

## JRD's Reflections on the First International Flight Expressed 25 Years Ago

Fifty years ago, on June 8, 1948, a 40-seater Lockheed Constellation 'Malabar Princess' (VT-CQP) bearing India's tricolour took off from Santa Cruz Airport, Mumbai, for London via Cairo and Geneva. This marked Air-India's maiden international service - a major milestone in the history of Indian civil aviation. J.R.D. Tata, the founder of civil aviation in India and former Chairman of Air-India, who is no longer in our midst, flew on the inaugural service. We reproduce here extracts from the views that he expressed in a message to employees on the 25th anniversary of the flight.

"Although our life as an airline began in 1932 and we therefore have more than 40 years' experience behind us, we inaugurated our first long-range international service on 8th June 1948, and the 8th of June this year marks our 25th anniversary as a full-fledged international carrier.

"...we flew across the seas with brand new Constellations, the queen of the skies of those days. I flew on the inaugural service and remember my anxiety throughout the flight as I watched and worried over our performance and the reaction of our passengers, most of whom were seasoned air travellers. I need not have worried as, all along the route, in the air and on the ground, our flight and ground personnel put up an impeccable performance and we landed at Cairo, Geneva and London dead on time.

"It was for me a great and stirring event which, as I reminisced on an earlier occasion, 'brought to life a dream, first dreamed some ten years earlier by a few starry-eyed and slightly demented men, including myself'. Seeing the Indian flag displayed on both sides of the 'Malabar Princess' as she stood proudly on the apron at the airports of Cairo, Geneva and London filled me with joy and emotion.

### Competitive Field

"Many then thought that, as an Indian airline, we were foolish, to put it mildly, to invade the ferociously competitive field of international air transport in which great European and American carriers had established for themselves an impregnable position over the years. Who, I remember being asked, would want to entrust himself on long overseas journeys to a small

Indian airline, its planes flown and maintained by Indians, in preference to such experienced giants as Pan Am, TWA, KLM, BOAC or Air France?



J.R.D. Tata

"Doubting Thomases could not have been proved more wrong, for we enjoyed from the start the patronage and confidence of growing numbers of Indians and foreign travellers who found in Air-India not only all that they found on other airlines, but also the warmth of Indian smiles and Indian hospitality.

"If, today, Air-India is known and trusted, and often loved, it is because, whatever the obstacles, whatever the disappointments or frustrations, whatever our internal disagreements which unfortunately led, at times, to strikes and the temporary suspension of our flights, we never gave up our determination to be as good as, if not better than, the best airlines in the world."

"The figures speak for themselves. From about 8,000 passengers in our first full year of operations, the number grew to 22,000 in 1952-53, to 166,000 in 1962-63, and to nearly 546,000 in 1972-73, while our total revenues went up from one and a half crores of rupees in 1949 to more than a hundred crores last year (i.e. 1972-73).

"Year after year we spread our wings further afield and brought new capitals into our network. Air-India's name on perhaps the best looking booking offices in the world, appeared in country after country, and at their airports where our Constellations, Super Constellations, Boeing 707s and 747s (-200s) marked the growth and prestige of our operations.

"If, today, Air-India is known and trusted, and often loved, it is because, whatever the obstacles, whatever the disappointments or frustrations, whatever our internal disagreements which unfortunately led, at times, to strikes and the temporary suspension of our flights, we never gave up our determination to be as good as, if not better than, the best airlines in the world.

"We certainly succeeded on

the technical and commercial planes. Our flying crew and our engineering staff proved themselves second to none, and it gladdens my heart when I

occasionally hear from a foreign passenger that he feels safer on Air-India than on any other airline in the world...

### Good Relations

"We have, at times, failed in our efforts to maintain sustained good relations with some of our unions or staff associations in India. It is a failure which I take greatly to heart, because there is not in India a better qualified, better educated, better trained and a higher paid group of skilled men and women than in Air-India. There are no

private interests in Air-India, for we belong to the State and we all work for the good of our country. We should, therefore, find it easy to be a happy and united family. Both management and unions mean well and sincerely believe they are right in whatever stand they take. The difficulty perhaps lies in a characteristic trait of our countrymen, of being somewhat intolerant of the other man's point of view. Whatever the cause of our disagreements, let us agree at least that both sides may be right as well as wrong and both therefore have to play an equal part in achieving and maintaining goodwill, mutual trust and friendly relations. This is the task to which we should now dedicate ourselves....

