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Why a judicial inquiry?

THE shadow of a tragedy must not be allowed to obscure the need for a thorough-going inquiry to examine whether the Directorate-General of Civil Aviation and the procedures under which it operates are the best that can be devised to ensure the demands of air safety. We already know that there have been irregularities in the working of the D-GCA in relation to the plane crash in which Sanjay Gandhi and Capt. Saxena met their death. The rules seem to have been bent at every stage beginning from the importation of the ill-fated Pitts aircraft and its ownership. It lay in crates for over three years before it was brought to Delhi to be assembled. Its long crate life in the humid climate of Bombay would have called for the rigorous scrutiny of every single part and, more particularly, the engine for evidence of corrosion. Did it get such a scrutiny? The aircraft got its airworthiness certificate, it appears, after two days of test flying. The aircraft was designed for aerobatics and sporting aircraft of this kind require being subjected to the maximum stress before ascertaining their airworthiness. Was it possible to meet these conditions in two days of flying? Were Sanjay Gandhi and Capt Saxena qualified to fly such a plane at all without being put through their paces by competent instructors? The relevance of these questions is not confined to last Monday's fatal accident.

But that is only one aspect of the tragedy. There are other aspects which are more important in their impact on air safety. First, are there political constraints which come in the way of the efficient working of the D-GCA? Or is it a case of the failure of the responsible political authority? Secondly, are there factors affecting air safety in the special conditions of Delhi which are beyond the competence of D-GCA to handle? For instance, should the Delhi Flying Club be allowed to operate from its present base? When the Club was first established, the site was on the outskirts of the capital. It is now in the heart of an expanding city. Air traffic itself has grown enormously in the intervening years and the Club's planes have to observe special care to keep clear of the flight path of commercial aircraft. Does this not constitute a continuing hazard?

It is absurd to imagine that the D-GCA can be entrusted with an inquiry of such a comprehensive nature, even if we were to forget that the D-GCA is under an obligation to declare its interest and opt out of an inquiry involving also its own working. The Government's excuse for withdrawing the judicial inquiry which it had itself announced is even more absurd. The D-GCA has acted under a formal requirement in starting its own inquiry. What disqualifies it are the extraordinary circumstances of the accident, and the patent necessity to go into questions beyond its competence.