

## J. R. D. Tata and Indian aviation

In human affairs it is given to some to embody attributes and live a life that raises them far above the ordinary. Such individuals leave indelible marks on the sands of time. One such person on the Indian stage was JRD. A colourful personality well known everywhere in India and abroad for a half a century – he was the leader and mentor of the great business and industrial house of Tatas founded by his illustrious ancestor Jamsetji. An outstanding leader of Civil Aviation and a daring aviator himself, he created the first airline in India and remained at the helm for many years. A great philanthropist he had instinctive support for the spirit of science and upheld ideals of morality and integrity in personal and public life which shine in the murky world of today.

Much is known and has been said about JRD as the prime architect of Indian Civil Aviation. R. M. Lala's excellent biography<sup>1</sup> brings out the fervour of his vision and infatuation with aviation which remained with him throughout his life. The thrill and fascination for flying captured his imagination at a very early age while witnessing the pioneering flights of Bleriot in the early 1900s soon after the Wright Brothers' epoch-making flights at Kitty Hawk. They not only set JRD's imagination on fire but a resolve grew in him which he redeemed early when he took flying lessons in England and soon after returning to India became the first Indian to qualify as a pilot. His younger brother Jamsed was also a keen flyer – JRD refers to him with affection and admiration as a 'born flyer'. It is tragic that Jamsed lost his life in an air accident in Austria when only 21 years old. The incident seems to have had a strong bearing on JRD's own determination to fly. Much later he endowed a fellowship for aeronautics at the Indian Institute of Science – named after his brother. He seems to have tempered his own daring and impetuosity with deliberate mastery of all aspects of flying – technical, navigation, safety, etc. Meticulous planning, full cognizance of hazards and personal attention to detail – attributes which spilled into other areas – were characteristic of the man who retained an

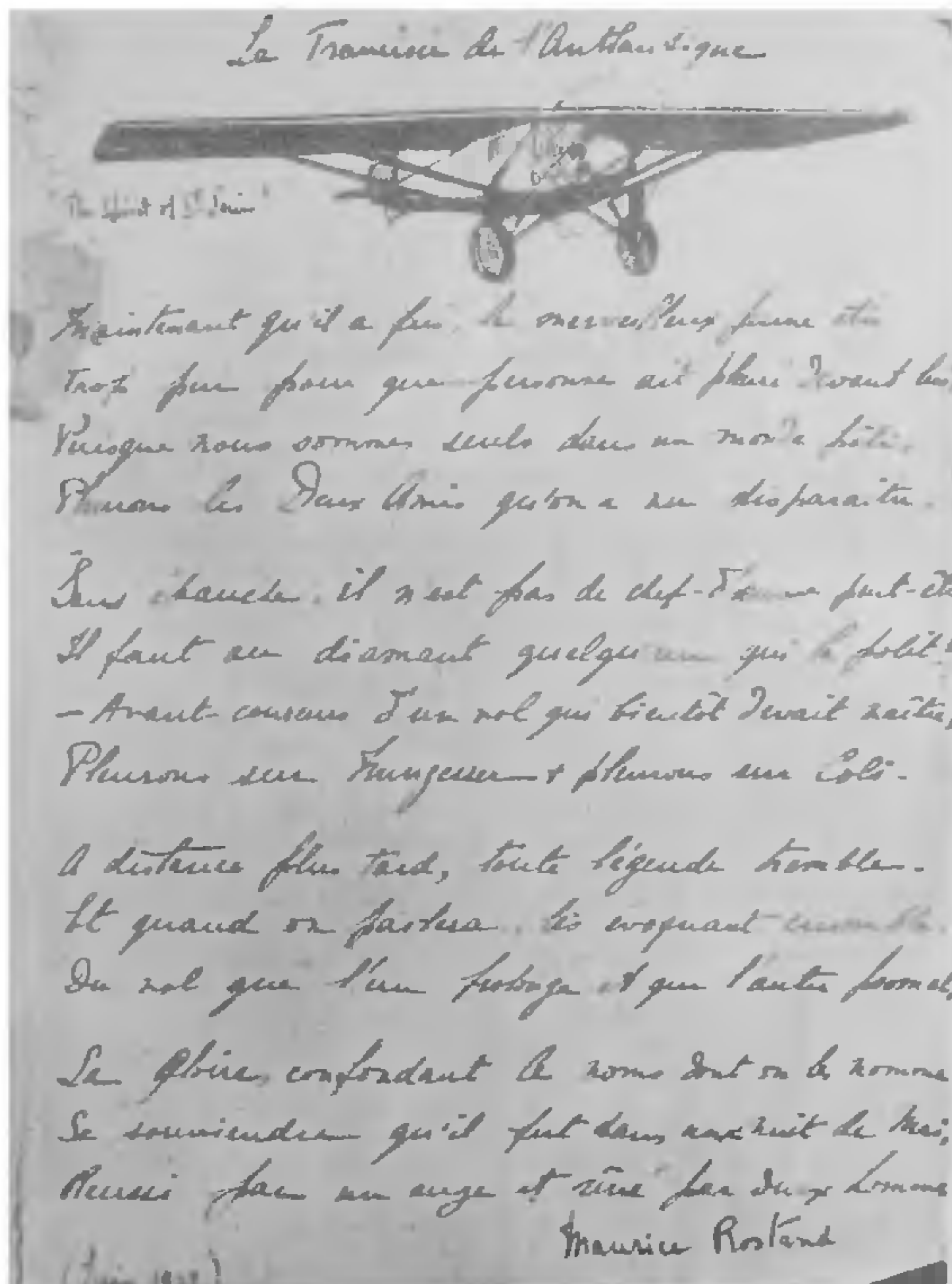
adventurous and debonair outlook even as he worked hard for mastery over details. The story of his participation in the Aga Khan prize solo air race between India and Britain is well known. The prize was won by Aspy Engineer – JRD lost by 2½ hours having been misled off his course by a faulty compass. The Karachi-to-Bombay repeat flights in a single-engined airplane in 1962 and 1982 commemorating the 30th and 50th anniversaries of Indian Civil Aviation will remain historic feats.