"The real measure of our success will lie rather in the number of our satisfied customers, both passengers and shippers, in the number of countries and cities of the world we shall bring closer to India, in the contribution we shall make towards international commerce and goodwill, and to the economic welfare of our country and our people.

Jai Hind."

## What Old Timers Said.... Constellations Join the Fleet

Air-India International was formally incorporated on March 8, 1948. A provisional order for three Lockheed Constellation aircraft had been placed and training of pilots and other staff had commenced some months earlier.

By a stroke of good luck, delivery of the aircraft was advanced by nearly six months, thanks to the cancellation of an order by another airline. Thus Air-India was able to inaugurate international operations by June 8 the same year.

Mr N. J. Pavri, who joined Air-India in 1947, a year before Air-India International was floated, played a pivotal role in obtaining loans for purchase of the aircraft.

At a farewell party arranged in honour of Mr Pavri when he retired

as Financial Controller in 1968 after a hectic but rewarding 21 years service, J. B. D. Tata, eulogising Mr Pavri, said that when it came to finding money for the Constellations, and later the Boeing 707 and the B747-200, "there was



Mr N. J. Pavri

never anyone more enthusiastic and active in extracting loans from the World Bank and the Ex-Im Bank" than Mr Pavri.

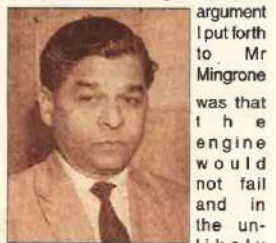
## V.G. Gadgil: Constant Innovation and Improvisation

Before our wing hangar in London was built in 1954, our engineers and technicians had to service our aircraft in the open in freezing temperatures. Mr V.G. Gadgil, who to quote J.R.D. Tata, lived and dreamed the same dreams that J.R.D. Tata dreamt and built up this great airline, spent the first 28 years of his career in the Engineering Department and retired in 1968 as Controller of Stores and Purchases after 36 coveted years of service.

In an interview prior to his retirement, Mr Gadgil stated that he had "the rare privilege of being on our maiden international flight as the Engineering representative."

Recalling an incident to illustrate the way in which the engineers/technicians worked in those days, Mr Gadgil said, "...we worked in those days by constant innovation and improvisation. We had just overhauled our first Constellation engine, under the guidance of Curtiss-Wright engineers and were faced with the problem of testing it. We did not have the required test stand, which was in the process of being locally developed by modifying the existing Dakota Engine test. This

was in itself an example of improvisation. Both the Curtiss-Wright representative and Lockheed representative, Mr Peter Mingrone posed the question, 'Mr Gadgil, what are you going to do now?' I told them that we should install the newly-overhauled engine on one of our Constellations and test it in the air. They were flabbergasted. The



Mr V.G. Gadgil

argument I put forth to Mr Mingrone was that the engine would not fail and in the unlikely event of its failure, Lockheed had guaranteed safe three-engine performance of the aircraft and therefore there was nothing that could prevent us from testing this engine in the air. Mr Mingrone was finally convinced and joined us in doing the test flight. In fact, he took a coloured motion picture of the whole episode to send it back home."

## It Was One of the First Major Enterprises : A. C. Gazder

Mr A.C. Gazder, Technical Director, in his welcome address at the impressive function held at the Taj Mahal Hotel in Bombay to commemorate the tenth anniversary of Air-India's international operations, reminisced the following about the flight that heralded the birth of our international operations:

"It was with a great sense of pride that we saw the Constellation take to the skies that night. Over fifteen years of vision, planning and endeavour had gone into that take-off. We were also proud of the fact that it was one of the first major enterprises of the New India.

"Our joy was of course mixed with a few butterflies in the stomach - about what the great wide world, which we were barging into, held for us....



Mr A.C. Gazder

"For a country like India, to have an international airline of any size or consequence, substantial support from Government is essential; and we have had it in full measure."



