Air India Collector

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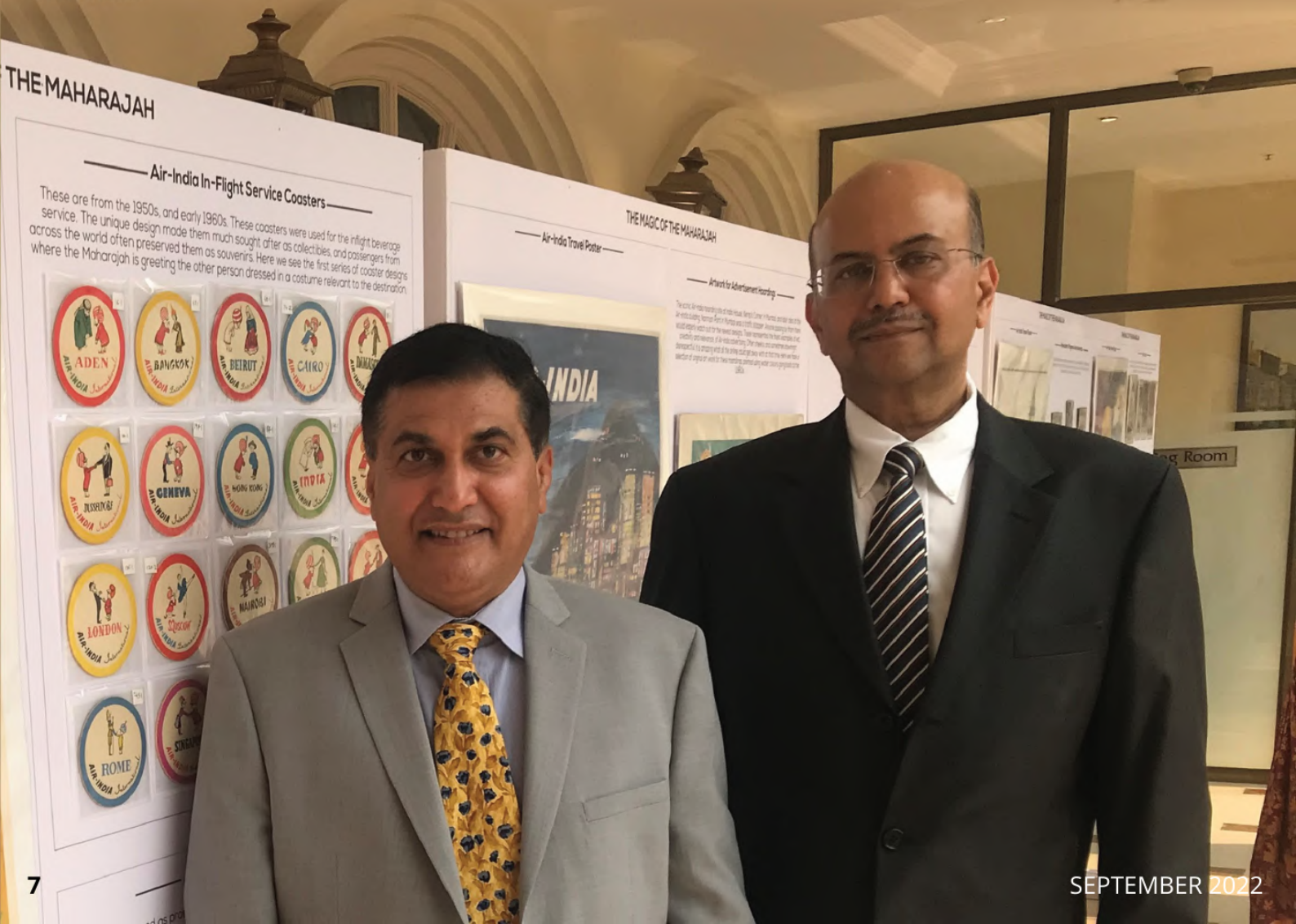
About Me

I have been a philatelist for some years and felt drawn to the very attractive first flight covers produced by Air India during the 1960s and 70s. This got me interested in their unique style of depicting the Mahraja, their mascot. They featured him in their advertising and souveniers in a very humorous and striking manner. My curiosity grew, one thing led to the other, and the seeds were sown in my interest of collecting Air India memorabilia. This was about 15 years ago.

