

DOUBLE ISSUE

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THEWEEK

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HORROR IN THE SKY

Air India's image has taken a hit with the Ahmedabad crash, but thorough investigation, transparency and a human touch could help

BY NACHIKET KELKAR



PHOTOS AMEY MANSABDAR

FLIGHT OF DEATH
Lalitaben, who lost her two-year-old daughter and mother-in-law in the crash, at the Civil Hospital in Ahmedabad; (right) wreckage of the flight



Kinjal Mistry from Anand in Gujarat was looking forward to returning to the UK, where she was on a work permit. Last year, the 24-year-old had an accident while on pilgrimage in India. Having completed the long treatment, she had booked a ticket on Air India's flight AI 171 bound for London's Gatwick Airport from Ahmedabad on June 12. The family had come to see her off, on what should have been a routine flight. Little did they know this would be the last time they saw her.

On the ground, Akash Patani, 14, was sleeping under a tree close to his family's tea stall near BJ Medical College Hostel. His mother, Sitaben, was working at the stall. The Air

India flight took off with 242 people, but within minutes it crashed into the buildings of the hostel. The fully loaded fuel tank exploded and the entire area was up in flames. Akash had no chance. Sitaben, who tried to save him, got burnt and was taken to hospital.

According to doctors, 270 bodies were brought to the Civil Hospital. "They were charred beyond recognition," said a resident doctor. "There was nothing we could do to save them."

The dead included students from the medical college, many of whom were having lunch in the hostel mess. Authorities could not provide an exact number, but the estimate of those who died on the ground is around 30.

The aircraft was a 12-year-old Boeing 787 Dreamliner. These have been in service since 2011 and more than 1,100 are in use worldwide. This was the first time this type of aircraft had crashed.

Reports said that by June 18, through DNA matching, 190 victims were identified and mortal remains of 159 had been handed over. The dead included former Gujarat chief minister Vijay Rupani.

Various theories have been put forth for the crash. Videos showed the flight taking off and climbing. However, having reached about 625 feet, it descended and crashed. Take-off pilots had made a distressed mayday call to air traffic control, but there was no reply when the ATC