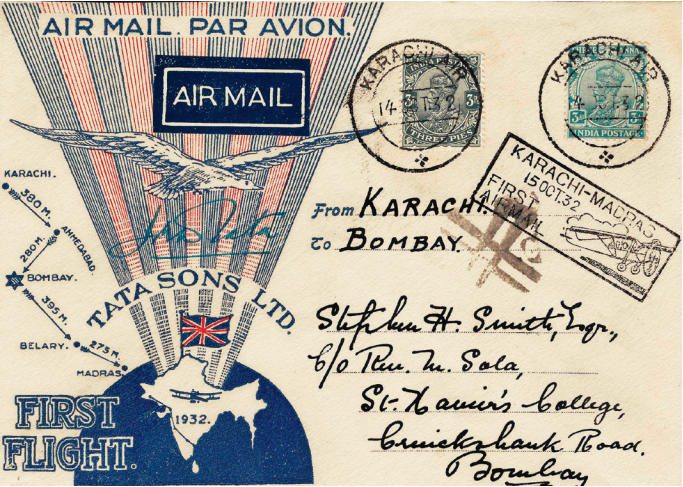
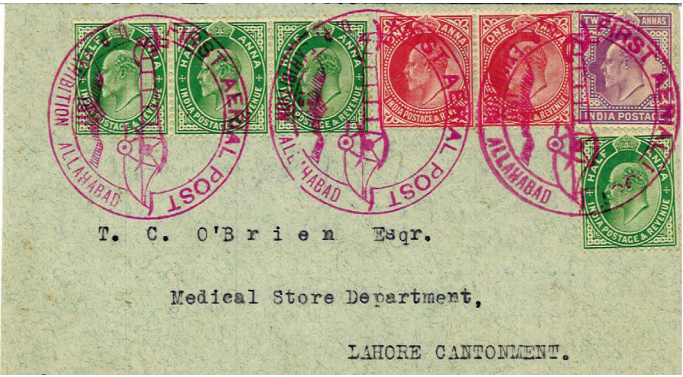


Flight of fancy

If anyone doubts India's glorious aero history, this aerophilatelist's unique collectibles of Indian airmails and Air India memorabilia, can prove otherwise. The rare treasures are now available online for everyone to see



Front cover of a mail carried on the first Tata Sons flight from Karachi to Bombay on October 14, 1932. The flight was piloted by JRD Tata, and the cover too, was signed by him



A cover carried on the world's first airmail service between Allahabad and Naini on February 18, 1911

JANE BORGES

LONG before technology revolutionised and allowed for instant communication, postal service was king. "It functioned like a fine-tuned machine. In fact, at the turn of the last century, there were at least 14 postal deliveries taking place every day in the city of Bombay. [This means that] the postman would knock on your door 14 times daily. All these deliveries were timed with the arrival of trains. With the General Post Office (GPO) right behind Victoria Terminus [now, CSMT], the postman would be out on his route within 40 minutes [of a train reaching the platform]," says Piyush Khaitan, a Bengaluru-based aerophilatelist and entrepreneur. This well-oiled system came into its own with air travel.

Not known to many, the first time a letter was carried by air anywhere in the world, was in India. On February 18, 1911, a seven-mile flight from Allahabad to Naini, across the River Yamuna, saw around 6,500 postal articles being delivered. "Six months later, a similar airmail flight was recreated in England by Walter Windham, who incidentally was also the force behind the first airmail service in Allahabad. So,



Front of a post card that was carried on the flight, showing the plane and pilot. It was signed by pilot (Henri Pequet) and organiser (Walter Windham)



A cover dated January 24, 1966, recovered from the wreckage of the Air India Boeing 707, which crashed into Mont Blanc while descending to land in Geneva. There were no survivors on board. Dr Homi Bhabha was on this flight

India has a very close link with the history of airmail," he adds. Khaitan calls himself an "amateur hobbyist," but the ease with which he rattles off airmail trivia is fascinating. A seasoned collector, he started engaging in aerophilately 12 years ago. "At the time, some senior philatelists gave me very wise advice. They said, 'First read the book, then buy the cover.' And so, I spent the early part of my journey,

just reading about the subject, before collecting."

