

# The Illustrated Weekly of India

## Air-India's Maharajah

by Khushwant Singh





# Air-India's Maharajah

Air-India enjoys the reputation of being among the world's best-run airlines. Although it has only 15 aircraft (five Jumbos and ten 707s) it reaps a harvest of profits of over Rs 30 crores per year.

Last month, the man who started this airline and worked for it all these forty-six years was unceremoniously dismissed. The news came as a shock to everyone. Even the pro-Janaata *Indian Express*, which crusaded for its victory, expressed its disapproval by exclaiming: "In ingratitude, we are second to none." Other newspapers and journals have been equally critical of the Government's action. Air Chief Marshal Lal who has been appoint-

ed in place of JRD rose to the occasion and said he was sorry Mr Tata was embarrassed by the manner in which he was relieved.

The reasons for this strange action are not known; it is generally believed that during the Emergency JRD had recognised some of the positive gains of the Emergency and this has brought the wrath of a section of the new Government on his head. If public positions are to be decided on the basis of such criteria, how many in India will be able to survive the onslaught of the establishment?

I interview JRD and talk to him about the story of his Airlines.

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by Khushwant Singh

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"I WAS fired as Chairman of Air-India on February 4, 1978," says J.R.D. Tata with a wistful smile. That is exactly what it was. JRD was fired—no milder euphemism can be used—in a most unwarranted, unbecoming, discourteous, unseemly and graceless manner from an organisation that he conceived, gave birth to and nurtured to fulness for 46 years.

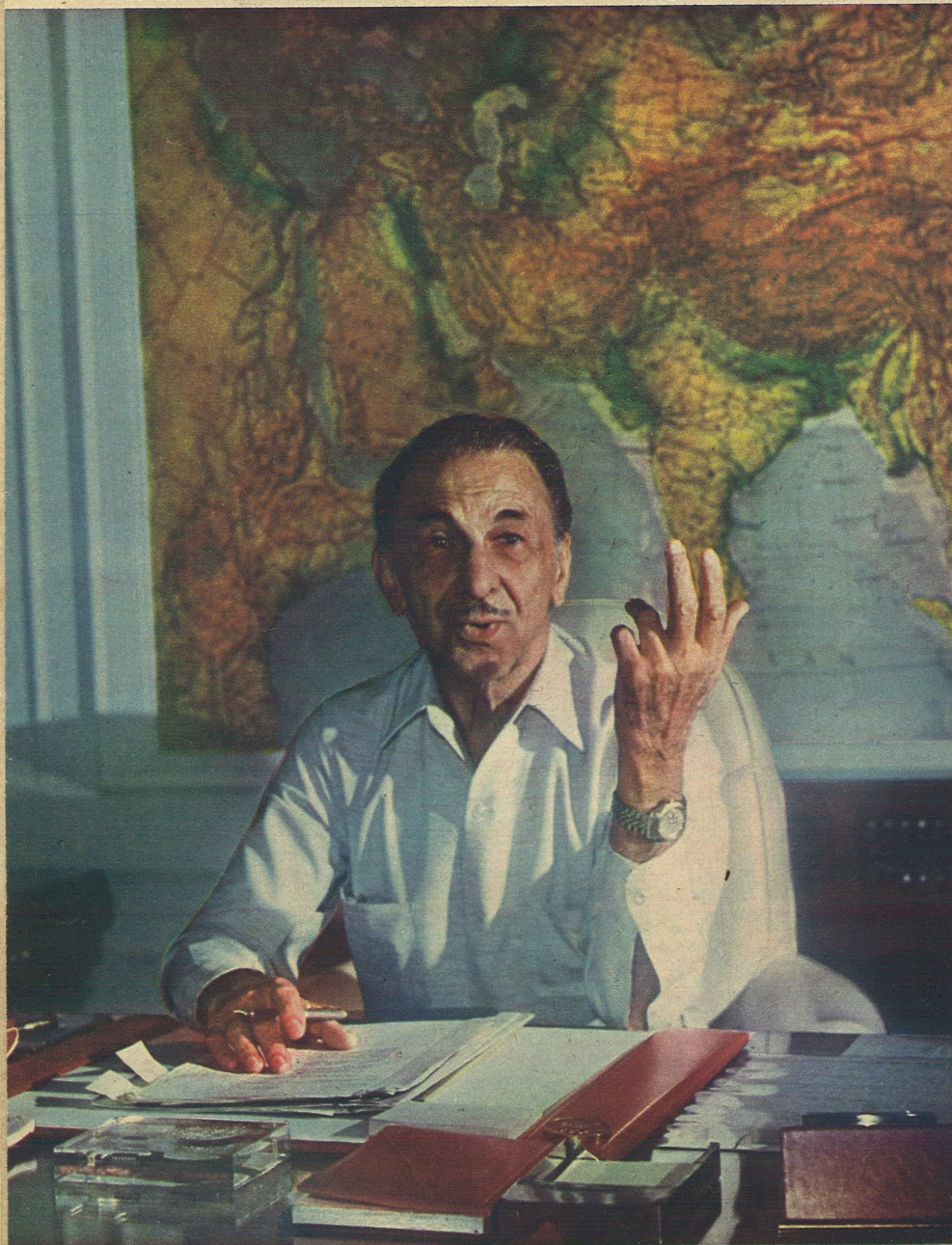
JRD knew nothing of the Government's decision to replace him. For some inexplicable reason it was not deemed necessary to ask JRD over and tell him personally, as courtesy demanded. The letter from the Prime Minister came so tardily as to add even greater insult to the injustice already done.

