

rude travel



vir sanghvi

The Good Old Days Of Air Travel

There was a time when air travel was glamorous and with J.R.D. Tata's vision, we could've had the world's finest airlines. Unfortunately, politics took over.



BRINGING BACK THE CLASSIC

The Vistara Retrojet doesn't fly every day but when it does, it's always quite special

It is hard now to imagine a time when air travel was glamorous. Crowded airports, rude immigration officers, passengers packed like sardines into narrow, metal tubes and inedible food are the images that come to mind when you think of modern air travel.

But as difficult as it may be for today's generation to believe, there was a time when not only was flying glamorous, India also ran one of the world's best airlines.

Most of us are aware that J.R.D. Tata, the legendary chairman of the Tata group, was a pilot. What we may not know is that the Tatas also owned and ran an airline as far back as the 1930s and that this airline was J.R.D.'s great passion even though its profit contribution to the Tata bottom line was minimal.

Tata Airlines was created in the 1930s, in an era before governments believed that it was their job to run aviation companies. J.R.D. was, of course, a pilot but he was also a global gourmet who liked to drink wine with good meals (his mother was French) and had a fully-developed appreciation for the good things of life. So Tata Airlines was created in J.R.D.'s own image; it was the sort of airline that he would like to fly if he were just another passenger.

All went well till the 1950s, when the airline business became more and more government dominated all over the world (except, notably, in the US). In 1953, the government of India decided that the aviation sector was a mess, with far too many players (India had many small airlines in those days) and decided to nationalise them all. From now on, the government said, there would be only two airlines: Air India for international routes and Indian Airlines for domestic sectors.

J.R.D. was distraught that Tata Airlines was being taken away from him. He wrote to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who was his friend, complaining about a) the nationalisation

of his favourite Tata company and b) the fact that the Tatas had not even been consulted before the nationalisation of their airline was announced.

Nehru was apologetic. He told J.R.D. that yes, the Tatas should at least have been informed before the announcement was made. But the aviation sector was too chaotic. There was a need to impose some order on it by merging all the disparate players. And only the government had the funds required to make the large investments that were necessary for new aircraft to be purchased.

However, said Nehru, he had an idea. Could J.R.D. stay involved with the aviation sector? He could run Air India (which would be much larger than Tata Airlines) and serve as a director on the board of Indian Airlines.

J.R.D. accepted the offer even though his colleagues at Tata headquarters questioned the wisdom of accepting the responsibility of running an airline that the Tatas had no stake in. Wouldn't his time be better utilised in looking after Tata companies?

But J.R.D. was adamant. He would run Air India, he insisted. And he would do it for the sake of his country for no money at all. (At some stage, a token salary of one rupee was initiated).

From then on, J.R.D. spent something like 50 per cent of his time on Air India, much to the annoyance of some of his colleagues who thought that the time could be more profitably spent.

Under J.R.D., Air India imbibed some of the best values of the old Tata

VINTAGE ACCENT
The Retrojet crew's uniforms are inspired from those worn in the days of Tata Airlines





AID FROM THE BEST

When Singapore Airlines launched, it had taken Air India's help to design its inflight service

Airlines. Nehru gave him a free hand, accepting that no politician knew very much about aviation. After Indira Gandhi took over, the government maintained this hands-off attitude. Mrs. Gandhi had known J.R.D. for much of her life and one popular story (retold by M.O. Mathai, Nehru's ex PS in an otherwise scurrilous memoir) has it that Nehru had asked J.R.D. to find a solution to one of Mrs. Gandhi's problems in the 1950s. As India's foreign exchange crisis grew, Nehru banned most consumer imports, including cosmetics. Mrs. Gandhi, apparently, went into a massive sulk and J.R.D. was sent for. He agreed to manufacture cosmetics under the Tata Oil Mills banner and Lakmé was born.

So Mrs. Gandhi, who like J.R.D. knew a little bit about the good things of life, refused to let the babus come in J.R.D.'s way. She appointed Dr. Karan Singh as Minister of Tourism and Civil Aviation because she knew that he would understand the airline business and the need to give J.R.D. the space to function.

It was a decision probably without parallel in Indian history: can you imagine any government now allowing an industrialist to run a nationalised company as he saw fit? And can you imagine any major industrialist agreeing to neglect his own empire only for the interests of a public sector company?