# 50 Years of First In



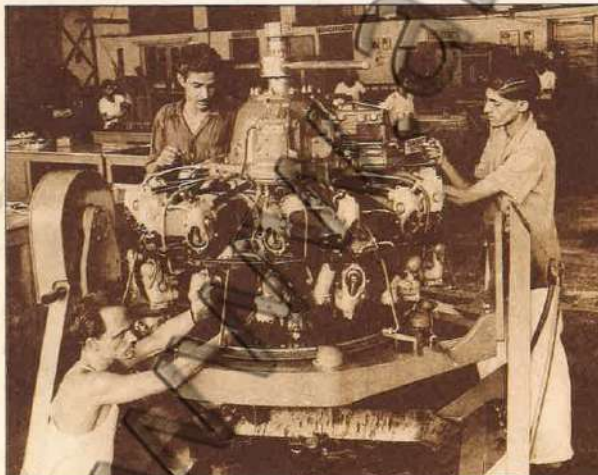
Special demonstration Constellation flight at Delhi prior to the inauguration of the India-UK service. Amongst the guests in the picture are Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Ms Indira Gandhi, Ms Rita Pandit, Rafi Ahmed Kidwai and Sir Shanmukham Chetty.



Terminal building at Santa Cruz Airport, Bombay in 1948.



Cairo 1948: Fali R. Nariman, District Manager, Air-India International, Cairo (2nd from left) and Sir Gurunath Bewoor, Managing Director, AII (third from left) with Mr A.A.A. Fysee, then Indian Ambassador to Egypt. Mr Nariman, who retired in September 1970 after 23 years service, was a familiar sight at 2 and 3 in the morning when the Bombay-London flight transited Cairo.



Maintenance work being carried out in the Engine Shop at Santa Cruz. Mr Norman D. O'Neal, Superintendent, was in charge of the Constellation Division of the Maintenance Department covering both the domestic and international fleets.

In June 1948, Lockheed Constellations were making history. Several of the aircraft were participating in the Berlin Airlift, an exercise that eventually delivered more than 2.3 million tonnes of cargo to a blockaded city.

Far away from the trenches of the cold war, another Constellation was doing equally yeoman service. On June 8, the 'Malabar Princess' (VT-CQP) bearing India's tricolour left Bombay's Santa Cruz airport for London on the maiden flight of Air-India International. It was the beginning of the Maharajah's global conquests.

The numbers will seem minuscule to a generation brought up on Jumbos and other wide-

Capt. K.R. Guzder, who was Commander of the flight on the Bombay-Cairo leg, being interviewed by late Hamid Sayani of All India Radio, prior to departure from Santa Cruz Airport on June 8, 1948.



bodied aircraft. The 'Malabar Princess' on its inaugural flight carried 35 passengers and 164 bags of mail. It took a little over 24 hours to reach London, with stops at Cairo and Geneva along the way for refuelling. But says Captain Keki Rustom Guzder, who piloted the flight from Bombay to Cairo: "It was a proud moment."

## Proud Moment

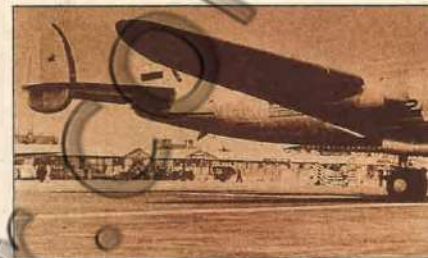
It was a proud moment for all those assembled at Santa Cruz Airport, at that time a stone's throw from nowhere, far removed from the bustle of the city. There was no scheduled departure time; the war in Palestine meant that commercial flights had low priority. But hundreds of people had gathered nevertheless, cheering each passenger as he/she boarded the aircraft parked only 15-20 yards away. "It is a historic landmark in the building up of modern India," said J.R.D. Tata, then Chairman, Air-India, in a speech prior to departure.

The flight to an overseas destination, said JRD, had been his dream ever since he had inaugurated Air-India's Bombay-Karachi service on October 15, 1932. It had taken 16 years to fulfill, and all thanks should go to the Government of independent India which had given full support despite economic and other constraints.

But, if truth be told, the international service got flagged off earlier than planned. The company was formally incorporated as Air-India International only on March 8 that year. The first commercial flight was scheduled for



Capt. D. K. Jatar who operated the Cairo-Geneva-London leg of the flight.