## Terse Letter

The letter simply informs JRD of the Government's decision to retire him from the Chairmanship of Air-India and the appointment of retired Air Marshal P. C. Lal, an employee of Tata's, as Chairman of both Air-India and Indian Airlines. The letter assumes, without prior consultation, that the Air Marshal could be spared by Tata. But more important than the assumption of Lal's availability are the words "*for the efficient working of the two airlines*", thereby implying that Air-India was not operating as efficiently as it should. Facts speak differently.

A few days later the new Board of Directors was constituted. JRD's name was missing. To make matters still worse an explanatory statement appeared in the press saying that the Government are considering co-opting Tata as a member. It is strange that while names of all other members had been decided on, the most eminent one was still under consideration.

The sacking of J.R.D. Tata has taken a heavy toll of the morale of Air-India's 11,700 employees. JRD is not an ordinary citizen; he is a one-man institution. He heads India's second largest (the first now being the house



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Photographs by S. N. KULKARNI

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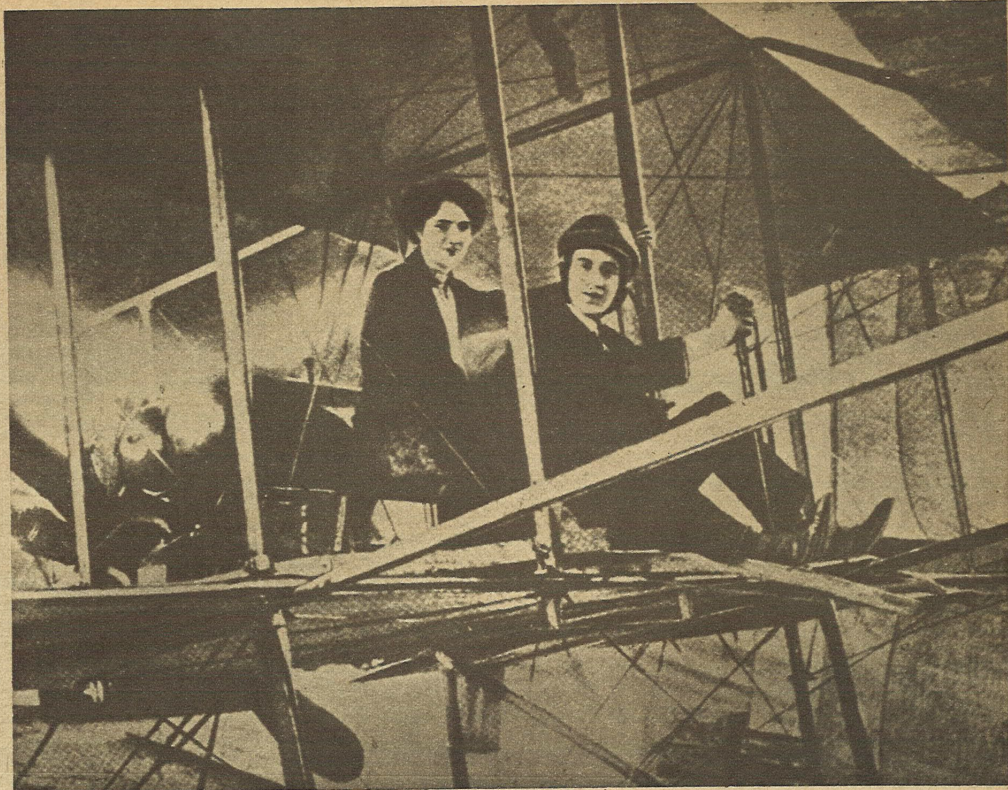


of Birlas) industrial empire which has played a pioneering role in Indian industry and which has all along enjoyed a well-deserved reputation for financial and moral integrity. Air-India is Tata's creation. India owes Tata a debt of gratitude for giving it a first-rate international airline.

### A Dream Come True

**J**AHANGIR Ratanji Dadabhoy Tata was the first to dream of giving India an airline of its own and he made that dream a reality. The story of air transport in India is inextricably bound up with the efforts of this one man who can justly be called the pioneer of Indian aviation.