I got to know more and more about the airline and this wonderful Maharajah and all the imagery they created around him; the way they to care of their passengers and provided a memorable travel experience. This aroused great fascination and curiosity in my mind. As I went deeper and deeper, I was awestruck with the personalities behind this creative journey, people like Bobby Kooka their marketing director, Jal Cowasji their creative director, artists like you Umesh Rao of J. Walter Thompson, their agency and so many artists who worked for the Air India art studio. The way they moulded the personality of the Mahrajah into someone who had incredible chutzpah and could get away with the most outrageous antics always with a touch of unapologetic humour. I can very confidently say there is no enterprise anywhere in the world which has ever managed to create a mascot like this. This is the stuff legends are made of.

The Team

The hobby has always been a personal effort and I was helped greatly by my friend Vivek Mathai who also had similar interests so we worked together in building this collection. As the collection grew I felt the need for a full-time assistant to research, curate and catalogue the collection. I also started a website so that my collection can be seen by anyone with similar interests. That's when Dharmdev Maurya also joined my team. Since then we have added one more assistant and Maurya is now the Webmaster and keeper of the collection.



Collection Process

Getting hold of these items is an adventure, like a treasure hunt. Some items are very easily available and others are almost impossible to find. Generally I scout around with a variety of sources, starting with the raddi-paper walla (waste paper sellers), particularly in Mumbai whom I have got to know quite well over the years. They have an amazing network buying discarded papers and household goods from peoples homes, and now reach out to me whenever they get something related to Air India. On the other end of the spectrum are antique dealers and large global auction houses like Sotheby's and Bonhams where from time to time rather interesting memorabilia is offered on sale.

Then again there are former Air India employees and passengers who have flown the airline who are in possession of some airline memorabilia. They reach out to me and once they know of my interest and either gift or sell me items for my collection.

Personal Favourite

It's difficult to list any one collectable as favourite, however, I talk about one of my favourite pieces in the collection. This is an Automaton (mechanical creation) which I bought from an antique dealer in France. This is a replica of the Maharaja statue probably manufactured in the 1950s. We have the Air India Maharaja dressed in his traditional livery of the red sherwani and turban and there is a electrical motor concealed inside the framework which actually causes him to bow his head down and move his hands as a welcoming gesture, perfect for a window display in one of their ticketing offices. I have never seen anything like this and wonder whether this was originally manufactured for Air India or made by someone just as a memento. Nevertheless, it is absolutely charming and perhaps a unique addition to my collection.

Most Prized Possession

I have this 35mm film called 'To Serve is to Love'. This was produced for Air India in 1974 and directed by Zafar Hai. At that time Muzaffar Ali (of Umrao Jaan fame) worked for Air India and was the consultant to the film. This film also went on to win the National Award that year for the best film in its category. It was meant to be a promotional film for the airline to be shown at various travel & trade shows and other promotional events. The music was composed by Pandit Ram Narayan and performed by himself, his son Pt. Brij Narayan, Ut. Zakir Hussain and Pt. Hariprasad Chaurasia. There is no dialogue in the film, it has fantastic instrumental music in the background. The film features actual Air India flight attendants and captures the luxury and magic on board their newly acquired Boeing 747 Jumbo Jet. The film shows the beautiful interiors of the aircraft and the way passengers were pampered by the airline and the excitement of travel to different play parts of the world aboard the Air India Palace in the Sky.

Many copies of this film were produced for promotion, but seem to have disappeared over time and apparently what I have is now the only surviving copy of this film. How I chanced upon it itself is a very interesting story. It seems that the film was processed by a lab in Pittsburgh, USA. This lab caught fire and there was an auction sale off material salvaged from that debris. One of the items was a rusted and worn out can containing a film reel. Browsing through auction listings, I chanced upon the label and it had something to do with Air India so I bought it completely blind and unseen. I had no idea what the contents were or what condition they would be. To my utter delight, the real inside and the celluloid was in pristine condition with the colour and sound fresh and intact. This 17 minute film is a delight to watch and I have seen it many times and invited with family and friends to viewings.

That First Item

I had started with collecting Air India flight covers and very quickly got attracted to their beer coasters. These are printed cardboard discs on which they would place beer glasses another beverages during inflight service. It is absolutely amazing how the airline converted such a simple object into a piece of art, entertainment and memorabilia. They depicted the Air India Maharaja on each of these coasters dressed in different costumes performing different activities, all with a touch of unique humour and design. These were largely conceived and designed by their in-house art studio, which in my opinion is unparalled in quality of art, design and imagination. Air India also produced a set of coasters with cartoon characters by RK Laxman in his own unique style. I have now over 600 such coasters in my collection. If one studies carefully, they depict the history and evolution off the airline itself, the routes they flew the destinations they served and of course the creative genius that blossomed within their art studio.