A couple of years ago, Khaitan, along with the help of researcher Dharmdev Maurya, launched the web page, www.indianairmails.com, which is a treasure-trove of aerophilatelic literature and documentation. Updated monthly, the web page currently comprises only a fraction of his vast collection and research, which he has segregated into five categories: Pre-1953 Airlines, Tata Airlines, Air India, Indian Airlines and Others. It offers a compelling portrait of how letters travelled by air, the different routes they took, and postal stamps that were used. For a collector, the insights run deep. "First of course, you get a lot of cultural insights—the way people corresponded, or how they addressed the letters. But, it also offers an understanding of the development of airmails and communication," says Khaitan. Here, he cites how the first international airmail service from India to England in 1929, took eight days to reach. Nearly a decade later, by 1939, they were able to shrink that journey to two-and-a-half days, with the development of more modern aircraft.

The complex geo-politics and economic agendas that came into play also influenced the way journeys were undertaken. "There was a time when Persia [present day Iran] was under very strong German influence. They opposed the British Imperial Airways flying through their country, and hence, a longer route had to be taken via the Gulf," says Khaitan. Similarly, Italy, which was bang in the middle of India and England, objected to

How do you love, love?

Sunday mid-day editor Aastha Atray Banan, whose first non-fiction title addresses the 21st century challenge of being in love and happily so (yes, they aren't the same thing), traces the book's origin to an Insta DM by a stranger from Surat who was planning on "doing it"

IT WAS 2018 when a young man, only 17, wrote to me on Instagram. He was from Surat and was confiding in me because he had been listening to me talk about romance on my weekly podcast, Love Aaj Kal. He told me that he and his girlfriend were planning to have sex for the first time. His query: Will doing it in an OYO room be safe?

I was out of words. I wanted to tell him, first of all, that he should reconsider doing it at all. But, then I realised, we are no longer in the '90s. It was now "okay" to have sex for the first time at 14. But, what I definitely wanted to tell him was that an OYO room was a bumner location for the first attempt. It was unsafe, yes, because he wouldn't want to land up in the state the protagonist of the 2005 film, Kalyug did. Blackmailed for having sex because they were taped. Was I getting too dark for a teenager asking me a simple question? I went ahead and advised him on waiting anyway. Why not attempt it at 19, when you are equipped to deal with the consequences, and the emotions that would stem from it? Research the hotel you pick for the moment, and make sure it's legitimate and safe before you book a room. That call from Surat hit me with a realisation: it was far tougher being a lover today. It's also what reinforced my faith in the need for the podcast. It's what led, most recently, to writing The L-Word:



Love, Lust and Everything In-between (HarperCollins India, ₹299). I wanted to have a conversation about love minus the judgement. In a world where apps are key to finding a date or partner, love is a conundrum. Here was a place where "the illusion of choice" played an important part. Everyone seemed to come across as commitment phobic, looking for the next best thing, next great person, instead of

adapting to give what was before them the best shot. In the smaller towns of the country, where the dating culture was being received with new excitement and discovery, cheating, breaking up, living in, were inviting, but also confusing. Why was someone in love writing to me, a rank stranger? How would I be qualified to offer them solutions to problems of the heart? Well, for one, I seemed to come



AASTHA ATRAY BANAN
PIC/GAURAV SAWN

I decided to use each day of my 39 years, 19 of them spent observing relationships (mine and others'), to offer easy hacks to find love, keep love, and be okay when love ends. It's the advice I would also give myself. I may not take it, but it's good, solid advice regardless

across as the weekly domain expert. But also, that I didn't know them, and my advice would come from a place removed from prejudice. It's what led to my zeroing in on the challenges that every lover today must equip themselves to tackle: how to spot gaslighting, move on from a heartbreak without losing yourself, how to first identify and then leave a toxic relationship, how to tell if you are ready for sex, the trick to enjoying porn without the guilt, effective dealing with infidelity, and of course, my favourite, how to love yourself.