Jeh's (as Tata is popularly called) interest in flying began in 1918 when, on a beach resort in France, he came across a joy rider with one of the First World War planes. From then on Jeh counted the days when planes would come to India and he could learn to fly. The opportunity came ten years later. In 1929 Sir Victor Sassoon started a flying club with a few Puss Moths donated by him. Jeh promptly joined this club and within only 3½ hours he was able to do without dual control (others take 8-10 hours). Thus in eight days he was able to fly solo and he became the first Indian to get an "A" licence.



**INDIA'S FIRST AIRLINE** was started by Tatas on October 15, 1932, with a Puss Moth which JRD flew from Karachi to Bombay via Ahmedabad and which Neville Vintcent took over in Bombay for the rest of the flight to Madras via Bellary. Tata Airlines consisted then of one Puss Moth, one Leopard Moth, one palm-thatched shed, one whole-time pilot (assisted by Vintcent and JRD), one engineer on a part-time basis and two apprentice-mechanics. Tata Airlines were the first to operate scheduled air services in India on a permanent basis. Earlier the Delhi Flying Club temporarily flew mail between Karachi and Delhi for the Government from December 1931 when the charter arrangement with Imperial Airways lapsed. Picture shows JRD and Vintcent with the Governor of Bombay, Sir Roger Lumley, and Lady Lumley inspecting a De Havilland Rapide. This was the first two-engined aircraft which Tatas acquired. It was also equipped with a radio. But the Airlines continued to carry only mail and passengers were a rarity. In early 1938 came the Empire All-Up Air Mail Scheme whereby every letter posted in one part of the British Empire and destined for another was automatically carried by air. That was the beginning of the prosperity of Tata Airlines. It was at this time that JRD bought this aircraft—the De Havilland Rapide—so as to carry the heavy mail which Imperial Airways brought from London to Karachi. In 1939 the Rapides were found inadequate for the increasing mailload and so two four-engined De Havilland 86s were brought; these were 12-seaters. By this time passengers had started using the air services. It was in 1945 that regular passenger services got into full swing.

