GEOSTRATA

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# The Falling Shield

By Center for Law and Politics

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**BY CENTER FOR LAW AND POLITICS**

**Sauhardi Uniyal**
**Researcher**
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# Abstract

This crisis is also examined on a political economy footing with a focus on corporate power, regulatory capture, and breakdown of accountability mechanisms.

The June 12, 2025, Air India Flight AI171 tragedy, which crashed on a Boeing 787-8 Dreamliner aircraft in Ahmedabad, has brought more international attention to Boeing's safety culture and corporate accountability. This tragedy cannot be viewed in isolation; rather, it exposes deep-seated systemic weaknesses in Boeing's safety procedures and quality control. A well-documented chronology—starting with whistleblower charges several years ago (in fact, about the 787 Dreamliner itself) and culminating in fatal crashes—now illuminates the abhorrent practice of retaliatory action against whistleblowers and deadly targeting.

This crisis is also examined on a political economy footing with a focus on corporate power, regulatory capture, and breakdown of accountability mechanisms—firmly highlighted by the controversial deferred prosecution agreement that followed the 737 MAX crashes. The report identifies a pressing need: robust, autonomous global regulatory frameworks are required to re-establish trust in aviation safety and protect whistleblowers who expose substantial risks.


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# Introduction

Following the tragedy, there has been growing scrutiny of Boeing's safety procedures, manufacturing processes, and the effectiveness of international aviation regulation.

On June 12, 2025, Air India Flight 171, a Boeing 787-8 Dreamliner headed for London, crashed shortly after taking off from Ahmedabad, killing a total of 241 passengers and crew members on board. Previously praised as a technological marvel and among the safest aircraft to fly, the Dreamliner had experienced its first fatal crash. Following the tragedy, there has been growing scrutiny of Boeing's safety procedures, manufacturing processes, and the effectiveness of international aviation regulation. This article looks at how the Ahmedabad crash reflects deeper, systemic issues at Boeing, including a recurring practice of retaliation against whistleblowers, a lack of regulatory oversight, and political obstacles to establishing true accountability.

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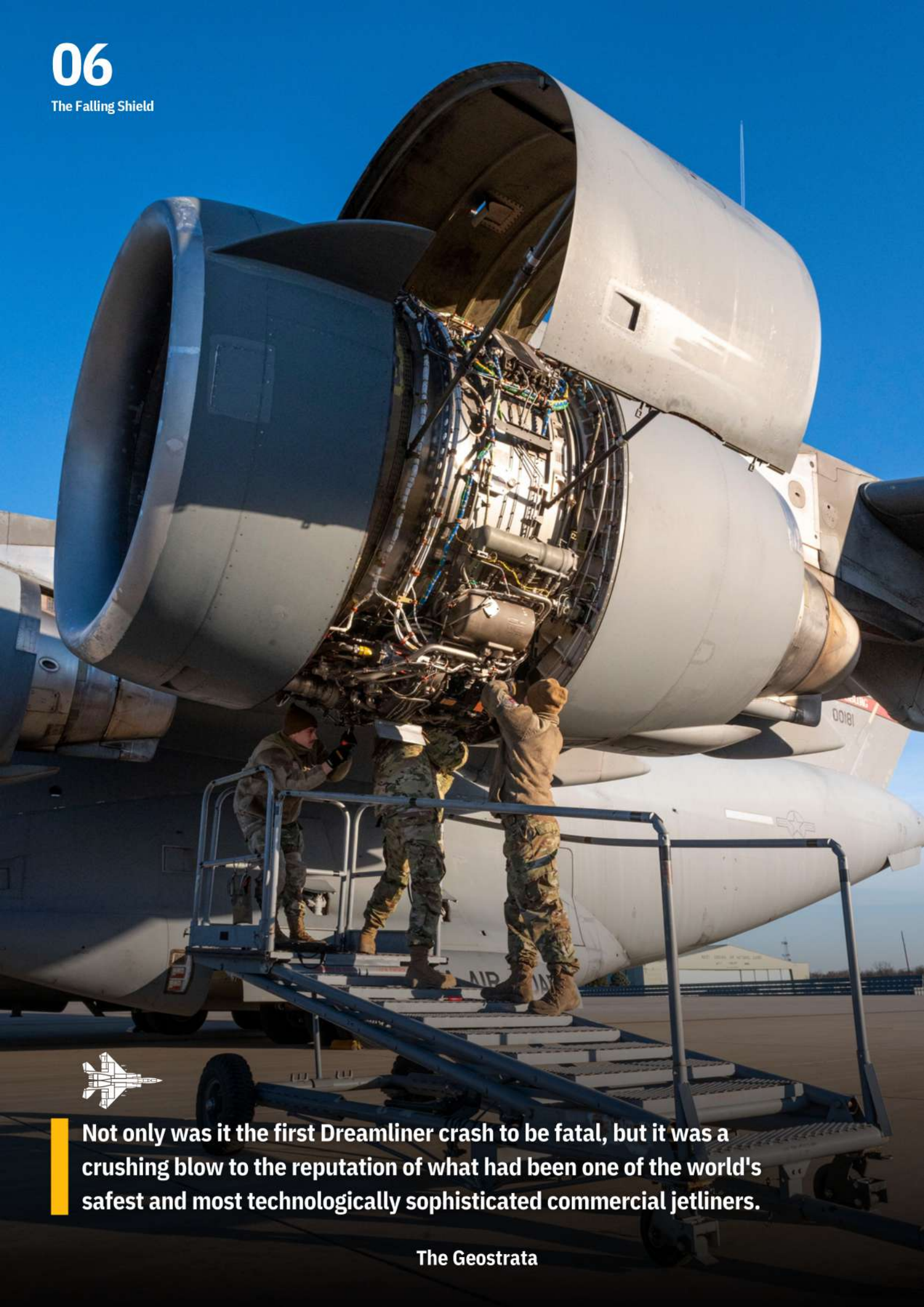
# The Ahmedabad Crash: A Catastrophic Turning Point

