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‘Conditions ripe for catastrophic failure’: House panel sounds air safety alarm

Flags unchecked fleet expansion, fatigued workforces, unresolved safety gaps, outdated infra



The site of the Air India Express AI 171 crash in Ahmedabad. (Express)



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In the backdrop of the Air India Express AI 171 crash in Ahmedabad this year, a

Parliamentary panel has sounded an unusually sharp warning on the state of India's aviation safety architecture, flagging multiple systemic lapses and calling for urgent reforms.

The Standing Committee on Transport, Tourism and Culture, chaired by JD(U) [Rajya Sabha](#) MP Sanjay Kumar Jha, presented its 380th report on "Overall Review of Safety in the Civil Aviation Sector" in both Houses of Parliament on Wednesday. While the report itself does not mention the AI 171 crash, committee members discussed it extensively during deliberations and summoned officials of the Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau (AAIB) to depose on investigative delays and coordination lapses.

"The rapid expansion of India's civil aviation sector has stretched its regulatory and operational infrastructure to the limits," the report observes, warning that persistent deficiencies and capacity gaps create "conditions ripe for a catastrophic failure".

With passenger traffic projected to cross 300 million annually by 2030, the panel warns that unchecked fleet expansion, fatigued workforces, unresolved safety gaps, and outdated infrastructure could converge into "conditions for future disasters."

Chairman Jha said the report is intended as a "roadmap for urgent reforms" to restore public confidence.

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During deliberations, MPs grilled AAIB officials on delays in AI 171's preliminary report and failures to act on earlier safety recommendations, underscoring how the [Ahmedabad](#) tragedy continues to shape India's aviation safety priorities.

DGCA autonomy crisis and global stakes

At the heart of the report is a scathing critique of the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA), India's principal aviation regulator.

The committee warns that the DGCA is "grossly understaffed to meet international obligations" and risks failing future audits by the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) unless vacancies are filled on priority. Out of 1,063 sanctioned posts, only 553 are filled. Nearly 45% of technical staff are on deputation, leading to "high attrition and institutional memory loss," weakening regulatory continuity.

India's latest ICAO audit placed it below the global average for effective safety oversight. The panel cautions that, without reform, India could face "international restrictions on carrier operations", directly affecting the country's growing aviation market.

The committee reiterates its long-standing demand to grant DGCA full administrative and financial autonomy and to decouple recruitment from UPSC so the regulator can offer competitive salaries and attract technical experts.

Air traffic controllers 'overstretched to breaking point'

The panel devotes significant attention to Air Traffic Control Officers (ATCOs), warning that fatigue among controllers poses a direct and ongoing threat to airspace safety.

Evidence before the committee revealed that ATCOs at busy airports like [Delhi](#), [Mumbai](#), [Bengaluru](#), and [Hyderabad](#) routinely work prolonged, fatiguing shifts. Many airports operate with merged control sectors at night due to shortages, placing excessive pressure on remaining staff.

Calling this practice “institutionalised overwork,” the panel has demanded an immediate end to exemptions from mandatory duty-time limitations and recommended the creation of a scientifically designed Fatigue Risk Management System (FRMS) for ATCOs.

The report also urges a comprehensive airport-wise staffing audit and a significant expansion of ATC training capacity. Currently, training centres accommodate just 210 officers at a time, causing new recruits to wait months before deployment.

Unresolved safety deficiencies, ineffective deterrence

The report highlights a serious enforcement gap in DGCA’s safety oversight, revealing that 3,747 safety deficiencies remain unresolved as of April 2025 — including 37 Level I deficiencies that pose immediate safety risks.

The committee criticises DGCA’s approach as “procedural formality without effective deterrence”, saying that without strict enforcement, safety findings “lose their purpose.”

It has recommended:

- A time-bound closure mechanism for all safety findings, with critical deficiencies fixed within 72 hours.
- Escalating enforcement measures, including financial penalties, suspension of approvals, or cancellation of licences for persistent non-compliance.
- An independent audit of DGCA’s enforcement processes to ensure findings translate into tangible safety improvements.

Helicopter operations: 'Confused and dangerous' oversight

After examining four helicopter crashes during the 2025 Char Dham Yatra and 23 incidents since 2021, the committee described India's regulatory structure for helicopter operations as "confused and dangerous."

At present, several high-risk helicopter services, including pilgrimage operations, are managed by state agencies like the Uttarakhand Civil Aviation Development Authority (UCADA) with limited DGCA oversight.

Calling this "a fractured and ambiguous regulatory command structure," the panel has recommended:

A uniform national framework to bring all helicopter operations under rigorous central supervision.

Mandatory terrain-specific training and certification for pilots operating in mountainous regions.

A dedicated oversight cell within DGCA to continuously monitor high-altitude helicopter operations nationwide.

Recurring operational risks

The report flags a troubling rise in runway incursions, which occurred at a rate of 14.12 per million movements in 2024 — well above the safety target of 9.78. Similar overshoots were noted for loss-of-situational-awareness events and near mid-air collision (AIRPROX) incidents.

Despite frequent reviews by the Occurrence Review Board, these events persist, suggesting that lessons from investigations are not translating into operational improvements.

The committee recommended mandatory root-cause analyses for every runway incursion and focused remedial programmes for high-risk airports, along with faster installation of fog navigation systems and Instrument Landing Systems at functional airports.

Whistleblower protection and ‘just culture’

The report warns that a punitive regulatory culture is undermining safety by discouraging open reporting.

Citing instances where individual ATCOs were fined up to `25 lakh, the committee called for aligning penalties with “just culture” principles, which distinguish between honest mistakes and negligence.

It also recommended creating a legally backed whistleblower protection framework to ensure anonymity, prevent victimisation, and promote a more transparent reporting ecosystem.

MRO dependence and strategic vulnerabilities

The panel expressed alarm over India’s 85% dependence on foreign Maintenance, Repair and Overhaul (MRO) facilities, noting that airlines spend `15,000 crore annually overseas on heavy checks and overhauls.

Calling this a “strategic vulnerability”, the report warns that geopolitical disruptions or supply chain shocks could ground India’s fleet.

Recommendations include:

- Rationalising GST and customs duties on spare parts.
- Incentivising state-of-the-art domestic MRO hubs.
- Creating a national aviation skill mission to develop specialised manpower and reduce dependence on foreign facilities.

Governance gaps in AAI board

The report criticises the Airports Authority of India (AAI) for lacking a dedicated Member (ATC) on its Board — a recommendation pending since 2006.

Calling this absence a “serious governance failure,” the committee argues that excluding ATC expertise from strategic decision-making “endangers systemic safety planning.”

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