allahabad  
18<sup>th</sup> Feb 1911.  
my dear Harry.  
I am sending  
you this postcard,  
that it may be  
conveyed by the  
first Postal Aerial  
Service in the  
world. many messages  
& letters have been  
sent by aeroplanes,  
but never under  
the auspices of the  
Postal Service  
Yrs Sinc.  
Ruth. Maresfield

On February 18, 1911, Mr Henri Piquet carried the world's first airmail from Allahabad to Naini Junction, some six miles away, in a Humber biplane. The mail was delivered in 13 minutes. This was four months before the first mail flight took place in England. However, this venture was not sustained. Commercial aviation reached India only on April 7, 1929, when Imperial Airways' London-Cairo service was first extended to Karachi.



Reminiscing about his early flying days, Jeh recalls: "As soon as I became a pilot, I decided that in order to be a good pilot one should be able to perform aerobatics. So on my own I began looping the loop, diving, spinning. Before trying out these tricks one should learn how to get in and out of a spin: every pilot was put into the spin and taught how to get out of it because the pilot's natural instinct is to do exactly the opposite of what he really should. There was no qualified instructor at our flying club. A pilot of the British Navy, Commander Cummings, who had never been an instructor was in charge of our training. He never bothered to teach me how to spin. Once, in one of my aerobatic practices, I got myself into a very fast spin and then did not know how to get out of it. Fortunately I recovered simply by remembering what I had read in a book."

Within a year Jeh became an honorary instructor of the flying club. About the same time a British ex-Air Force pilot, Neville Vintcent, and his friend J. S. Newall came to India in two First World War aeroplanes—the DH9s. They flew all over the country surveying a number of possible air routes.

### Jeh and his Puss Moth

Vintcent joined hands with Jeh and prepared a scheme to start our airmail service—there were no passengers in those days—between Karachi-Ahmedabad-Bombay-Bellary-Madras. Jeh was able to persuade Sir Dorab, the Chairman of the Board of Tatas, to agree to the proposal. After prolonged negotiations it was approved by the Government of India. Tatas finally had to agree to operate it without any guarantee of mail revenue or subsidy. That was India's first airline.

Tatas bought two second-hand planes each costing about £1,000. Jeh went to fetch the first plane from London. He flew his little Puss Moth homewards with his wife as his passenger. They only got as far as Naples when Jeh fell ill. The rest of the journey had to be done by Lloyd Triestino's VICTORIA with the plane strapped on the deck.

The air service was inaugurated on October 15, 1932, with the Puss Moth which Jeh flew from Karachi to Bombay via Ahmedabad and which Vintcent took over in Bombay for the rest of the flight to Madras via Bellary. Tata Airlines, as it was then called, consisted of one Puss Moth, one Leopard Moth, one wholtime pilot, assisted by Vintcent and Jeh, one engineer on a part-time basis, two apprentice-mechanics and one palm-thatched shed as the airport.

### First "Aerodrome"

Although airmail services were being operated during those days with single-engined aircraft like these Puss Moths in other parts of the world too, not one of them had to make do with such little support from the ground as our early Indian services. With the exception of Karachi, which had radio and night-landing facilities of sorts, the rest of the 1,300-mile route of Tata's Karachi-Madras service was devoid of any aid whatever; Bombay, the principal base of the airline, did not even have an all-weather airstrip; the "airport" was a dried mud flat near the sea serviceable only during eight months of the year. At high tide during the monsoon the "aerodrome" was overrun by the sea and the airline had to transfer operations bodily to a small strip at Poona, next to the Yeravda Jail.