Behind this facade of safety, however, the plane series has been rocked by consistent technical and quality control problems, many of which were documented by whistleblowers and industry insiders well before the Ahmedabad tragedy.

On June 12, 2025, Air India Flight 171,[1] piloted by a Boeing 787-8 Dreamliner,[2] plummeted into an Ahmedabad residential neighborhood just seconds after takeoff, killing nearly everyone on board. Not only was it the first Dreamliner crash to be fatal, but it was a crushing blow to the reputation of what had been one of the world's safest and most technologically sophisticated commercial jetliners. The flight recorders were recovered quickly, and investigators were able to begin reconstructing the final seconds of the doomed flight. Although the exact cause of the crash remains under investigation, this tragedy has already prompted a global re-assessment of Boeing's safety procedures and manufacturing practices.

The Dreamliner, introduced in 2011, has boasted a remarkable safety record, flying over one billion passengers without losing even a single life for nearly 15 years. Behind this facade of safety, however, the plane series has been rocked by consistent technical and quality control problems, many of which were documented by whistleblowers and industry insiders well before the Ahmedabad tragedy.



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# The Dreamliner's Turbulent History: From Innovation to Crisis

Boeing's single-minded drive for efficiency and profitability was taking precedence over its commitment to safety.

The Boeing 787 Dreamliner was initially greeted as an amazing technological achievement, with new materials, increased fuel efficiency, and a host of comforts designed with passengers in mind. Its electronic fly-by-wire flight control system, triple-redundant safety features, and composite fuselage were intended to create new standards for safety and dependability. However, the Dreamliner's production was plagued by severe issues, including delays, cost overruns, and a controversial outsourcing strategy that sent production to a multitude of international suppliers.

The initial severe safety crisis occurred in 2013,[3] when two Dreamliners suffered lithium-ion battery fires—one in Boston, one in Japan—prompting a global grounding of the fleet by the US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). Boeing's rushed repairs and the FAA's rushed recertification allowed the aircraft to return to service within weeks, but the event exposed deep flaws in both the company's engineering protocols and the regulatory checks that were supposed to safeguard passengers.

Over the next few years,[4] there was a succession of technical issues: generator failures, concerns about the fuselage's strength, and most critically, a March 2024 accident in which a LATAM Airlines 787-9 took a sudden vertical dive, injuring dozens of passengers. Each accident further undermined the Dreamliner's reputation as unstoppable and raised the question of whether Boeing's single-minded drive for efficiency and profitability was taking precedence over its commitment to safety.

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# Whistleblowers Raise Alarms: A Persistent Pattern of Repression

Whistleblowers such as former quality manager John Barnett documented unsafe shortcuts in the South Carolina plant, such as leaving metal shavings close to critical wire and defective oxygen masks that might fail in an emergency.

Even before the Ahmedabad crash, Boeing workers had been complaining that production standards and quality of the 787 were subpar. Whistleblowers such as former quality manager John Barnett [5] documented unsafe shortcuts in the South Carolina plant, such as leaving metal shavings close to critical wire and defective oxygen masks that might fail in an emergency. In April 2024, engineer Sam Salehpour [6] documented that portions of the 787's fuselage were not properly secured, risking catastrophic structural failure after multiple flights.

Instead of addressing these issues in an appropriate manner, the management at Boeing tended to respond in denial, discipline, or silencing the whistleblowers. Barnett, for example, said that he was harassed and shunned for not certifying incomplete inspections. Salehpour was said to be admonished after he complained to the FAA. In the past few years, a number of Boeing whistleblowers have died in suspicious circumstances[7], and rumors and outrage have been sparked among safety groups and the public.

These whistleblowers' deaths have become a dark sign of the risk to those who speak out against dominant corporate interests. The repeated patterns of retaliation [8] and censorship have not only dampened morale within Boeing but also eroded trust in the company's commitment to putting passenger safety ahead of profit.

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# Quality Deficiencies and Regulatory Failures: An International Problem

The revelation exposed Boeing's weaknesses in its international supply chain and challenges in enforcing similar standards in numerous countries and a variety of suppliers.

The issues surrounding the Dreamliner do not only confine themselves to the United States. Italy's regulators, at the start of 2025, discovered that there was a corrupt operation involving more than 4,800 parts that were sent to Boeing with forged quality certifications from an Italian subcontractor. The revelation exposed Boeing's weaknesses in its international supply chain and challenges in enforcing similar standards in numerous countries and a variety of suppliers.