The Lockheed Constellation 'Malabar Princess' with which J from Bombay to London on June 8, 1948 seen at London Airport. Airlines were housed are in the background.

the year-end. But the Constellation arrived six months before time than order. The training of the crew and way. "We had done several previous to London," says the 83-year-old Cicester in the United Kingdom. So many problems. (Incidentally, Guzder flight; the Cairo-London stretch saw Captain Jatar, who was posthumously by the Government of India for most sacrifice whilst commanding our ship crashed in the South China Seas in crew travelled on the plane all the

Though a great deal of preparation detail had gone into the international infrastructure may seem a shade been described as being from club end, the departure lounge was a sides and with only one check-machine for baggage. Liveried hostesses in midnight blue uniform, welcomed the passengers. There searches or formal check-in, the familiar faces. But there was excitement of journalists and well-wishers going on," says Capt. Guzder. "I was for All India Radio as there was no

## Speeches and Celebration

At London, some 24 hours later and much celebration. Despite this, the morning of June 10, Mr V.K. Krishna Rao, Minister for India in the UK, was at the photographers ran riot. "Set your came down the step-ladder. "We day there was a grand bash at the Times of India in an editorial: "I country of its majority in the realm but the first stage in India's march to air transport."

First stage it really was if one be of euphoria. Air-India was still a fledgling the carrier had been allocated a control tower. "The winter of 194 way we could keep warm in the cabin and it was a choice of either suffer heater or the bitter cold outside," man who set up Air-India's London

Dalal, who described the early



Passengers boarding the 'Malabar Princess' prior to the departure of the first scheduled India bound service. With a schedule of under 24 hours, this was the fastest England-India service.



# International Flight



Air-India's maiden international flight was operated from Bombay. The huts in which the various departments of

ns - better known as Connies - is to the cancellation of another flight staff was already under- flights previously right through apt. Gudder, now settled at Le- lams could be advanced without er handled the first leg of the Captain D.K. Jatar in command. ily awarded the Ashoka Chakra conspicuous gallantry and self- staged "Kashmir Princess" which April 1955, and the replacement ay from Bombay.)

tion and meticulous attention to il venture, by today's standards, te primitive. The first flight has house to caravan. At the India vooden pavilion open on three n counter and one weighing stewards bustled around. Air porting jaunty caps and dimples, were no security checks, body passengers were almost all ement in the air, what with the s. "There was a lot of tamasha s interviewed by Hamid Sayani television in those days."

S there were welcome speeches arrival during the wee hours of hna Menon, the High Commis- airport. Flash bulbs went off as vatches boys," said JRD as he re right on schedule." The next Dorchester Hotel. Wrote The marks the attainment by this of aerial development .... this is international status in regard to

thered to look behind the façade fting outfit. At London airport, caravan parked behind the old was very severe and the only avan was by using an oil heater g the pungent fumes of this oil iminisces Mr M.A.S. Dalal, the operations from scratch. days in an article published 30

years ago in *Magic Carpet*, remembers that it was easier to navigate back to Bombay than to the caravan. "There was no road and the only way to get to our 'office' was through thick mud."

There was a lot of other trudging to do. "We (with S.K. Kooka, the then Traffic Manager) physically tramped the streets of London for many miles, and for many weeks, looking at possible business premises and hoping to secure the right ones," he says in his 20th anniversary retrospective.

Getting business at the London end was not easy. "We were completely unknown in this country," says Dalal. "(It was difficult) to persuade travel agents and business houses to send their passengers with Air-India." What may have helped was that Air-India was

state-of-the-art while big boy BOAC had still not upgraded the Connies.

All this, however, is the unseen underbelly of the airline business, of little concern to passengers. It would have been of even less concern to the elite that flew on that first flight. They had paid handsomely for the privilege. An advertisement in The Times of India on June 3 has the Maharajah (still doing yeoman service for the national carrier despite the passage of half-a-century) inviting readers to "fly with me to London via Cairo and Geneva. I leave Bombay every Tuesday in a beautiful Constellation. Bombay-London fare: Rs.1,720/-" In those days that was a small fortune. The Maharajah, it was clear, was targeting maharajahs.

