

The Pitts enquiry: One year after Sanjay

THERE was always more to Sanjay Gandhi than met the eye. This held true about his life, and now efforts are underway to somehow prove that there was more to his death than has hitherto been believed. Sanjay died on June 23, 1980 when a gleaming new Pitts aerobatic plane he was piloting spun out of control and plunged to the earth, instantly killing him and his fellow pilot Subhash Saxena.

The way in which the subsequent enquiry into the air crash has been conducted, has only added to the thick air of mystery. To all appearances, it was a case of an overconfident pilot taking on more than he could handle. Despite his 500 hours of flying experience, Sanjay was not really qualified to fly a high performance aerobatic plane and take it through complicated aerobatic manoeuvres, specially over populated and sensitive areas like Delhi's Diplomatic Enclave, where flying is not permitted.

But the authorities are not willing to risk blaming Sanjay for bringing about his own end. Quite conveniently for them, there was another pilot along with Sanjay, Captain Subhash Saxena. Efforts have therefore been underway to foist part of the blame for the tragedy on Subhash Saxena. This is partly the reason why the enquiry, which was due to be completed in a few months, has dragged on for nearly a year.

One theory that is likely to find a mention in the enquiry report is that the plane crashed due to lack of co-ordination between Sanjay and Capt. Saxena. The obvious aim is to put part of the blame on Saxena, since he was the more experienced of the two pilots with over 5,000 hours of flying experience compared to Sanjay's 500 plus.

To support the thesis that Capt. Saxena was partly responsible, the authorities mention that the flight plan for the fatal flight was filed with the control tower by Saxena. What no one says is that the actual flight release papers were signed by Sanjay just



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Sanjay and his followers on the campaign trail in Amethi during the 1977 general elections.

before take off. Saxena was sitting in the front cockpit and Sanjay in the rear one.

People who have been in touch with the enquiry, fear that an attempt may also be made to suggest that Subhash Saxena deliberately took Sanjay to his death. One theory being voiced is that he grabbed hold of the joy-stick and immobilised it, thereby making it impossible for Sanjay to control the plane. These sources openly say that Saxena had had an argument with Sanjay some days before the crash. Besides, he was depressed as he had not been paid any salary for several months. The same sources say that he had dressed well that morning and trimmed his beard because, it is implied, he was bent on suicide, and on taking Sanjay with him.

To be fair to Saxena, there

could have been a genuine misunderstanding between the two pilots leading to a lack of co-ordination. Each may have thought the other was taking steps to bring the plane out of the spin and both waited too long to do anything about it. This is possible because there was no way the pilots, sitting one behind the other in separate cockpits, could communicate with each other. The radio intercom between the two cockpits had not been connected and since each pilot's head projects above the fuselage, even shouted instructions would get carried away by the rushing wind.

In any case, the enquiry may report the conclusion that one of the pilots, or both, were disoriented by the loops and spin. The blood normally drains out of the pilot's head at the bottom of a

loop and the pilot cannot make out which direction he is going in. If this had happened, it is more likely that Sanjay, with no experience whatsoever in flying aerobatic planes, was the one disoriented rather than Saxena, who had received his basic training, including some aerobatics practice, in the air force.

Let us consider, first, the unusual circumstances which have attended this enquiry right from the beginning. The accident should normally have been investigated by a court of enquiry or at least a committee of enquiry. After all, the son of the Prime Minister, who was additionally, general secretary of the ruling party and a powerful political figure on the national scene, had been killed. No one could then have been certain that the plane was not sabotaged. All this necessitated an enquiry by a High Court judge and the Government initially appointed Justice M. L. Jain of the Delhi High Court, with a panel of four technical experts to assist him. But, fearing that a judicial enquiry would expose the risks and short cuts Sanjay took when flying, and that many officials would be put in the dock, the Ministry of Civil Aviation did a quick about-face. That very evening, it cancelled the enquiry by the judge and instead appointed a departmental enquiry by the Director of Air Safety in the DGCA.

One reason which prompted this decision was that barely a few weeks before the accident, the then Director General of Civil Aviation, Air Marshal Jafar Zaheer, had protested to the ministry against Sanjay's dangerous flying. In a letter addressed to the Ministry Secretary, Dr. B. Venkataraman, the DG had asked what Sanjay's status was. Was the young flier to be treated like a VIP or just any other fledgling pilot? If he was in fact a VIP, as the Air Marshal rightly presumed, then why was he allowed to take unnecessary risks by flying around the country in total disregard of normal safety procedures? If something happened to Sanjay, who would bear the responsibility, he asked.