In India, the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA)[9] too had intensified surveillance of Air India's 787 fleet prior to the incident, but detected no significant safety issues at that time. However, the fast growth of India's aviation industry and the high dependence on foreign airplanes such as the Dreamliner made the country question whether local regulation was sufficient and whether the regulators could cope with increasing technology complexity and industry lobbying.

The US FAA, for its part, has been repeatedly accused of being too close to Boeing and relying on company workers to conduct important safety checks—a procedure called "delegated authority". The regulatory capture[10] has been attributed by many as a key factor in both the 737 MAX crashes and the current quality issues on the 787 and other Boeing planes.


**The US FAA, for its part, has been repeatedly accused of being too close to Boeing & relying on company workers to conduct important safety checks — a procedure called 'delegated authority'.**

# The Political Landscape: Senate Hearings and Public Backlash

In the hearings, the CEO of Boeing faced widespread denunciation from both Democrats and Republicans who accused Boeing of prioritising profits over safety.

The crash in Ahmedabad and other frightening incidents involving Boeing have reached the highest level of politics. In the US, the Senate[11] has conducted a series of very public hearings investigating Boeing's safety culture and the failures of the FAA. There have been gut-wrenching testaments from whistleblowers, families of victims from the crash, and aviation experts creating a picture of a company in crisis and a regulatory process dysfunctional in maintaining the safety of the public.

In the hearings, the CEO of Boeing faced widespread denunciation from both Democrats and Republicans who accused Boeing of prioritizing profits over safety and who implicated the FAA in failing to learn from past mistakes. Lawmakers were deeply skeptical about repeated calls for reform from the CEO especially given subsequent reports of continued production shortcuts and suppression of internal disagreement.

The political implications are immense. Boeing is not just an employer and exporter, it is also a player in national defense, and so the attempts to hold Boeing accountable[12] must reflect a sometimes tenuous balance between public accountability and political risk of escalating national economic circumstances, national security realities, and the loss of market share into the hands of foreign competitors like Airbus.

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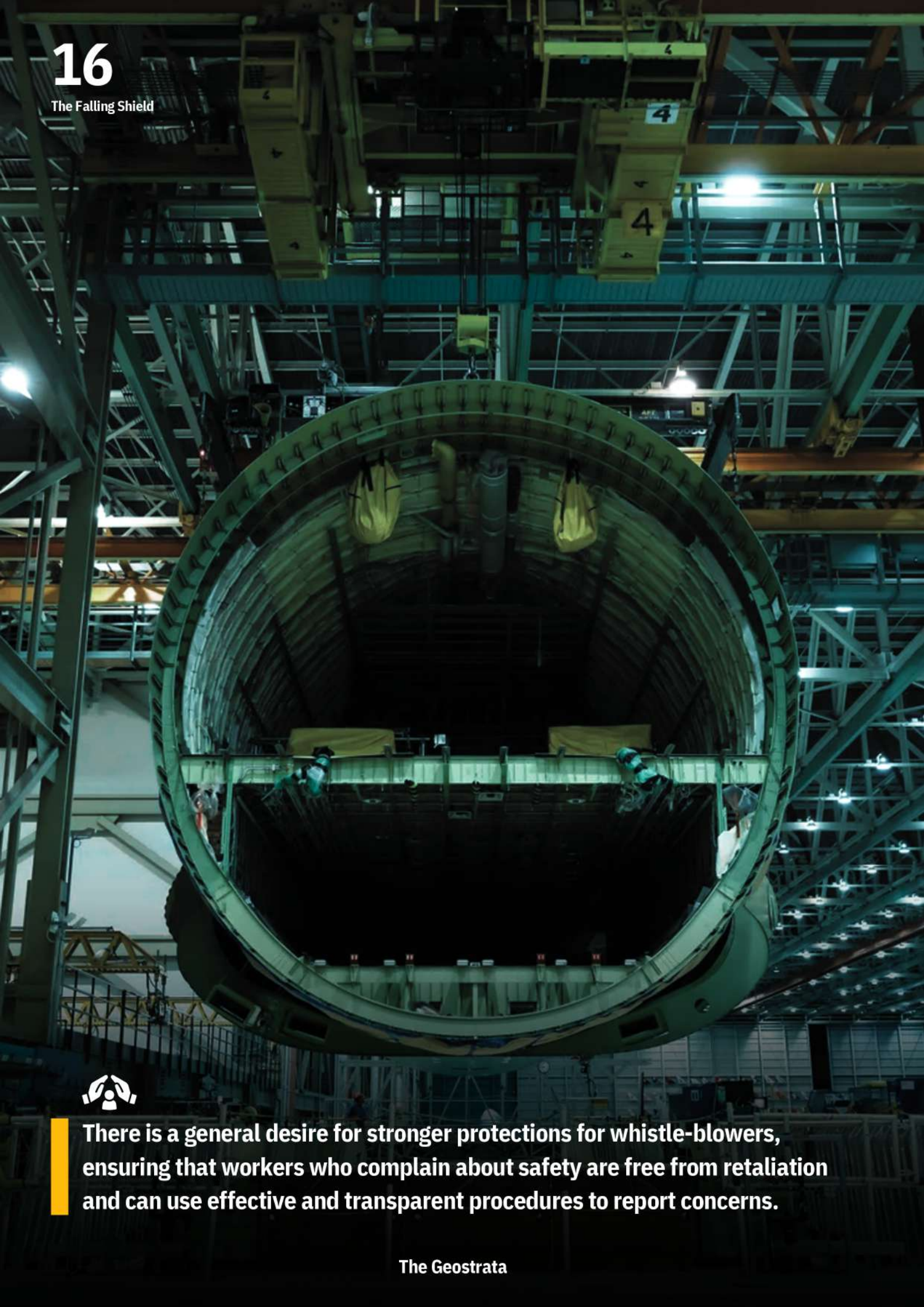
# The Global Impact: Erosion of Trust and Calls for Reform