**OFF TO A FLYING START.** Some of the first air-hostesses of Air-India International at Bombay House in 1946. Air-India's air-hostesses are among the prettiest and the most courteous of any world airlines. Two-thirds of Air-India's passengers are non-Indians who choose to fly Air-India in preference to their own airlines because of the personalised service and hospitality of the airline. Below: Emperor Haile Selassie's pet lion greeted Air-India's first plane to land in Addis Ababa in 1968.



As there were no lighting facilities at any of the airfields on the route, no night flying was possible. With a night stop at Bellary the average speed from Karachi to Madras was 40 miles an hour. The route crossed 5,000 ft-high hills, vast deserts, swamps and places inundated with 300 inches of torrential rain during the monsoons. There were also dust-storms, clouds of locusts, lightnings, thunderstorms. Despite

all, Tata Airlines flew 160,000 miles during its first year of operation with unbroken regularity.

From then onwards there was no looking back. The Puss Moth made way for the Leopard Moth, the Fox Moth, the Miles Merlin, the Waco and the De Havilland Rapide; and with new aircraft new routes were opened. JRD continued to be the driving force behind every scheme of expansion whether it related





**THEY WERE AIR-INDIA'S BACKBONE.** Nari Dastur, Deputy Managing Director, who has been with Air-India for over 30 years, has chosen to retire next month although he has three years to go. Nari had endeared himself to Air-India men all over the world.



**S.K. KOOKA (Bobby)**, formerly Commercial Director and later Chairman of Air-India Charters, who was associated with the airlines right from its inception, met a few months ago the same fate as J.R.D. Bobby is known for AI's witty hoardings & brochures.



**K.G. APPUSAMY**, Managing Director, has resigned in protest against Mr Tata's ouster. Air Chief Marshal Lal has described Mr Appusamy as "an able, conscientious person of high integrity who has served Indian aviation extremely well".

to the establishment of a new service or the purchase of new aircraft.

The Second World War brought about a temporary lull in the progress of Indian aviation. By now Jeh had become the Chairman of the entire Tata group. He established a training centre for pilots and an aircraft factory near Poona.

For some years Tata Airlines only carried mail because, according to their contract with the Government, passengers and mail had to be in separate compartments. With the small machines that were being operated, this was not possible. The Puss Moth and the Fox Moth could seat only two persons. The Wacos with which the Delhi Services were started were four-seaters.

Besides, combining mail and passengers was not economical. With mail the only consideration was speed; in the case of passengers, safety and personal comfort were of greater importance. The maxim was: "Passengers may be delayed but must never be lost; mail may be lost but never be delayed."

In any case, there were few passengers in the early thirties. Tatas had in fact planned to operate a daily service between Bombay and Calcutta with bigger planes. But they found that the number of people who travelled First Class by rail, between the two metropolitan cities, was seldom more than four or five per day. So air travel which would cost more would have attracted even fewer customers.

#### Tata Airlines to Air-India

Until the end of World War II, the airline was called Tata Airlines. In 1946, it was decided that it should have a non-proprietary title. A poll was held among the employees of Tata Airlines. Jeh suggested a few names. "Air-India" was the one that topped the list.

Soon after Independence, Jeh approached the Indian Government with a proposal to extend air services to foreign countries. The Government's view was that its international airlines should be in the public sec-