## Passenger List

And the tribe was amply represented on the passenger list. There was His Highness the Jam Sahab of Nawanagar, Rajpramukh of Saurashtra. This was his first holiday abroad since 1933 and he was looking forward to the Australia-England Ashes series and tennis at Wimbledon. For three months he would eschew work, business and politics, he declared at the airport before departure. There was Maharaja Duleepsinhji, also with cricket on his mind but perhaps in a more active role. And there were the modern maharajas - business barons such as Neville Wadia and Narottam Lalbhai. Among others were Lt. Col. W. Grey, returning home after a stint with the Government of India's Political Department, and H.B. Malcolm and R.R. Noble, Indian cyclists who were to represent India at the Olympic Games at Wembley.

The passenger list survives to this day. Time has taken its toll, however; many of the people are dead. But surviving are details such as the dress code for air hostesses - midnight blue coats and skirts, complemented by light blue, short-sleeved blouses. (Western apparel remained the norm till 1960, when saris were introduced to give the uniform an ethnic touch). People remember too that the food was excellent, the bubbly flowed freely and the choicest vintages were available.

Also a matter of record, of course, are the formal communications that the maiden flight carried. JRD had with him messages of greeting and goodwill from Jawaharlal Nehru, Indian Prime Minister, to the Prime Ministers of Great Britain and Egypt and the President of the Swiss Republic. There were similar messages from Rafi Ahmed Kidwai, the then Communications Minister of India, to his counterparts in those countries.

But JRD and the 'Malabar Princess' carried something more important than messages, mail and passengers. They bore the hopes and aspirations of more than 350 million people, looking for a material symbol of their newfound independence and sovereignty. They delivered. Air-India, which has travelled millions of miles since then, is testimony to that.



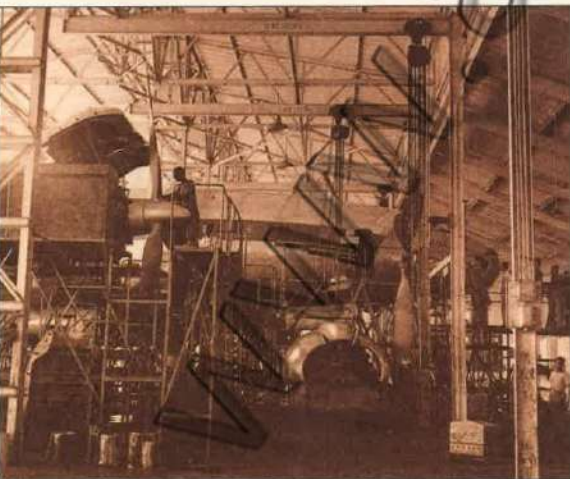
Arrival of the inaugural India-UK service at London Airport. Left to right are Mr B.W. Figgins, then General Manager; Mr J.R.D. Tata; J.R.D. Tata; Mr V.K. Krishna Menon, then High Commissioner for India in the U.K.; and Sir Frederick James, then Managing Director, Tata Ltd., London.



Air-India's first Booking Office at 56 Haymarket, London. Mr M.A.S. Dalal, the first Air-Indian to come to London to start the office from scratch, and S.K. Kooka, then Traffic Manager who later became our first Commercial Director, physically tramped the streets of London, looking at possible premises.



Beautifully tailored European dresses with caps set at a jaunty angle formed the uniform of Air-India's air hostesses in 1948. Sari, as a uniform was introduced with the induction of the Boeing 707 in 1960.



A Constellation in the Maintenance Dock at Santa Cruz, Mumbai.



The interior of Air-India International's Booking Office in Bombay. Commercial Department was in those days housed in Esplanade Mansion, Mahatma Gandhi Road, Fort. Compare this with the majestic Air-India Building where our Headquarters, including Commercial Headquarters, is situated and you can see the fantastic progress made by Air-India in the past 50 years.



## JRD on the Maiden International Flight

The Bombay airport terminal, hitherto accustomed to only domestic flights, was pulsating with hectic activity in the hours preceding the departure of our maiden international flight to London on June 8, 1948. Amongst the distinguished personalities at the airport was J.R.D. Tata, who was the cynosure of all eyes.