The secretary passed the letter on to his minister, Mr. J. D. Patnaik, who after a lapse of some time, showed it to Mrs. Gandhi. Mr. Patnaik meanwhile left for Orissa to contest the election for chief ministership. Mrs. Gandhi showed the DGCA's letter to Sanjay and reportedly warned him against taking too many chances. Sanjay must have been annoyed, because the newly-appointed Civil Aviation Minister, Mr. A. P. Sharma, summoned Air Marshal Zaheer and told him he was a misfit in the department and must therefore proceed on leave. The Air Marshal had, only months earlier, been approved for a two-year term, but he quietly acquiesced and handed over charge on June 17. Five days later on June 23, Air Marshal Zaheer's grim foreboding about Sanjay's flying was proved true.

This letter was on record in the DG's office and the ministry feared that the truth would come out in a judicial enquiry. The minister, Mr. Sharma, and the secretary, would also have been questioned about why they did not stop Sanjay from risking his life. Another man whose role in Sanjay's death flight would have been probed was Mr. G. R. Kathpalia, who took temporary charge as DGCA after Air Marshal Zaheer was packed off. Mr. Kathpalia was, in fact, present at Safdarjung Airport every morning that Sanjay flew, and also on June 23. Apart from this there were serious questions about the maintenance standards of the Delhi Flying Club, and the security of aircraft parked there. All this would inevitably have become public knowledge, and many reputations would have suffered.

But ironically, the persons whose conduct would have been called in question were the ones who had to decide what kind of enquiry should be held into the crash. It was not surprising therefore that the court of enquiry already appointed was cancelled and a departmental enquiry ordered in its place.

This has created a funny situation in which the Director of Air Safety, Mr. H. B. Singh, who

works under the DG is supposed to comment on the role of the DG in the whole episode.

What is more intriguing is the Government's action in retaining Mr. Kathpalia for six months as temporary Director General on current duty, and then giving him an ad hoc appointment for another six months. This has led several people to ask whether there was a scheme behind the refusal to fill the DG's post for a whole year. Mr. Kathpalia took over on June 17 when Air Marshal Zaheer retired. Surely there was enough time to assess his work and appoint him full time DG if the Government wanted. In any case, he is the seniormost Deputy Director General. But no. The Government has kept him in an officiating and ad hoc capacity, for as long as the report is not handed in.

Has this been done to ensure that the report makes no adverse comments on Sanjay Gandhi? If this is so, then the earlier misgivings about having a departmental enquiry were well-founded. The report has first to be submitted to him, he can alter parts of it and change the findings of the enquiry officer. This is probably why he has been kept on the tenderhooks of an ad hoc status, which incidentally is likely to end some time in June.

Such are the circumstances under which the enquiry has been conducted. The plane wreckage was taken to the technical centre across the road from Safdarjung Airport and reconstructed. With no similar aircraft available in India for demonstration flights, Mr. H. B. Singh travelled to Afton, Wisconsin, U.S.A. where Pitts planes are manufactured. There, a Pitts S2A of the type used by Sanjay was test-flown and made to duplicate some aerobatic manoeuvres Sanjay was seen performing. The test pilot took the plane through a series of loops ending in a stall turn, and then put the plane into a spin. The aim of this was to establish the height the plane would have needed to recover from a spin. According to some sources, this was the sequence of the flight: Sanjay had done some wing-overs and loops, then pulled up to attempt a stall turn. The plane flipped over onto its right and went into a spin, finally crashing into the ground near Willingdon Crescent. Most of the manoeuvres were performed over Sardar Patel Marg.

The plane's Lycoming engine was also stripped and vital parts flown to the U.S. where they were inspected by the engine manufacturers and the National Transportation Safety Board. The verdict was that the damage to the engine was post-impact which means the engine was working satisfactorily at the time the plane hit the ground. On the basis of all this data, the enquiry officials informed the Prime Minister's household of their preliminary finding that sabotage could be ruled out.

But in November, a Congress (U) MP stunned the Lok Sabha with the allegation that a BJP member, Mr. Rudra Pratap Sarangi, had written to his party president, Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee, alleging that Nanaji Deshmukh and the RSS had, with the help of an "Indian Airlines mechanic," tampered with the plane and sabotaged it.

Mr. Vajpayee immediately denied the charge and demanded an inquiry by a Supreme Court Judge. He said he had received no such letter. Mr. Yadav, however, handed over a photostat of the letter to the Speaker and it was passed on to the authorities.

This provided enough excuse for the Government to direct the Director of Air Safety to probe once again the sabotage angle. He was on the verge of handing in the enquiry report, when he got a letter in December asking him to get to the root of the sabotage charge, even though he had already ruled out sabotage in his oral report to the Director General, who had passed the information on to Rajiv Gandhi.

So Mr. H. B. Singh started looking afresh into the truth of the Yadav charge. He interviewed Mr. Yadav, Mr. Sarangi, Mr. Vajpayee and Mr. Deshmukh. Mr. Sarangi denied writing the letter but admitted that the signature was his. This he explained by saying that he often signed bits of paper for the benefit of those who wanted to make representations with his endorsement. Someone must have got such a paper signed by him and written the allegation against the RSS on to it. This is proved by the fact that the handwriting of the letter and the signature are different.

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