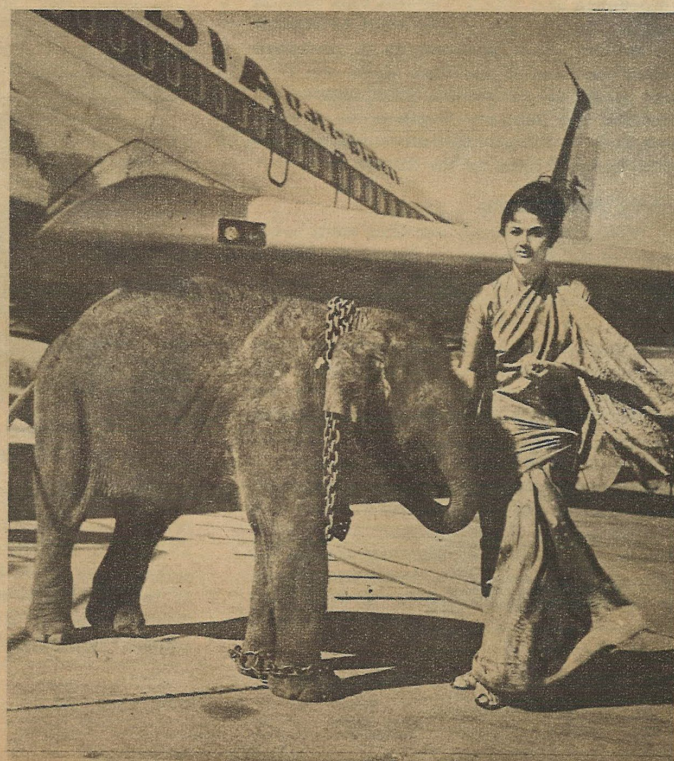
tor. "Why not have a joint enterprise?" suggested Jeh. He wrote out a memorandum on what was to become the Air-India International. According to it the Government would have 49 per cent shares with the right to buy 2 per cent from Tata Sons at any time so that they could get the majority any time they wanted; Air-India Limited, the domestic airline, would provide the expertise including the crew, training of personnel and the maintenance of aircraft. That was the cheapest way of doing it.

"I got the answer from the Government within fifteen days, approving of our scheme in toto," says Jeh. "I was flabbergasted." This was the genesis of Air-India International as a joint enterprise.

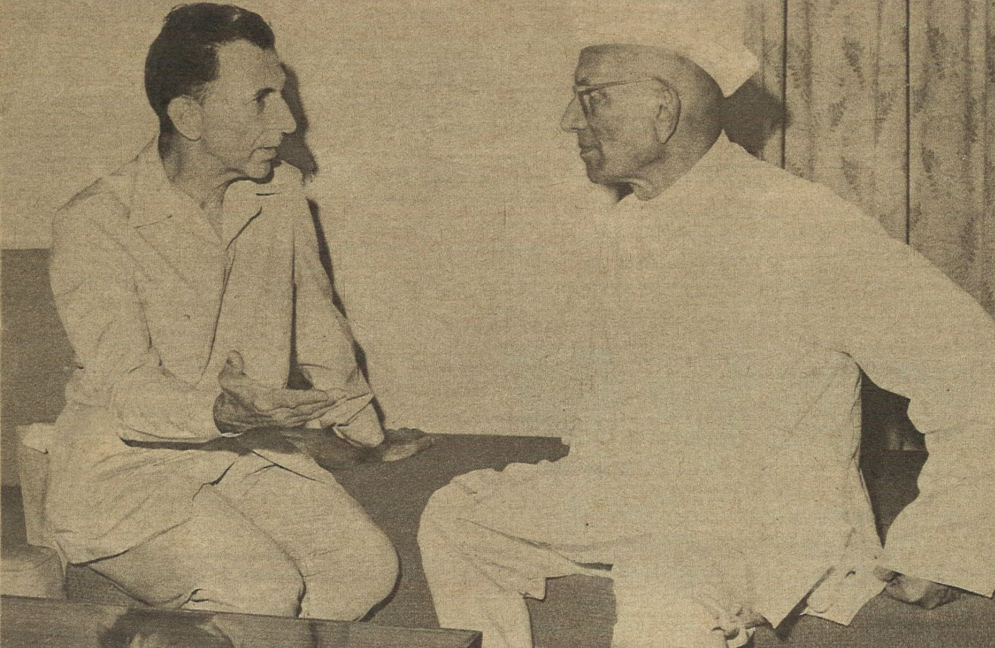
Right from the beginning it did extremely well. Within the next four years, it more than doubled its operations, making a profit every year until 1952. But by July 1953, ten more airlines cropped up in the country. Most of them were running at a loss. Something had to be done. Thus on August



**GROWING PAINS.** The aerodrome in Bombay in the early days was just a dried mud flat which got flooded during the high tide in the monsoon. The airline then had to operate from a small strip at Poona. There was no runway, no radio nor lighting facilities and no buildings. (right) A baby elephant was carried to the Antwerp Zoo from Santa Cruz Airport on Air-India's inaugural flight to Brussels in 1973.