Mr Tata, in an interview prior to the departure of the epoch-making flight, said that it was on October 15, 1932, when he inaugurated Air-India's Karachi-Bombay service, that he had dreamt of an international service and it had taken 16 years for that dream to come true.

JRD said "It was significant that this was the first major scheme of economic development of the modern India that was being built up to be taken

up since the achievement of Independence. It, therefore, constituted a historic landmark in the building up of modern India."

It was notable, Mr Tata said that the Government of India had agreed to sponsor the scheme jointly with Air-India in October 1947, right in the middle of the crisis existing then, and credit was due to the Government of India for encouraging and sanctioning a scheme for which they were embarking at a time when they were faced with overwhelming difficulties, troubles and dangers.

Mr Tata added that at a time when there was a lot of controversy over the merits and demerits of private enterprise versus state enterprise, the fact that the Government of India had sponsored the Air-India International scheme was an

interesting as well as significant development. He thought that the Government of India had given an original and valuable hand in the matter.

Finally Mr Tata hoped that the Bombay-London service would be only the beginning and that the Indian Union Flag would fly over many other continents.

He also hoped that within three or four months the frequency of the service, which was initially a weekly service, would be doubled but that was dependant on the traffic requirements, Government policy and economic conditions. Air-India International also intended to organise, in the not too distant future, a service to East Africa, where there were a large number of Indians and a considerable amount of trade, he added.

## First Flight Postage Stamps

As the event marked a major milestone in the annals of Independent India, The Indian Posts & Telegraphs Department issued special first flight postage stamps on June 8, 1948,

depicting a picture of the Lockheed L-749 Constellation aircraft with which Air-India operated its first international flight from Bombay to London via Cairo and Geneva. Mr Krishna Prasad,



then in charge of the Indian Posts & Telegraphs Department, sent greetings to the postal administrations of Egypt, Switzerland and the U.K. on Air-India's first international

service. In his message he stated that another bridge between India and the countries en route was being built. "The linking up of our countries so close together will assist in the promotion of goodwill and mutual benefit," the message added.

The Posts & Telegraphs Department also released a stamp on June 8, 1973 to mark the silver jubilee of this historic event. The stamp, in the denomination of Rs.1.45, showed the tail of an Air-India Boeing 747-200 and carried the words "25 YEARS OF OVERSEAS OPERATIONS 1948-1973" in Hindi and English.

A pair of stamps designed specially for the occasion will once again be released by the Indian postal authorities to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the epochmaking event on June 8, 1998.

The stamps released in 1948 and 1973 are reproduced above.

## The Distinguished Passengers

The air fare of Rs.1,720 from Bombay to London, in 1948, was literally a princely sum in those days. The aviation industry, then in its infancy, was patronised only by the rich and the famous which, of course, included the members of the various royal families in India.

Those who did the honour of travelling on Air-India's maiden international flight included : His Highness the Jam Saheb of Nawanagar, Rajpramukh of Saurashtra, who was flying abroad on a three-month vacation. He said he was flying abroad for his first holiday since 1933. He planned to be away for three months, the greater portion of that time in Britain and Switzerland. He was looking forward to seeing the Australia-England (Cricket) Test and tennis in Wimbledon. In the three months out of the country,

he seriously intended eschewing work, business and politics. Maharaja Shri Duleepsinhji, who

was also eager to see the England-Australia Test match was on board.



Air-India's advertisement that appeared in The Times of India of June 3, 1948.

The other passengers were Lt. Col. W. Grey, formerly of the Government of India Political Department, Mr. Bhatti Gulam Mahomed, Mr. Narottam and Ms Sulochana Lalbahai, Mr. Hasambhoy Jetha, Miss Gulshan and Master Akbarali Jetha, Mr. H.R. Stinson, Dr. Eric Streiff, Mr. Hans Balthasar Reinhardt, Mr. Dhunibhoy Noshir, Mr. and Ms Fazel A. Fazalibhoy, Mr. Salim Gulamally Bhimane, Mr. Sinha Govindjee, Mr. Venkatachalam Iyer, Mr. Neville Wadia, Mr. L. V. Malkani, Ms G.S. Patell, Mr. N.K. Patel, Mr. P.S.

## Some of the posters that whisk you away to the days of Air-India International....