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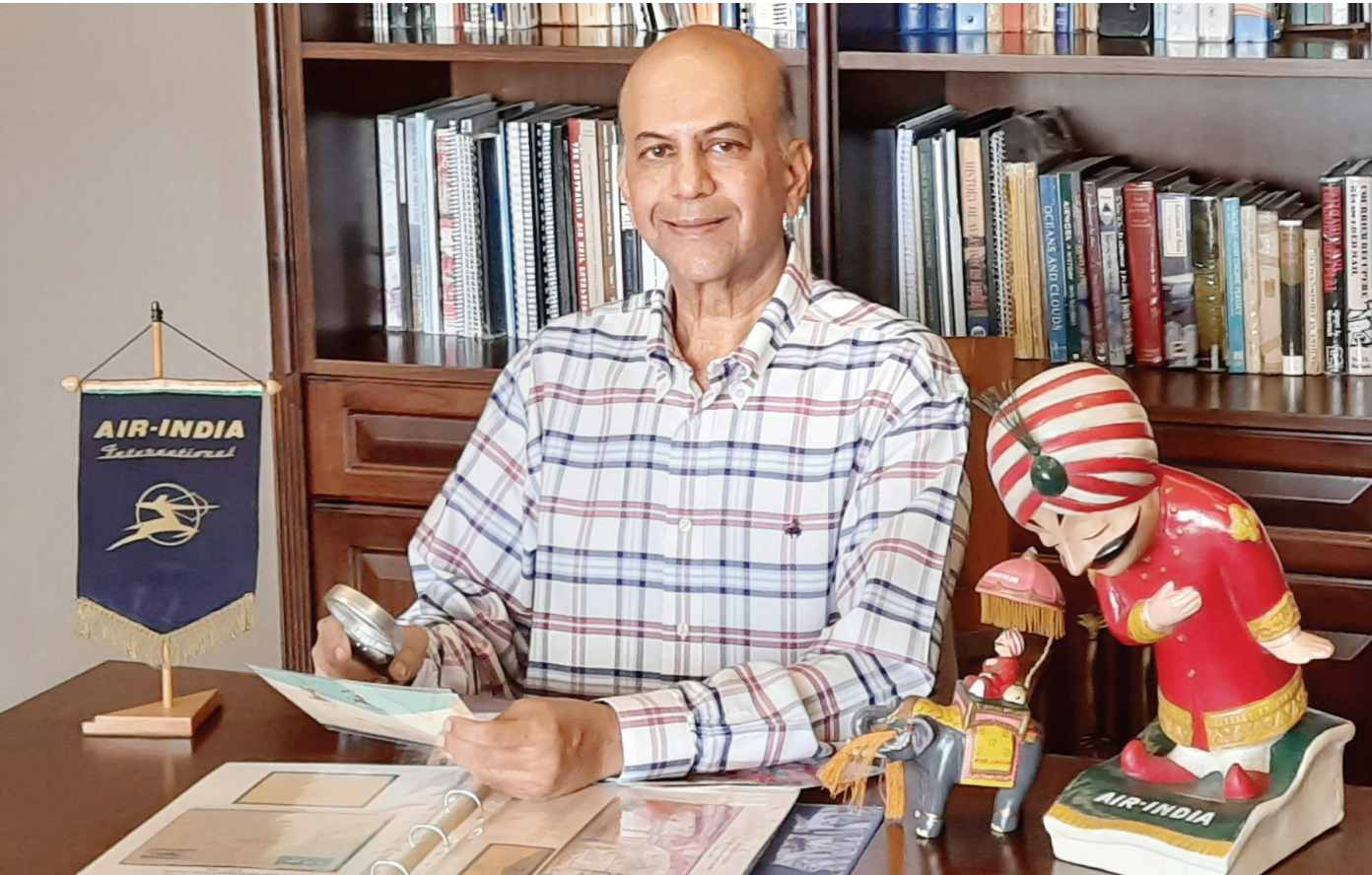
My inspirations are many, among them former lovers, friends, colleagues, and of course, pop culture. And despite the good and the bad, I have continued to hope that people believe in love, however hard, because to not love would