This decline of trust has reignited urgent calls to action in a number of key areas.

The impact of the Ahmedabad crash has sent shivers through the global aviation community, resulting in an immediate deterioration of confidence in Boeing[13] and the aviation regulatory environment amongst airlines, regulators, and travelers. This decline of trust has reignited urgent calls to action in a number of key areas. First, there is a general desire for stronger protections for whistleblowers, ensuring that workers who complain about safety are free from retaliation and can use effective and transparent procedures to report concerns. Second, there is increasing consensus that organizations like the FAA and DGCA should have greater independence, a lower reliance on delegated authority, and more resources to enforce stringent controls. This makes the need for truly independent regulatory oversight evident.

Additionally, the crisis has brought attention to the need for openness and examined at all points in the supply chain globally; as recent events have demonstrated, failings or frauds that occurred in one aspect of the chain, may have devastating impacts for others; thus, increased auditing and regulation of suppliers are seen as paramount to securing integrity, as well as safety of the critical aircraft parts. The demands for effective corporate accountability[14] have also intensified, with calls for substantial financial penalties and at the more serious end, calls for criminal prosecutions to ensure that Boeing and its leaders face the consequences of failures of safety. The Ahmedabad disaster has plainly demonstrated that the world of aviation is merely interconnected; failures in one country or firm may result in loss of life far removed from their administrator, suggesting clearly that only a global collaborative effort, with similar, real standards that are enforced, will allow the world to avoid such disaster in the future.



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# The Economics and Ethics of Whistleblower Suppression

The suppression of whistleblowers at Boeing is not simply a human resources issue; it is an indication of structural flaws in the political economy of contemporary corporations.

The suppression of whistleblowers[15] at Boeing is not simply a human resources issue; it is an indication of structural flaws in the political economy of contemporary corporations. As earlier noted by several scholars, there have long been indications of a principal-agent dichotomy[16] in large organizations which has resulted in a misalignment between the interests of the executives and shareholders, juxtaposed with the interests of the employees, customers, and the public. When profit and production targets take precedence over safety, the prospect of taking shortcuts and silencing dissent becomes quite compelling.

While whistleblowers serve as the last line of defense against catastrophic failure, the personal and professional risks to whistleblowers can be substantial as well. The deaths of Boeing whistleblowers[17] have cast a cloud over the entire industry, leading to painful questions regarding the sufficiency of legal protections and whether regulators will intervene for someone who speaks out.

The patchwork political response[18] to whistleblower suppression has been sporadic. Some legislators will advocate for additional protection, or greater oversight when necessary, while others delay and defer to a company like Boeing, which is both politically connected and insulated. Many decisions concerning the laws and rules applicable to whistleblowers end up being disjointed, and too often, individual whistleblowers are the most isolated and least protected party involved in the process.


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# The Senate Committee Hearings: A Moment of Reckoning

The Boeing CEO has been visibly antagonized by multiple pieces of evidence demonstrating systemic failures, warnings that were ignored and catastrophic consequences.

The recent US Senate committee hearings on Boeing's safety[19] culture have become a public lightning rod for anger and calls for change. The Boeing CEO has been visibly antagonized by multiple pieces of evidence demonstrating systemic failures, warnings that were ignored and catastrophic consequences. Lawmakers are obviously determined to analyze why whistleblowers were disregarded or retaliated against, why serious safety issues remained unaddressed, and what corrective actions the company is developing to prevent such catastrophes from happening again.

The hearings also revealed gaps in today's regulatory frameworks. Senators have expressed concern about the FAA depending on Boeing employees to certify the safety of their products. They have called for more transparency and independence in how the FAA certifies products. The whistleblowers' and experts' testimony has emphasized that it is time for structural reform not only at Boeing, but across the aviation landscape.

As noted earlier, and even with the promise of change, it is unlikely that what comes from the hearings will help to mitigate many people's skepticism. Boeing has a long history of influencing politics[20] and pushing its narrative even amid bad planes but which have kept people's jobs—and it's doable in an industry with huge stakes in jobs, passenger safety, and national security. That said, the aftermath of the Ahmedabad crash shows promise. Many advocates of trust, safety, and accountability will seize on the outcry of the public to move forward with more robust oversight carried out by agencies that will not meekly accept the status quo and unworthy influence, especially in light of the consistent ineffectiveness of the Boeing entity and its followers, which surfaced through the hearings.


