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AVIATION PROFESSIONALISM WHICH INDIA MUST DRAW FROM

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‘The aviation world should learn a lot from the absolutely high professional standards in Japan’ | Photo Credit: AP

“If there is a possibility of several things going wrong, the one that will cause the most damage will be the one to go wrong,” is one of Murphy’s general laws.

The aviation accident, on Tuesday, January 2, 2024, where a Japan Airlines (JAL) Airbus A350 aircraft collided with a Japanese Coast Guard Bombardier Dash 8 aircraft at Tokyo’s Haneda airport while landing, in which all 379 passengers on the JAL plane escaped but with five fatalities on the smaller aircraft, is a perfect example of this. There was a notice to airmen issued for Haneda indicating that the stop bar, a set of red lights that come on at taxi holding point for that runway, was not available. The Coast Guard plane was cleared to the holding point, which was acknowledged by the pilot to Air Traffic Control (ATC). The ATC tape transcript also shows the JAL flight being cleared to land, which was acknowledged by the pilots. The investigation report will indicate what made the Coast Guard pilot enter the runway. Did he miss the notice to airmen? Did he not hear the ATC issue landing clearance to the JAL aircraft? The investigation report will identify these and we can expect the preliminary report in a fortnight, unlike accident reports in India which take months and years.

Aircraft manufacturers are required to demonstrate that an aircraft, in maximum density configuration, can be completely evacuated within 90 seconds using only half the total number of emergency exits. The world witnessed the highest quality of discipline and crew training, which saved 379 people in the fiery accident. It was an amazing display of orderly evacuation from the burning wreckage that the JAL cabin crew executed. All passengers followed the safety instructions and left the aircraft without carrying their hand bags or crowding around after coming down the aircraft evacuation slides. Only three exits were available for evacuation. The cabin public address system was not working and the crew used megaphone and voice announcements for the evacuation.

On August 2, 2005, Air France flight, AF 358, from Paris, France, to Toronto overshot the runway while landing in heavy rain and caught fire. All 309 passengers were evacuated safely, though 11 received injuries. Images of the evacuation showed several passengers leaving the burning aircraft with their hand luggage. Similar action by passengers on an Emirates flight (EK 521) from Thiruvananthapuram to Dubai, on August 3, 2016, that crashed while landing, showed

a complete lack of discipline on the part of passengers who were grabbing their hand luggage, thus delaying the evacuation. The aviation world should learn a lot from the absolutely high professional standards in JAL's training of its crew. Air passengers worldwide should also realise that pre-flight emergency procedure instructions should be followed seriously.

The Japanese authorities have already made the ATC transcripts public. Contrast this with what would have been several months of silence and secrecy in India. Take the case of an extreme hard landing done by the crew of an Air India Airbus flight from Kochi to Dubai on December 20, 2023. The news surfaced only after a tracking site showed the aircraft flying to Mumbai on December 27 at an altitude of 9,000 ft instead of the normal 31,000-plus ft. Eventually, the news was that the flight had made a 3.5g landing at Dubai and was on ground for more than a week. To put that in simple language, 'g' is acceleration due to gravity. If an aircraft does a 1g landing, the weight on the wheels equals the weight of the aircraft. A 3.5g landing means the weight on the wheels of the aircraft at touchdown is 3.5 times its landing weight for that flight. Landing gears are not designed for such an impact and the resultant damage to crucial aircraft parts can be serious. The plane was permitted to depart as an unpressurised flight and was allowed just one take off and one landing.

Did the captain report the hard landing in the aircraft tech log? Did he file the flight safety report within 24 hours, a mandatory requirement by the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA)? What action did Air India take upon learning of the very hard landing? Why did it take more than 10 days to report this serious event? Was there an attempt to hush up this serious accident?

A disturbing fact is the failure of the Air India management to act proactively on a report by the instructor who trained the captain. He was a copilot on the airline's Boeing 777 fleet and was brought to the Airbus A320 fleet for his first command. The minimum hours on type that is required for first command were bypassed. Let me quote from the letter that the instructor had sent to the Chief of Training, Operations and also Safety of Air India. "Sir, they are facing difficulties in exercises which require manual flying skills and raw data flying and had to be recommended for corrective training twice. This I feel can be attributed to their lack of experience in the same, as they both are from the B777 fleet.

"God forbid if there is an incident/accident involving one of these pilots from the [airline's] 777/787 fleet, many questions will be raised, and we will not have any reasonable answers."

It was a case of shooting the messenger and the instructor pilot was sacked from Air India. Today, the airline has several questions to answer. The DGCA and Air India should look at the accidents caused by confusion of flying different types of aircraft, especially when fatigue and stress are involved. One can go back to October 12, 1976, when an Indian Airlines Caravelle flight from Bombay to Madras (IC 171) crashed shortly after take-off at Bombay and while attempting an emergency landing, killing all 95 passengers on board. The pilots had endorsements on their licences to fly the Boeing and the Caravelle. The switch positions for certain functions worked differently in each aircraft, which was highlighted in the court inquiry

In the Indian Airlines Airbus crash at Bangalore, on February 14, 1990, where there were 92 fatalities, the pilots were fresh from conversion training for the aircraft.

In the TAM Airlines Airbus crash in Sao Paulo, on July 17, 2007, this was the fourth sector of the day. Even though the flight was within duty time, one cannot discount the fatigue factor for the crew. The ATC calls on the wet runway condition were more in line with Boeing terminology. The aircraft also had one thrust reverser unserviceable. One of the pilots had flown previously on Boeing aircraft. The thrust lever action on a Boeing where the reverse thrust lever in the cockpit is wire locked is different from that on an Airbus. All on board the flight literally burnt to death.

In the Asiana crash in San Francisco, on July 6, 2013, the captain had flown previously on Airbus aircraft. On final approach for landing, he was lulled into thinking that the auto thrust would respond like in the Airbus he was so used to, forgetting that he was on a different aircraft.

Air India has had a long history of covering up serious incidents and accidents with the blessings of the DGCA. The hard landing accident at Dubai should serve as a wake-up call for the airline. The airline has just inducted a new aircraft, the Airbus A350, and the criterion for the crew selected to fly it should be based on very high standards and not on seniority. While the first lot of captains are Airbus experienced, the second lot being sent for conversion are from the Boeing fleet. Both the DGCA and Air India should insist on a hard copy of the simulator proficiency check report/certification of the pilots training on this aircraft.

Merely stating that safety is paramount when so many incidents are being swept under the carpet will not improve the reputation of the airline. India can claim to be among the fastest growing aviation markets but where do we stand on the passenger safety count? The Air India management needs to do some soul searching when it comes to operations, training and safety. India and its airlines have much to learn from the Japan Airlines incident.

Captain A. (Mohan) Ranganathan is a former airline instructor pilot and aviation safety adviser. He is also a former member of the Civil Aviation Safety Advisory Council (CASAC), India

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