

THE SKY IS THE LIMIT

The Taj Group of Hotels salutes its spirited Chairman J.R.D. Tata who, on October 15, 1982, fifty years to the day, re-enacted India's first solo flight from Karachi to Bombay, in a frail and now antiquated Leopard Moth.



Mahendra Singh



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Although this historic event has received a blaze of publicity, nowhere is a tribute, however brief, more fitting than in the Taj Magazine. For, by a strange coincidence the Taj Mahal Hotel fully opened its doors to the world in the same year as J.R.D. Tata was born.

If Jamsetjee Tata, founder of the House of Tata gave to the world the finest hotel that India could offer by building Bombay's Taj Mahal, J.R.D. Tata — who now wears his mantle — founded Air India, presenting the country with the honour of an international flag carrier.

Having known J.R.D. for over half a century, and because of his long standing association with him, we invited A.F.S. Talyarkhan, a friend and companion of their more youthful days, to reminisce on some of the characteristics and the national spirit of the man who ventured to make aviation history in India.

Because, as A.F.S.T. says, "fortunately, even at 85, memory has not yet slammed the door."

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Some years ago on a certain occasion and in one of his many official capacities, J.R.D. Tata, addressing a somewhat disgruntled assemblage said: "Enough is enough," but if that admonition acted with immediate good effect the dictum has never worked where he himself has been involved.

Nothing illustrates the truism better than his accomplishment this year of celebrating to the day his solo flight from Karachi to Bombay fifty years ago, not forgetting that in between he chose to repeat the original venture in 1962.

This tribute is added solely because the writer, must be one of the very few who are still alive to recollect the scene at Juhu on October 15, 1932.

At that time flying in India was in its infancy and the very idea of the scion of a well-known family choosing to undertake what then appeared to be something akin to crossing the Sahara on a bicycle, was enough to stir at least those of the same social circle. With the result that the small crowd that had collected to await the safe landing of Jehangir Tata — the JRD was not then in society use — was composed largely of the elite who resided at Malabar Hill.

As the fragile Puss Moth neared the Juhu strip it looked like one of those large box-kites our parents would bring back from Gamages whenever they went abroad and which many of us flew at Scandal Point (also known as Breach Candy). I recollect the pilot stepped out of the Moth looking less concerned than did those of us who had waited with bated breath for a safe landing, and the whole occasion resembled more a society garden party than the marking of an accomplishment now rightly regarded as one of the greatest in the subsequent progress of the country.

If Jehangir Tata had taken this flight as just one of those things, it is because of his youthful background. So that it might serve useful purpose, I reproduce what I wrote in my daily column in the Times of India when he repeated the flight in 1962:

Thirty years ago, on the fifteenth of October, many of us of this circle of friends anxiously asked each other "will Jeh make it?"

Thirty years after, last Monday to be exact, the haunting question was whether the vintage of his plane would enable J. R. D. Tata to enact once again his pioneering solo flight which placed India on the world's sky-map.

Thirty years ago the plane in which he flew was then up-to-date; thirty years after, the prototype could surely be a danger. But because living dangerously is in his blood JRD accepted the assurance of his own Air-India International experts that it was 'thumbs up' if he cared to live it all over again, just one of the many big things he has started — and completed. Speed and mechanics was always a hobby with JRD and it all started in a stark G P Bugatti in which a young man was busy trying to make out that the windings of Worli and the purlieus of Peddar Road would do as well as the curves of Monte Carlo.

Maybe it was when his father frowned that JRD thought of some region in which his

natural bent would have full play without interference from paternal and police persuasions.

The sky was the limit for JRD and we now see that there was no limit to his ambitions to place India firmly amongst the foremost airworthy nations of the world.

It was the love of adventure of one young man that has accomplished so much, and the dangerous little drama may have riled *Bombay House but has aroused the whole country.

Deep down in his make-up JRD is still more comfortable in the cockpit of a plane than in an airconditioned office from where he conducts an empire of nation-building activities.

After all, the ceiling of great ambitions knows no fixed altitudes while a floor is only a man-made platform on which ordinary mortals may strut.

In the final analysis it is love of sport which breeds the cult of dangerous living and Young India can learn a lesson from this historic drama of thirty-years after...

And finally for JRD a joystick, after thirty years, is still a stick of joy.
Do you get me, Steve?

* Bombay House is the nucleus of the House of Tata which comprises of companies as diverse as soaps to steel.



JRD wrote to me saying, "it brought sweet music to my ears!"

But to go back to the original flight. So little did even the then mighty Times of India consider JRD's pioneering venture that the newspaper made no mention of the man in the headlines, who sequence read: "New Air Mail Service Inaugurated. Karachi-Madras. Early extension of Colombo. Bombay gets letters on Saturday."

All this and a brief report appeared on page 91 No JRD!

But as if to make up for the sorry lapse, the same newspaper published on page 12 (l) "Bird flies into cabin during journey. Mr. J.R.D. Tata hopeful about success of service." All this is not reproduced as criticism of a newspaper but only to indicate that evidently at that time the mail meant more than the man who flew in a machine. How times do change.

Everything that could be written

about JRD's flight at the age of 78 years has been read, but it seems a pity that what is nearest to his heart and which undoubtedly promoted this golden jubilee performance has not been stressed. It is not that at his age he took this risk, though it is laudable. It is not that the imp in him is still bouncing about ignoring his own dictum that "enough is enough." It is not only that what was clearly passing in his mind when he was up in the skies between Karachi and Bombay was the determination that one day the House of Tata would honour India with an international flag-carrier. But as he has remarked, he did this all over again because he feels it is sorely needed that young Indians should imbibe more and more the spirit of adventure, learn to take risks, learn that nothing ventured nothing gained.

This is the true reason for JRD insisting on doing again what he first

did fifty years ago, cocking a snook at danger, thinking only of how a fragile Puss Moth had ushered the era when Indians would be flying the world's biggest and fastest planes, proving that India can do it.

This is the truth about the determination of a man who in so many fields of national endeavours has blazed a trail but whose first and last love lies in that which has always some danger attached to it.

Just as there is an Indian Ocean without the markings visible, so is there surely an Indian sky mapped out by J.R.D. Tata in a Puss Moth 50 years ago.

'Live dangerously' might well adorn his letterhead but there is little doubt that he always preferred to write history in the skies than on mere paper.

The old saying is — time flies. True. Equally true that J.R.D. flies with time.

A.F.S. Talyarkhan



Mahendra Singh