But it worked. Under J.R.D., Air India became one of the world's best airlines. We talk with admiration now of Singapore Airlines (justifiably), but few of us remember that when that airline was launched, it took Air India's help to design its inflight service. (A little later, it began raiding Air India for its pilots.)

The notion of Asian hospitality that such airlines as Cathay Pacific and Thai Airways now embody was created by J.R.D.'s Air India. So fabled was its service that, in the 1960s and the 1970s, when Air India operated on the London-New York sector, many Brits and Americans much preferred it to Pan Am or BOAC (which later became British Airways) or TWA. There was a sense of hospitality that Western airlines could not match.

Much of this was down to J.R.D. himself. He involved himself in every detail from menus to seat pitch to crew uniforms to the wines served on board. And of course, he understood aircraft. Air India introduced its first Jet in 1960 and was among the first airlines to order the Boeing 747, or as it was better known, the Jumbo Jet.

J.R.D. would fly Air India frequently and wander down the aisles, talking to passengers and checking that everything was okay. If a single piece of cutlery was dirty, the crew would get it in the neck. No meal could be served cold, or even too hot.

Air India's marketing was run like that of a private company. Bobby Kooka, who was in charge, created the Maharaja, put up witty hoardings (the slot that Amul later occupied) and was consistently irreverent. A book called *Foolishly Yours*, given free to passengers, was both cheeky and funny.



MAN WITH A PLAN

Under J.R.D. Tata, Air India became one of the world's best airlines

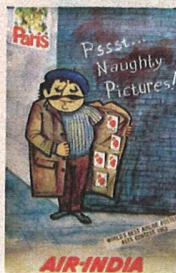


BACK IN THE DAY

Tata Airlines was created in the 1930s, in keeping with J.R.D.'s taste for the good things in life



POPULAR CHOICE
Bobby Kooka created the iconic AI Maharaja



THE FUNNY BONE
Air India's marketing strategy included witty hoardings of the Maharaja

Cathay Pacific and Thai Airways embody the hospitality that was created by Air India

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The views expressed by the columnist are personal

Two factors ended the golden age of Air India. The first was the Gulf boom of the mid-1970s. As labourers flew to the Middle East, the nature of the passenger changed. And Air India found that it could make more money ferrying passengers to the Gulf than it could from such routes as Bombay to London or Delhi to Tokyo.

J.R.D. recognised that there was room for both kinds of passenger: Gulf traveller and globetrotter. But he wasn't around long enough to make that distinction. In 1977, the new Prime Minister Morarji Desai summarily dismissed J.R.D. Tata by means of a government circular.

Morarji was a strange, cantankerous man so nobody was able to explain why he did it. (One theory was that he thought that J.R.D. was a pal of Indira Gandhi's.)

But, from that day on, the decline began. Air India became just another public sector company. When Mrs. Gandhi returned to power in 1980, she had a chance to put that right. But she chose not to. Instead, her private secretary RK Dhawan appointed Raghu Raj, a former banker with no aviation experience to run Air India. And control passed to the politicians and babus of the civil aviation ministry.

The Tatas are back in aviation now with Vistara (in partnership, ironically enough, with Singapore Airlines, which had once looked to J.R.D. for help) and though the nature of aviation has changed irrevocably, they still sometimes remind us of the good, old days.

One such innovation is the Retrojet, a plane that Vistara has been running for a year. It doesn't fly everyday but when it does, it is always quite special.

I flew the Retrojet last week from Delhi to Bengaluru and it was one of the most pleasant experiences I have ever had on a domestic flight. The crew, fitted out in old Tata Airlines uniforms, were magnificent, giving their full attention to every passenger. There was a chef from Taj-Sats (another Tata-Singapore collaboration) to plate the specially-designed menus and you had the sense that you were not in an aeroplane but in a fancy restaurant at the Taj Mahal Hotel in J.R.D.'s days.

From what I am told, the Tata Airlines experience was even better, because there was more room for passengers and a sense of a luxury experience. I don't think those days will ever come back, alas.

But I thought back to what a remarkable man J.R.D. must have been. And I thought back to the stupidity of India's politicians. (J.R.D. and Bobby Kooka were evicted from the Air India building within weeks of each other, and Kooka's follow-up to *Foolishly Yours* was pulped).

It could all have been very different. We could have had the world's finest airline.

But trust politicians to destroy everything built up through love and passion.