

# *Air India's Inaugural International Flight*

*Editor's Note: This article originally appeared on Air India's website but is no longer available there. If you or someone you know has personal knowledge of this flight, please contact the editor at [dadinani@gmail.com](mailto:dadinani@gmail.com).*

**J**une 8, 1998 marked the 50th anniversary of Air India's maiden international flight – a milestone in the history of Indian civil aviation.

His Highness, the Jam Saheb of Nawanagar, Rajpramukh of Saurashtra, looked at his watch. The golden dial caught the light and the bejewelled hands indicated the hour. The time has finally come! Jam Saheb rang the bell and asked for his luggage to be brought down. Europe would be wonderful at this time of the year he thought as his liveried servants loaded his heavily monogrammed, leather luggage into the boot of the gleaming limousine parked outside.

Soon the car was speeding towards the airport; its crested flag fluttering in the night air.

In front of the Jam Saheb's car, another vehicle was also on its way to Santa Cruz airport, Mumbai. The car's occupants, the Jetha family, were excited. Mr Hasambhoy Jetha had explained, perhaps for the hundredth time, to his children that the flight would not leave without them. Nevertheless, the children persisted with their questions. "What kind of plane were they going to fly in? Where would they halt? What was the pilot's name?"

The cars finally reached the airport coming to a halt alongside a throng of journalists and photographers. Both drivers leapt out simultaneously to open the car's doors.

There was a palpable excitement in the air. Tonight Indian Civil Aviation history would be created. The time had finally come!

The date was Tuesday, June 8, 1948 and Air India's aircraft – Malabar Princess, a 40-seater Lockheed L-749 Constellation, registration number, VT-CQS, with Captain K.R. Guzdar in command – was in the final stages of preparation for its 5,000 mile journey from Mumbai to London via Cairo and Geneva. The flight's time of departure was late in the evening and of the 35 passengers that were to board the flight, 29 were bound for London and six for Geneva.

## ***Meticulous planning***

Months of meticulous planning had finally paid off. General preparations for the flight had been under way for a long time. Air India had the requisite experience of flying on domestic routes. However, some extra effort had to be put in order to fly on an international sector. Carefully selected staff members were allotted to the new operation, new staff were recruited and Air India offices were opened in Cairo, Geneva and London. The Cairo office was set up by Mr F. Nariman; Mr G. Bertoli took charge of the Geneva operations and London was headed by Mr M.A.S. Dalal where Air India had a very small set-up at London airport with the Operations and Engineering Departments housed in temporary hutments and the Traffic Department in a caravan which was parked somewhere behind the old control tower. Mr Dalal and Mr S.K. Kooka had physically tramped the streets of London for many miles looking at possible premises and hoping to secure the right ones. Ultimately they decided on 56 Haymarket for the Booking Office and 35 Curzon Street for Air India's Administrative Office.



A two column x 15 centimetre, non-graphic advertisement in The Times of India June 3, 1948 had the airlines' mascot, the Maharajah, bowing to welcome passengers. It read, "Fly with me to London via Cairo and Geneva every Tuesday in a beautiful Constellation for Rs.1,720."

Outside on the tarmac, Captain Guzdar was inspecting the aircraft. It was a summer night and the moon seemed suspended in the sky by a string of sparkling stars. Ideal conditions for a historic moment, thought Captain Guzdar as he looked up at the silver state-of-the-art Constellation. The aircraft was the finest money could buy and the operating crew which included the navigator and the radio officer, would soon be in the familiar self-contained environment where they could function with the skill and independence for which they had been trained. The camaraderie of the air - intangible, yet real to those who shared it - would be theirs once more.

The food was coming on board now. Given the nature of the flight – Air India's maiden international venture – and the list of distinguished passengers, it had been chosen with great care. Hors d'oeuvres, a succulent main course, a delectable dessert and of course, a savoury.

In the distance Captain Guzdar could see the flight crew walking down the tarmac towards the aircraft. They were talking excitedly. And why not? It was, after all, a once-in-a-lifetime event.



