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State of fleet across services a matter of concern

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The crash of the Kiran Mk II aircraft during the aerobatic display in Hyderabad on Wednesday that killed both pilots is tragic and the board of inquiry when completed will provide a more informed account about the causal factors for this fatal mishap. Pilots the world over whether military or commercial are taking a certain risk every time they take-off and it is to the credit of the global aviation community that they have maintained the safety records that they do.

But accidents occur and the reasons more often than not are a mix of human error and or material failure and in rare cases, plain sabotage.

While the Indian armed forces that include the Air Force, Navy, Army and Coast Guard do have a flight safety record that is satisfactory, the material state of the fleet across the board is cause for deep concern.

Vintage aircraft that have been assigned a place of pride in museums abroad are still flown by the IAF and the IN. The Kiran, the primary trainer for the Navy or MiG 21 for the Air Force are case in point. The basic design and technology for both these aircraft is almost 50 years old and yet they form the mainstay for training of fighter pilots in India. The reasons for this kind of obsolescence that puts lives in jeopardy on a regular basis may be ascribed to the strategic culture of India and the protracted procurement processes that plague Indian military since the days of the first PM, Pandit Nehru.

Specific to the aircraft inventory it merits recall that the IAF mooted the need for an advanced jet trainer as far back as 1983. Indira Gandhi was the PM at the time. It took the Indian elephant a good 20 years before the AJT became a reality in 2003 on AB Vajpayee's watch and that too because of the many crashes that had occurred and lives lost. Even now, the number of AJTs in the inventory is far short of what had been sought and as far as Navy is concerned its original request for an AJT is still to be realized. Hence, the Kiran still remains the work-horse for training for the IN.

The policy issue that is crying for attention is the total inadequacy of the Indian politico-bureaucratic apex to deal with procurement issues in an

objective manner which is politically bi-partisan and driven by the single consideration of enhancing national security. From the needless Bofors scandal to the current submarine and Gorshkov delays and the much anticipated fighter deal major procurement decisions have been marred by delays, steep price revisions and charges of kickbacks and corruption.

The existing state machinery has proven unable to deal with decision making that involves large funds and perhaps there is a case to involve the corporate expertise that is abundantly available in India. But life alas, is cheap and the Indian apex rarely accountable for their transgressions.

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