Love hacks from The L-Word

NEVER have sex with someone to make them like you. This applies to all of you: the 16-year-old who wants the popular boy or girl to like them; the 21-year-old who seeks validation through sex; the 30-year-old who is being forced to settle down; or the 40-year-old who once again is seeking validation due to age-related anxiety STOP mistaking anxiety for the butterflies in your stomach. Start normalising feeling comfort instead of anxiety LISTEN to your gut, and the voices inside you. They mostly, always tell you the truth. It prevents you from falling prey to gaslighting DON'T be friend zoned. Being a friend to someone you love is one of the hardest things one can do in life. You don't need that pain

be a waste of a good life. Why are some people wary of it? Why did someone sing, Mohabbat buri bimari? If we were aware of how not to let love become the reason for our misery, we'd stop seeing it as the enemy.

When some folks tell me they don't believe in love anymore, I tell them a story about everyone's favourite actress Jennifer Aniston, who suffered a massive public embarrassment when her lover of many years, Brad Pitt dumped her for fellow actress Angelina Jolie. If anyone, Aniston should have hated the idea of love. Instead, in an interview to Vanity Fair in 2005, she said, "When I hear people say that they would never do it again, it's like cutting off your nose to spite your face. Why would you ever close your heart down?"



Piyush Khaitan started engaging in aerophilately around 12 years ago

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any mail flying over their country, so the mail had to be taken by rail to Italy, before it was taken onward to England.

When it came to matters of aviation, India, though then a part of the British Empire, was fairly independent and forthright, says Khaitan. The Government of India very early on legislated that any foreign airline, including Imperial Airways, would have to deliver all mail at the first point of arrival in India. This would then be delivered by a local airline to the rest of the country. "This was a big catalyst to develop civil aviation in India."

One of Khaitan's most prized collectible is a letter, which flew on the first Air India international flight from Bombay to London on June 8, 1948. "At the time, the newly-formed Government of India released a special postage stamp of 12 annas to commemorate this flight. This stamp was valid only for one

day, and only on mail carried on that flight. Now, that was a unique event in world philately. Something like that had never happened before," says Khaitan, who has more than 250 covers, which were flown on that flight.

In the last 12 years, he has built a huge network to keep his passion going, which includes trading with other collectors worldwide, dealing with auction houses, including Sotheby's, and attending stamp fairs. "One needs to keep a track of everything that is happening." He admits that because it's such an exciting field a collector might be tempted to lay hands on anything and everything they find. "Before you realise, you'd have spent a lot of money on it. Some of these items are fairly expensive, and so, I always suggest that people [who are interested in aerophilately] continue reading and researching," says Khaitan, who runs a Mumbai-based financial services company.

Khaitan is also the proud own-



Khaitan with Vivek Matthai during an exhibition of his Air India collection at the Taj Lands End, Mumbai, in December 2016

er of the largest collections of Air India memorabilia, comprising over 6,000 AI artefacts. His online repository boasts of everything from airplane photographs, calendars, diaries, tickets, coasters, first flight covers, menu cards, posters, and time tables. Among these,

is the 1974 National Award-winning film made by Air India titled, To Serve Is To Love, which he says, is perhaps the only surviving print of the film. The 16-minute short encapsulates the journey of four flight attendants on AI's first Jet. "I tracked the film to the



US, and immediately managed to get it digitised at a lab in Chicago," says Khaitan. He received help from Vivek Matthai to build his collection.

Once the lockdown lifts, he is hoping to apply to the Guinness World Records. "All through the 1950s, '60s and '70s, Air India was the finest airline in the world. Its level of service, efficiency, crew, and modern aircrafts were legendary. They occupied a space, which left every other airline behind."

The postage stamp issued to commemorate the Air India International flight Bombay-London, June 8, 1948

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