*Capt KR Guzdar being interviewed by late Hamid Sayani of All India Radio prior to departure from Santa Cruz Airport, on June 8, 1948*

The air hostesses and the lone Flight Purser, greeted Captain Guzdar before they ascended the stairs leading into the plane. Dressed in midnight-blue coats and skirts complemented by light blue, short-sleeved blouses, the girls looked smartly efficient. The hostesses had been trained not just as mere stewardesses but as personnel whose duty it was to ensure that every person in the aircraft felt that he or she was a special guest of the airline as opposed to just being a passenger on board. The air hostesses were given intensive training in the art of service on board. Air India's distinguishing mark in the intensely competitive world of international air transport. Western apparel was to remain the uniform for Air India air hostesses till 1960 when sarees were introduced giving the uniform its first ethnic touch.

Inside the small terminal building the atmosphere was electric. Passengers and visitors rubbed shoulders with the press and airport officials. Never before had Santa Cruz seen so many excited faces. Tonight it was a bustling, jam-packed, noisy conglomeration of people, many of whom, despite the late hour, had come to witness this historic event.

At one end of the hall the Air India contingent comprising Mr J.R.D. Tata, the then Chairman; Mr S.K. Kooka, then Traffic Manager who later became Commercial Director of the airline and Mr B.W. Figgins, then General Manager, watched the bustling crowd with affection. They knew just how much

hard work, how many late nights and months of preparation it had taken to make this dream come true.

### ***Distinguished passengers***

Passengers were being checked in. Other distinguished persons who were to be on board the Malabar Princess that night were:

Maharaja Shri Duleepsinhji who was looking forward to seeking the England-Australia Test match; Mr and Mrs Keki Mody; Lt. Colonel W. Grey, formerly of the Government of India Political Department; Mr Bhatti Gulam Mohamed; Mr Narottam and Mrs Sulochana Lalbhai; Mr H.R. Stimson; Dr Eric Streiff; Mr Hans Balthasar Reinhard; Mr Dhunjibhoy Noshir; Mr and Mrs Fazel A Fazelbhoy; Mr Salim Gulamally Bhimane; Mr Sinha Govindjee; Mr Venkatachalam Iyer; Mr Neville Wadia; Mr L.V. Malkani; Mrs G.S. Patell; Mr N.K. Patel; Mr P.S. Jayasinge; Mr Charles C.M. Broughton; Mr C.R.K. Rao; Mr C.R. Rao; Mrs Rosemary Southorn; Mr J.I. Williams and Mr Sardar Singh. Also on board were Mr H.B. Malcolm and Mr R.R. Noble, Indian cyclists, who were to represent India at the Olympic Games at Wembley.

“What a lot of luggage there is,” thought Gulshan Jetha wondering whether it would all fit into the aircraft. Little did she realise that apart from luggage, the Malabar Princess was carrying on board, 164 bags containing 1700 pounds of mail, the greater part from Indians to their friends and relatives in Egypt, Switzerland and the UK.

Akbarali Jetha was getting impatient. Tapping his father's hand he asked, “When will we board the flight?” Just then came the flight departure announcement. Akbarali cheered and to his surprise found that he was not alone. The entire building seemed to comprise one applauding mass of people.

This is what the many visitors had come to witness. The lateness of the hour had not dampened their spirits. This was one moment they were not going to miss.

“Drink a toast to me when you're up in the air,” said Mr Neville Wadia's mother as he headed towards the doors leading out onto the tarmac.

Outside near the gleaming, silver Constellation, bearing the Tricolour, a quiet calm prevailed. Passengers were beginning to board and the hostesses stood with folded hands welcoming them aboard.

On the flight deck, Captain Guzdar had already begun the pre-flight check. The clock in the cockpit displayed the time - 11.15 pm. “Almost time to go,” Captain Guzdar smiled excitedly to himself. Inside the aircraft the girls had begun their pre-takeoff rituals.

### ***Ready for takeoff***

Akbarali Jetha peered out of the window. Further down the aisle Mr and Mrs Fazel A. Fazelbhoy were engaged in an animated conversation which came to a standstill when they heard the announcement. “On behalf of Captain Guzdar and your crew we welcome you aboard our maiden flight to London via Cairo and Geneva...”