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# The International Accountability Crisis: Implications from Ahmedabad

Boeing's failure or unwillingness to confront systemic approaches to quality control risks lives all over the world.

The demise of Air India Flight 171[21] demonstrates to us that the ramifications of corporate misadventure are not limited to geography. Boeing's failure or unwillingness to confront systemic approaches[22] to quality control risks lives all over the world. The tragic events in Ahmedabad are a continuation of several subsequent mishaps preceding a number of silent tragedies that have illustrated the tenuousness of the global aviation safety net.

The government, regulators, and industry leaders will need to grapple with what the crash represents for aviation in the coming years to improve safety. If we ignore the lessons from Ahmedabad, the chances of other tragedies remains, regrettably, potentially too high. On the other hand, if the crash results in a true reckoning related to the root causes of Boeing's safety issues - such as, whistleblower suppression, regulatory capture, prioritizing profit over people[23] there could be an opportunity toward accountability and reform.

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# Indian Aviation Compensation Framework

The Indian aviation compensation framework is structured according to certain legal contexts from which domestic and international liability standards originate.

The Indian aviation compensation framework is structured according to certain legal contexts from which domestic and international liability standards originate. The Aircraft Act (1934)[24] forms the foundation of Indian aviation law. It allows the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) to enact legislation regarding safety and airworthiness and enforces enforcement tools when passengers attempt to make their compensation claims. The Aircraft Act, now refined over time by other legislative contexts such as the Consumer Protection Act 2019, also provides further legal avenues for victims of aviation accidents to receive compensation from non-aviation related remedies.

The introduction of the Montreal Convention 1999,[25] ratified by India in 2009, fundamentally changed how India regulates aviation compensation by providing standardized liability limits under international law and allowed for the incorporation of these limits into domestic law through the Carriage by Air Act. The Carriage by Air Act exemplifies India's dual method of not only creating compulsory minimum standards environmental standards for compensation but also more avenues for victims to obtain greater amounts for damages in cases of negligence.


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# Civil Aviation Ministry: Compensation Guidelines

These amounts represent the government's minimum compensation scheme, apart from any airline liability pursuant to the international conventions.

In 2019, the Ministry of Civil Aviation introduced comprehensive compensation guidelines[26] that lay out fixed compensation for aviation accidents that are conducted under the provision of public services. The guidelines specify compensation as follows:

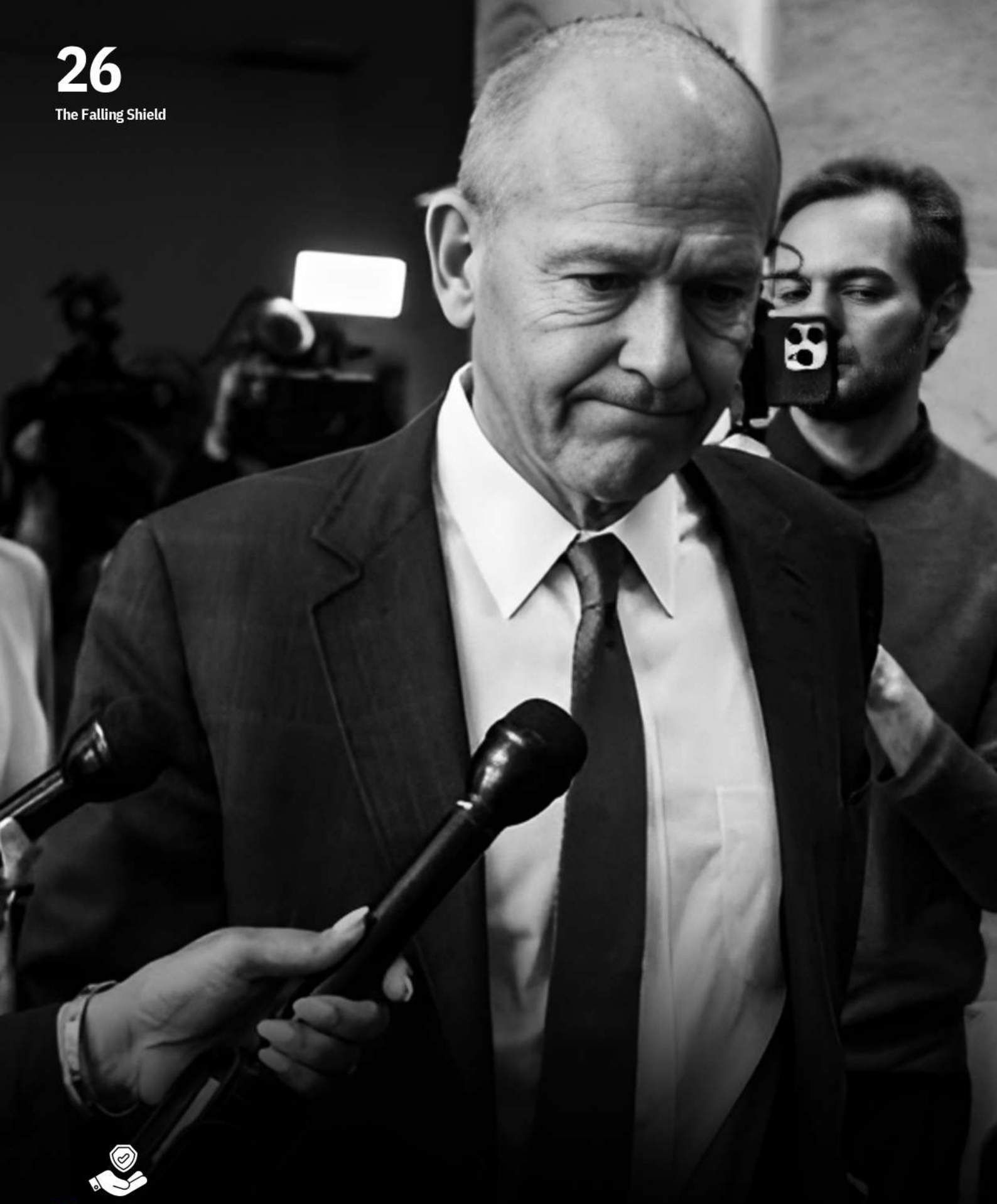
Death or permanent disability due to loss of both limbs: ₹10,00,000 (₹10 lakh)