## ODE TO A FINANCE MINISTER

Morarjibhai, Morarjibhai you are the king  
dollars and deutsche marks don't mean a thing  
Morarjibhai, Morarjibhai, one favour we ask  
Bury the "P" form and capture our hearts!

JRD WITH MORARJIBHAI, who was then Union Finance Minister, at Santa Cruz Airport in 1962. Below: One of Air-India's popular hoardings of the same time.

Above:

1, 1953, all airlines were nationalised by an Act of Parliament. Under the Air Corporations Act, 1953, two State Corporations were created, one to operate domestic routes and services to neighbouring countries, the other to run long-range international services.

Accordingly Air-India Limited was merged in the Indian Airlines Corporation and Air-India International Limited was taken over by Air-India International, of which, at the request of the Government of India, Mr J. R. D. Tata agreed to become Chairman.

"I proposed that all the airlines should be merged into two," says Jeh, "one for the east and one for the west. But the Government did not accept my plan. Instead it nationalised us all. I then suggested to them that there

should be two separate airlines—domestic and international, just like BOAC and BA in those days. The Government approved and acted accordingly."

## Nationalised Air-India

That in brief is the story of Air-India and also of Jeh. It is ironic that Mr Morarji Desai who has now relieved JRD from Air-India was the man who invited JRD to be the first Chairman of nationalised Air-India in 1953.

Bombay's Chief Minister, Morarjibhai, inaugurated the nationalised services. People expected him to deliver a sermon in justification of nationalisation.

## "Tradition of Tatas"

Instead the then Chief Minister of Bombay said: "I know the views of Mr Tata and the Government of India are diametrically opposed as far as the nationalisation of airlines is concerned, but in the changing pattern of events in our country this is inevitable. Only the future can tell whether it is a correct decision or not; and it is essential that members of this industry give to Government its unstinted support in the same way as has been promised by the Chairman who, though he has differed on the fundamental issue, once the decision was taken, has shown his great patriotism, typical of the traditions of the House of Tata's, to agree to serve as the first Chairman of Air-India International and a member of the Indian Airlines Corporation." With these words the tension of several months was broken; and those who were there saw Jeh wiping a tear from his eye.

## No Bitterness, No Regrets

Jeh's farewell message at the time he handed over his airlines to the nation reads as if it was written for today: "And now the time has come to say goodbye. As we turn the last page and put away the book, regret or bitterness has no place in our hearts. Instead, we may find content in the thought that what we did was worth doing, that we set out standards high and would not lower them, that we never need part with our memories."

Even today, although hurt and grievously wronged, JRD has no regrets, nor any bitterness.

The Indian Press in a rare mood of unanimity paid handsome tributes to J. R. D. Tata and censured the Government for the way in which it had dealt with a person who could rightly be described as God's own gentleman.

The best tribute has been paid to JRD by Air Chief Marshal P. C. Lal who has been appointed Chairman of Air-India in his place.

Mr Lal said that Air-India could not afford to lose the guidance of JRD who had fathered the Indian aviation industry. "JRD has given 46 years of his life to building up Indian aviation. He still has many years to give to this industry and we need him with us." Jeh must be brought back to Air-India.



Bowing low, I take leave of thee,  
and if the world's a stage, I've played my part.

And if the crowded house  
in chorus thunders out SHABASH  
humbly shall I stand...

and to those who take my place,

GODSPEED, shall I say.