The cabin lights were dimmed for takeoff and a few minutes later Malabar Princess began moving, taxiing down to reach the takeoff runway.

In position now, Captain Guzdar revved the engines while he waited for permission from the control tower to takeoff. It soon came: “Air India Malabar Princess, cleared for takeoff...” Hearing these words, Captain Guzdar did not wait. His outspread fingers slid the main throttles forward to their full

extent. The engines' sound deepened from a steady whine to a thunderous roar. Then as Captain Guzdar released the brakes, Malabar Princess leaped forward down the runway.

Lights flashed past as the aircraft gathered speed. The nose wheel left the tarmac and Malabar Princess was now in lift-off mode, ready to leave the ground. A moment later with speed still increasing, they were in the air - bound for Cairo!



*Cairo 1948: Fali R.Nariman - District Manager Air-India International Cairo and Mr A.A.Fyzec- the Indian Ambassador to Egypt*

In 1948 only a few airlines existed and not many countries had their own international operations. India had achieved a notable milestone, ahead of others, that night. The civil aviation industry was still in its nascent stages so aircraft were small – while the Lockheed L-749 Constellation a state-of-the-art aircraft in its time, had a seating capacity of 40 people, the state-of-the-art Boeing 747-400, operated on this route today, is a 417-seater.

Aircraft also did not have the capability of flying long distances non-stop as they do today. Constellations could do 4,800 kilometres as opposed to 13,340 kilometres non-stop today. Flights,

therefore had to make technical halts en route for fuelling. For Malabar Princess, Cairo and Geneva were to be such halts.

Malabar Princess arrived in London in the early hours of June 10 taking a little more than 24 hours as compared to flights of today which take under 10.

For the second leg of the journey from Cairo Captain D.K. Jatar was in command. He was assisted by Captain B.B. Dhuru; Radio Officer, N.R. Sule; Flight Engineer, Freddie D'Souza; Navigator R.S. Mani; air hostesses Thelma McCoy and Ray Salway and Flight Purser, Ganesh.

After a halt in Geneva, Malabar Princess cruised towards London. A few hours in the night the voice from the control tower cut abruptly through Captain Jatar's thoughts: "Air India Malabar Princess, this is London. Begin your descent now."

Holding the aircraft in a steady descent, on course, Captain Jatar ran through the pre-landing check list. There was the familiar sound of the landing gear going down and he saw the runway lights strung ahead of him like strands of converging gold. Diminishing speed, Captain Jatar applied the brakes and soon Malabar Princess was taxiing down the runway coming to a halt at London airport.

Among the several people waiting to receive passengers was Mr Krishna Menon, then Indian High Commissioner to the UK. A broad smile spread across his face as he extended his hand in welcome to the then Chairman of Air India, Mr J.R.D. Tata, aptly described as the Father of Indian Civil Aviation.

Flash bulbs popped as Mr Tata stepped down from the aircraft followed by other passengers. With sparkling eyes and a broad smile he affirmed, "Set your watches boys, we are right on schedule!" He was clearly delighted at this great achievement.

Mr Tata carried with him messages of greeting and goodwill from Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the then Prime Minister of India to the Prime Ministers of Great Britain and Egypt and the President of the



*Arrival of the inaugural flight at London Airport. Mr B.W Figgins, then General Manager; Mr & Mrs J.R.D. Tata; Mr V.K. Krishna Menon, then High Commissioner for India in the UK; and Sir Fredrick James, then Managing Director Tata Ltd London.*

Swiss Republic. He also took with him similar messages from Mr Rafi Ahmed Kidwai, the then Communications Minister of India to his counterparts in these countries.

Considering its great significance, the event received extensive coverage in the Indian media. The Times of India dated June 9, 1948 wrote, "The inauguration of India's external air service...marks the attainment by this country of its majority in their realm of aerial development....this is

the first stage in India's march to international status..."

Celebrations continued the following day when an enormous party was held at the Dorchester Hotel, London where Mr Tata made his first speech in his capacity as Chairman of Air India International. The event was a great success and the national carrier of India was launched as an international airline.

History had been made and one man's vision had finally taken shape. A dream had been translated into reality.❖

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