- Other permanent disability: ₹7,00,000 (₹7 lakh)

These amounts represent the government's minimum compensation scheme, apart from any airline liability pursuant to the international conventions. The guidelines also provide for a simple process whereby victims or dependents must file a claim within 90 days of the incident, and officers appointed by the government are required to deal with claims within 30 days. Moreover while only 25% of any compensation shall be paid immediately to a victim or dependent, 75% is required to deposit as fixed deposits for one year.

## International Compensation Standards

Under the Montreal Convention regime,[27] foreign airlines flying international services have liability up to 151,880 Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) per passenger, or around ₹1.82-1.85 crore at prevailing rates of exchange. This is assured compensation irrespective of fault, with unlimited liability possible in case of negligence. The compensation structure works under a two-tier system under which carriers are bound to pay the first tier of damages under strict liability and unlimited liability beyond that level if fault were to be proved.



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The recent revisions to the Montreal Convention caps, to be in force from December 2024, raised the cap from 128,821 SDRs to 151,880 SDRs, keeping in step with the International Civil Aviation Organization's practice of compensation levels in sync with inflation. The hike works out to around ₹20 lakh extra compensation per passenger relative to earlier limits.

## Insurance Framework and Legal Battlegrounds

India's aviation insurance regime[28] acts as "lifeline and battleground" for compensation claims. Legal professional Sonam Chandwani points out that although airlines depend on sophisticated policies such as hull insurance, passenger liability, and third-party protection, "when a crash occurs, insurers play hardball, stalling payouts to limit exposure". This sets up a difficult situation where families have to fight both airline compensation requirements and insurer intransigence.

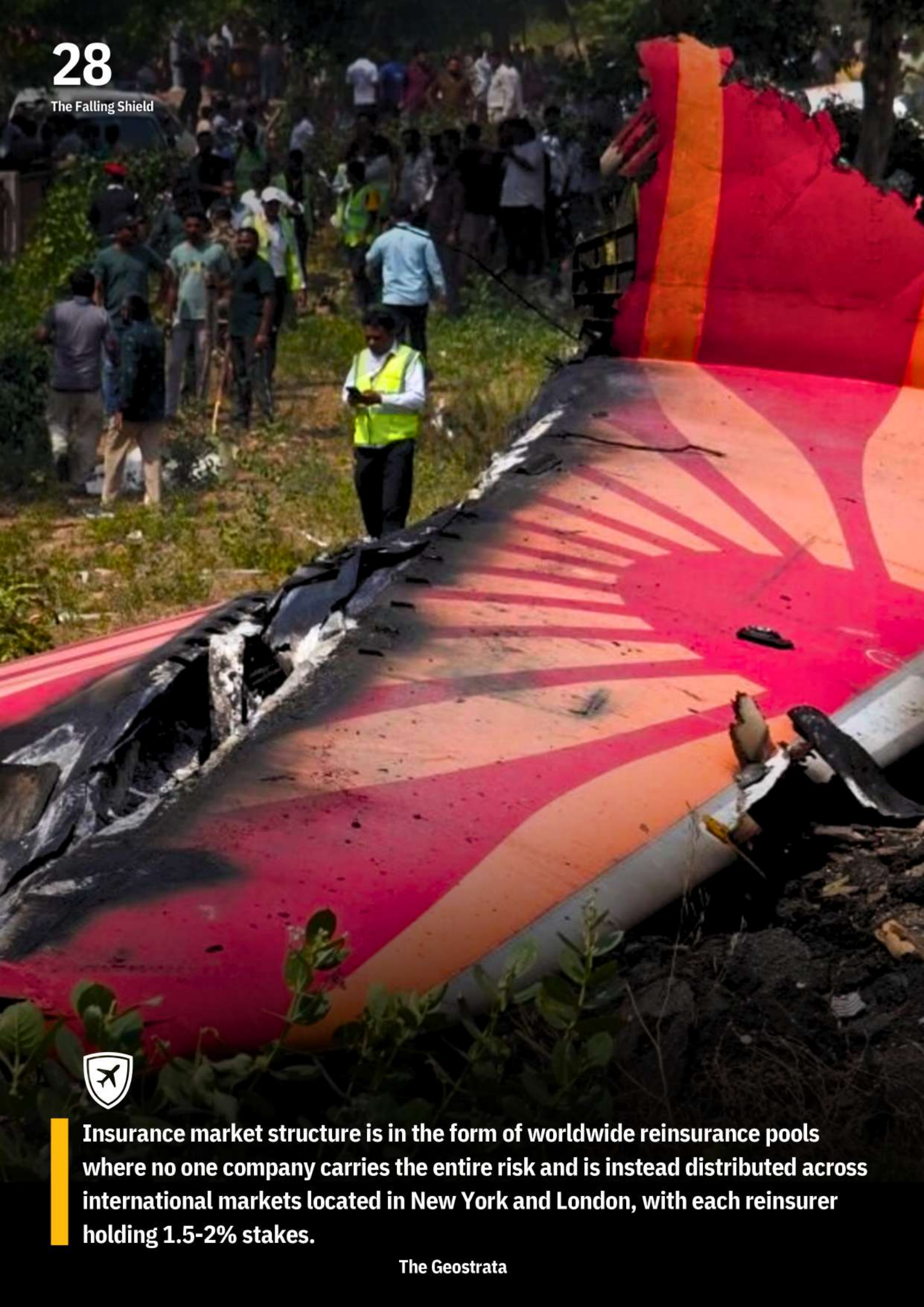
Aviation insurance in India generally includes three key elements:

