against all these pilots?” Chopra questioned, citing the instance when only one pilot was pulled up for unstabilised approach. “Thus, it points clearly to COFS (chief of flight safety) being unfair and biased. This is [in] contravention to basic requirements of flight safety,” he added.

He also noted that the flight-safety department of Air India was working in isolation and was at loggerheads with all other departments. It worked from Mumbai and Delhi, likely because a few members did not want to shift to Delhi after the airline’s headquarter was moved to Delhi

following its merger in 2007. The department was also allegedly threatening the airline's crew and engineers.

"It is not [the] function of [the] flight-safety department to terrorise people (especially pilots and engineers)," Chopra said in the letter.

Ironically, one of the findings of the Mangaluru crash investigation was that the pilot did not go for a hard landing for the fear of being reprimanded by the management — a decision if made could have prevented the crash. Notifications were issued later by Air India Express encouraging pilots to opt for hard landings if required. But the price for the decision had been already paid — in the form of 158 innocent lives.

Another alarming finding by Chopra was that the airline was found "tampering" with flight-safety data and Foqa (flight operational quality assurance) parameters. "Data is being manipulated and tempered with in Air India, thus at present the way it is being done, is waste of time and energy," Chopra further noted, recommending an urgent review of the airline's Boeing fleet. Foqa is a method of capturing, analysing, and/or visualising the data generated by an aircraft and is critical to ensure that any deviations done by the pilots are caught and corrected soon after the flights so that they do not reoccur.

Air India was also found allowing planes to fly with "excessive" use of MEL (minimum equipment list) which needed to "be stopped", according to the letter. Typically,

every instrument installed in an aircraft is supposed to work, but sometimes some things do not work. The MEL provides relief from that requirement and acknowledges that even if something is broken, the flight can continue the journey safely instead of being cancelled at the last minute. But a higher frequency of such occurrences reveals a lax attitude on the part of airline officials. Even accident investigations were being delayed and recommendations were biased, the letter added.



In essence, all critical safety pointers that prevent an accident from occurring were being flouted at Air India and its subsidiaries — Air India Express, and Alliance Air.

The former head of safety at Alliance Air, Shakti Lumba (71), who went on to set up flight operations at IndiGo, agrees with Chopra's findings, adding that the safety department of the national carrier and its subsidiaries is being viewed as a mere legal obligation. Usually, an airline's chief of safety officer has its CEO's ear, he says. CEOs listen and act promptly and decisively on safety issues flagged by these officers,

but unfortunately that was not the case in Air India.

“Air India is a victim of the Cassandra effect,” Lumba says, referring to the Greek princess who could foresee future, but was cursed that nobody would believe her. “Many Cassandras have warned the king of great dangers ahead, but the king refuses to listen.”

And in the Maharaja’s case, the Cassandra is none but Chopra. He had also forewarned how fund crunch at Air India was always leading to “crisis management” in the engineering department, which needed to be stopped as the number of aircraft to be serviced, including major maintenance and engine overhauls, was being planned based on the availability of budget.

Chopra also found that even small things such as safety manuals at the airline were outdated and recommended an urgent safety audit of the flight-safety departments at Air India, Air India Express, and Alliance Air by independent experts. He further suggested that the training departments of Air India Express and Alliance Air be augmented and their training procedures standardised.

It is unclear why no action was taken on such damning observations made by an experienced official who had given the US aviation regulator a point-by-point rebuttal when India was downgraded citing poor safety oversight.

Lohani, who has now joined the GMR

Group, which runs the Delhi and Hyderabad airports, declined to comment when asked about the e-mails sent by Chopra.

Air India spokesperson Aruna Gopalakrishnan confirmed Chopra was appointed by the airline and the contract was "terminated" in August 2019. She did not respond to Chopra's charges in a mail that was also marked to aviation minister **Hardeep Puri** , aviation secretary Kharola, Air India chairman Rajiv Bansal, air-safety head Harpreet Singh, and Air India Express chief Shyam Sundar. In a text message separately, Air India safety head, Harpreet A De Singh, said the charges levelled by Chopra are "false" but declined to elaborate.

The bottom line

Had the authorities acted on the advice they themselves had sought, perhaps 18 people would have been alive today and many would not be in the hospitals with broken spinal cords.

“My assessment of the situation is more serious than what **the aviation ministry** had thought,” Chopra wrote in the same parting e-mail in August 2019, warning that if corrective measures weren't taken immediately, Air India would meet with a disaster sooner than later. “The writing on the wall is very clear that Air India/its subsidiaries, especially Air India Express, is heading for a catastrophic accident, only the time and place is yet to be decided.”

As it turned out, the time was 7:43 pm on the fateful rainy day of August 7, 2020, and the place, Kozhikode in Kerala.

(Graphic by Sadhana Saxena)

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