Most Recent Addition

I recently added a whole bunch of notes and documents from the estate of John Stroud. He was a recognised aviation journalist and author based in London, and was the publicity manager for Air-India International from inception in 1948 for many years, and has taken great pains in documenting the early history of the airline. Getting these documents in origiinal was a coup and they are a treasure trove of information. he has recorded every single aircraft in the fleet including details from when it joined service until when it was retired and very useful data on the performance of the airline and the evolution of the routes and other important events in the airline's history for the first 10-15 years. I have digitised all of these and now made them available on my website (www.airindiacollector.com) for anyone who is interested to view. I was also able to get most of the airline calendars and house magazine published by Air India in the 60's to the 80's which I consider the golden era of Air India. The Air-India calendar were a much sought after item and anyone who knew anyone connected with the airline would move heaven and earth to get hold of one. These reveal a very interesting aspect off our history, the Air-India Art Collection, and the unique way Air-India served as the cultural ambassador of our country.

Maintenance

Taking care of these items is quite difficult. The typical Indian environment is extremely hostile to preservation of these artefacts. This is because of the high heat and humidity. Often these have been stored for the last 40-50 years in poor condition which means a lot of them have fungus and bacteria, they also are quite badly kept so they are torn, chipped off, creased and discoloured. So the first thing that I need to do is to have them professionally cleaned and restored. They are then individually packed in acid free pouches or boxes to prevent further deterioration and stored in cool dark and dry environment, ideally at a temperature of 20-25C and humidity of 50-60%. This process is time consuming and expensive. Because of their large size, the travel posters are typically worse for wear by the time I get there and they are also the most interesting. I have all of these professionally restored and mounted on archival grade linen using acid free gum at a studio in Chicago. It would be fair to say that these artefacts need considerable effort and investment in restoration, preservation and display.

Exhibits

My effort is entirely on an amateur basis so I do not trade in these items. I do loan out some materials for exhibitions from time to time. There was one in Mumbai about two years ago and a function by the airline in November last year. There is another exhibition in New York starting this September for six months which will be featuring some of rarities from my collection.

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My interest in collecting Air India memorabilia has brought great joy and satisfaction to me. I have always enjoyed discovering new an unknown things, and the achievements of this airline are something that we as a nation should be proud of. This airline has achieved heights and global recognition as no other airline or corporation in the world has ever. I felt that it is my duty to document and spread awareness of this, and hence decided to create a website (www.airindiacollector.com) . On this website I have showcased my collection of over 6,000 unique artefacts from the airline which is perhaps the largest such collection in the world. I have also listed a lot of reference books and other information sources for anyone interested.. This the website is updated at least once a week and through this I get emails from various people all over the world with similar interests. They could be former employees, collectors, researchers or just ordinary passengers who have flown the airline and want to share their memories and experiences. This has made me feel part of a global community of Air India fans and is a source of great satisfaction and pleasure.

YOUR PALACE IN THE SKY

The Beginning of Air India

The early history of Air India is very interesting and often mis-reported in our country. What very few people know or understand is that Air-India international was formed as the most successful example of public-private partnership in 1948. Owned only 25% by Tatas and 49% by the Government of India, it was never really a Tata enterprise. Later on in 1953 the airline was nationalised and it became 100% owned by the Government of India. The most glorious era of the airline was from the 1960s all the way to the early 1980s when Air India was recognised as the finest airline in the world. This was under the chairmanship of Mr J.R.D. Tata who continued to serve the airline without salary and without ownership, but also full credit to the Government of India to allow a public sector enterprise to be managed with such a free hand and to support the airline to grow to such heights of glory. The common perception that Air-India International belonged to Tata and the Government of India took it away is simply not true.

In the 50's and 60's Air India was a very small airline with just a handful of aircraft and limited budgets. They had to compete with global giants lake Pan-Am, KLM, Air France and BOAC. Air-India realised that they can never be the biggest airline in the world and so decided to simply be the best. Air India built its entire brand around the Mahraja who was their mascot and who promised passengers an unforgettable flying experience. They welcomed passengers aboard their Magic Carpet and into their Palace in the Sky. Each passenger was indeed treated like a maharajah, offered the best possible luxury, the best inflight service and the finest of food and wine. There was simply no other airline in the world that could come close to Air India in terms of their inflight experience, the modern fleet and their well trained, charming and caring crew.