1.Physical aircraft damage through hull insurance

2.Legal liability to the passengers for injury or death on the aircraft

3.Third-party liability for damage on the ground and casualties

Insurance market structure is in the form of worldwide reinsurance pools where no one company carries the entire risk and is instead distributed across international markets located in New York and London, with each reinsurer holding 1.5-2% stakes. This system of distribution, though it disperses the risk, can make it difficult for claims to be processed and delays compensation payouts.



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# Legal Remedies and Compensation Pathways

Civil cases take 2–5 years or more to be settled in India, and airlines normally use delays as a tool for pressurizing families into settling for lesser compensation.

Indian law provides various methods through which aviation companies can recover compensation for victims of accidents:

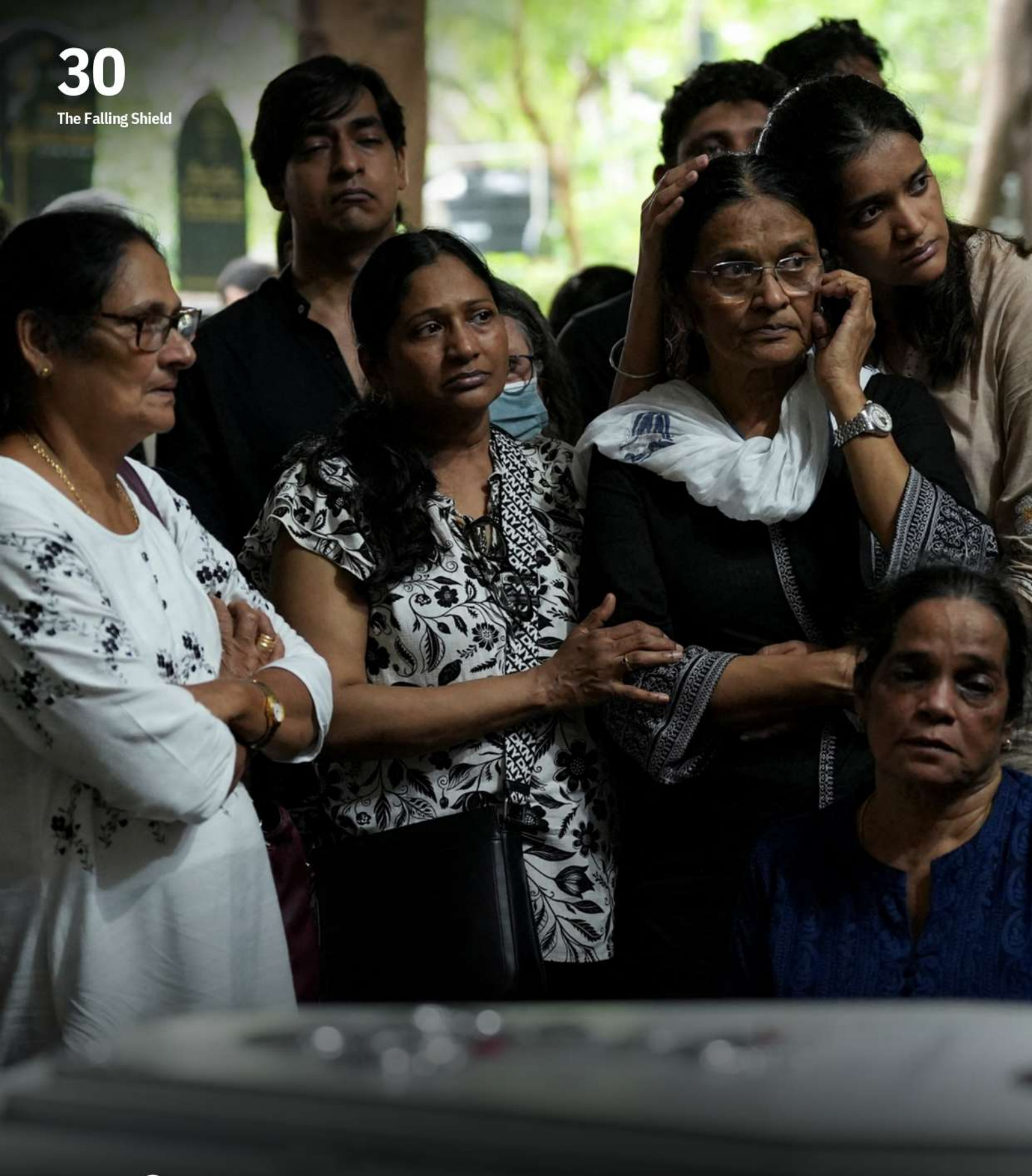
1. Montreal Convention Claims: In the event of international flights, providing guaranteed compensation of up to ₹1.85 crore per person regardless of fault.