The Myth about Tata Airlines and Air India

Strictly speaking Tata airlines never became Air India in the way we understand it. Let me explain. In 1932 Tata Sons Limited created an aviation division which secured the contract to fly mail from Karachi to Madras. This was the start of the domestic airline service off Tatas. Then on for the next 20 years this airline grew to four major routes originating from Bombay; The Western coastal route to Trivandrum, the Northern route to Delhi, the Eastern route to Calcutta and of course the original Karachi to Colombo route. During this period, the airline first changed its name to Tata Air Services and later to Air India Limited, but was essentially a domestic career serving Indian cities and limited neighbouring destinations. This was nationalised in 1953 along with eight other airlines and they all merged together formed Indian Airlines Corporation.

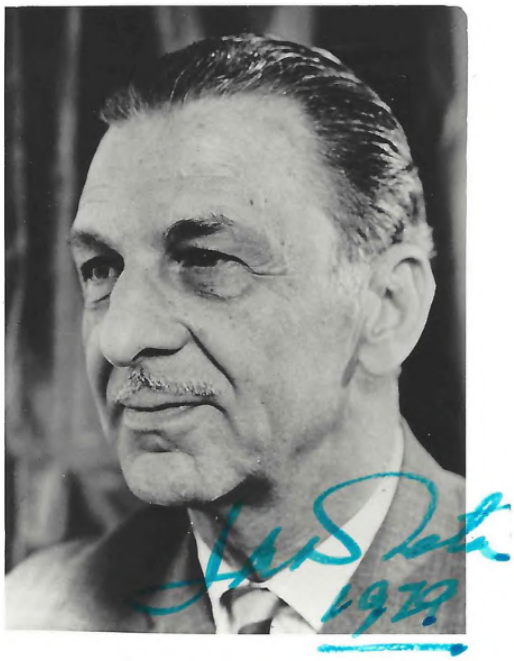
Air-India International Limited, the airline we know as the foreign carrier was formed in 1948 as an entirely separate company. This flew on various international routes, essentially one across Europe to London and later to New York. A secong to Africa, a third to Australia, fourth to Tokyo and the fifth to Moscow. The two airlines were independent of each other. So you see, Tata airlines never really became Air India. Later, in 1961, Air-India international limited changed its name to Air-India. Indian Airlines itself merged into Air India in 2011.

Facing the Competition

Air India positioned itself very cleverly as the cultural ambassador of our nation. To fly Air India was to enter a magical world of luxury and eastern mystique. The aircraft cabin itself was decorated with Indian motifs and colours, the flight attendants dressed in traditional Indian attire and the food on board included a delectable assortment of spiced and herbed Indian food. This is something that was deeply appreciated by passengers from all over the world who had never experienced anything like this. In fact, on the highly competitive transatlantic route from London to New York, Air India was the preferred carrier despite having competition from below BOAC and PanAm. Air India always had the most modern and up to date fleet, and highly trained staff. They always splurged on passenger comfort.

The Downfall

From the mid 1980s there was a lot more government intervention in the running of the airline and decisions were taken which were not necessarily in the best interest of the passengers or the enterprise. This led to a gradual but irreversible decline. This clearly goes to show that as Indians we have it in us to create globally competitive and world class enterprises and can compete with anybody on their own turf.



Legacy of JRD Tata and will it return?

It will be very difficult to regain the glory of the 60s and 70s. Times have changed and so have circumstances. The airline business itself has always been difficult and is now even more challenging. Even when Mr. Tata was managing Air India profitably and expanding rapidly, there were so many airlines around him which were continuously losing money and compromising on passenger comfort and safety standards. It was his genius and his greatness that was to a large extent responsible for the success of the airline and how they managed to grow and remain profitable, and still provide a unique and unparalled flying experience. I simply cannot imagine how anybody can bring that back.

With recent privatization, I would expect that with the new management, Air India will find the money to modernise and expand its fleet, and pitch aggressively in the growing international travel market. I'm sure the management knows everything about the glory of the airline and have big plans around how they will position the airline and what they want to do with it. I wish them luck and would simply add that they carry a billion dreams on board every time they fly. Air India is a legacy every Indian is proud of.