2. Consumer Protection Act Claims: Allowing families to seek service deficiency and sue for damages in consumer courts.

3. Tort Claims: Under airline common law for fault-based compensation.

4. Contractual Claims: Under terms and conditions of the airline as well as under insurance policies for travel.

Legal experts note that while Montreal Convention provides guarantied instant compensation, family members claiming damages above SDR rates have to wait for months through lengthy legal cases. Civil cases take 2-5 years or more to be settled in India, and airlines normally use delays as a tool for pressurizing families into settling for lesser compensation.



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# Compensation Challenges and Reform Needs

The disparity creates a two-tiered judicial system in which compensation varies substantially depending upon flight category and not on the actual harm suffered.

The current system of compensation[29] is beset by several critical issues. According to legal analysis, compensation requirements are insufficient in domestic flights relative to requirements for foreign routes, leaving the victims dependent upon airline generosity or protracted legal proceedings. The disparity creates a two-tiered judicial system in which compensation varies substantially depending upon flight category and not on the actual harm suffered.

The complexity of the insurance system, and overseas reinsurance agreements, often means postponed payments which take years following the initial incident. Aviation insurance premiums have increased significantly following catastrophic crashes, putting pressure on airlines to reduce safety expenses - a "vicious cycle" that increases risk factors.

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# Conclusion

Our ability to deal with these hard truths will ultimately define our ability to trust the aviation industry into the future.

The tragedy of the Ahmedabad crash has shattered the premise that technological innovations can supersede risk in aviation. The strong safety record of the Dreamliner was built not on advanced engineering, but based on the premise that manufacturers, regulators, and airlines would always prioritize the safety of passengers over all else. Trust in Boeing has been tremendously eroded by repeated failures to act on warnings, protect whistle-blowers, and maintain adequate standards of quality and transparency.

The Indian compensation system in aviation is a multifaceted intertwining of national law, international treaties, and insurance business practices. While the Montreal Convention does set minimum baseline protection for international tourists, gaps still exist in protecting indigenous travelers and ensuring prompt payment of compensation. The Boeing whistleblower lawsuits illustrate the need for increased safety regulation and safeguards to avoid manufacturing faults and company negligence that can result in catastrophic failure.

Boeing and the aviation industry will need more than simple apologies or adjusted policies or proposals to ever regain confidence. They will require a transcendental shift in the corporate culture, a divorce from the power of regulators and law-makers, and a long-term commitment towards action. Whistle-blowers must be protected not bullied; regulators must be removed from the influence of industry; and companies must be held accountable for public safety underground with or without significant economic or political power.

The world is watching. The lives lost in Ahmedabad, along with those lost in previous Boeing disasters, require a reckoning of our beliefs related to the failures and tragedies that have occurred. Our ability to deal with these hard truths will ultimately define our ability to trust the aviation industry into the future.

# Report Team
# *At Strata*

## Authors of Strata

### Authored by Sauhardi Uniyal

**Sauhardi Uniyal,** a second-year History & Political Science student at the University of Delhi, hails from Dehradun, Uttarakhand. Passionate about international relations, governance and public Policy, she is skilled in research, writing and policy analysis. She is an intern with the Politics and Law Centre at Geostrata.

## Designers of Strata

### Designed by Deepika Rani Gupta, Mahek Latwal, Poshika Mukku, and Tanu Nagar for The Geostrata.

**Deepika Rani Gupta,** A final year student at Gargi College, University of Delhi. Pursuing her graduation in Political Science. Her interests lie in Public Policy & International Relations. She employs her skills as a Designer at the Geostrata.

**Mehak Latwal,** an Economics undergraduate student at the University of Delhi having keen interest in economy, public policy, and international relations. She employs her skills as a researcher and graphic designer at the Geostrata.

**Poshika Mukku,** a FYJC Commerce student, is passionate about Political Science and International Affairs. She applies her skills as a Graphics Designer and Junior Researcher at The Geostrata.

**Tanu Nagar,** an ambitious and keen individual with a deep interest in Geopolitics, International Relations, and Diplomacy. She effectively utilises her skills as a Junior Researcher and Graphic Designer at The Geostrata.

# Endnotes


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