An artist's impression of young J R D.

Next to his first solo flying thrill JRD placed the opportunity to launch the first domestic air carrier Tata Airlines and later to build a world class International Air Service. From the early creation of Tata airlines and the vicissitudes of the Indian government's decisions – or the lack of them! eventually leading up to the nationalization of Indian domestic and international airlines in the early 1950s JRD vigorously involved himself in the evolution of civil air services on the subcontinent – often coming into conflict with government actions and policies. Typically while he vigorously defended his point of view of minimal governmental interference he retained no rancour after decisions were made

and was ever ready to help and even shoulder responsibility – e.g. as Chairman of Air India after nationalization. These actions flowed from a very deep and genuine interest in aviation as a vehicle of goodwill between peoples, promoting commerce, business and industry. Knowing that Air India could not compete in size with well-established international airlines he proceeded to carve out a niche for the airline in the quality of service, efficiency of operations, equipment maintenance and decor – the flying Maharajah symbolized the service. It is a sad commentary that in 1978 the then government abruptly removed him from the Chairmanship of Air India – not without a spirited protest from him. The record shows that while JRD conducted himself with dignity, government actions appeared graceless. Subsequent events have borne out what difference the absence of a great helmsman can make to an air carrier. For 50 years he steered Indian Civil Aviation from the days of wood and fabric, single propeller aircraft to the great Jumbo jets winging over continents. Apart from being directly involved in the creation and running of domestic and international airlines for India, JRD's involvement in the organization of airports, landing and navigation aids and safety issues was intimate and deep. Often asked to chair a committee by government or the industry he would throw himself into the job in spite of his very heavy schedule as Chairman of the Tata Companies in India and abroad. What eventually happened to the recommendations and suggestions of these committees is of course another matter – some were archived straightaway, some were referred to other committees which no doubt led to others! Sometimes JRD appeared despondent at the fate of the unrewarded work he put in but it is no exaggeration to say that without substantially changing his core point of view, the optimism and vision always returned. Sometime in 1992 he enquired from a small group of people in Bangalore what India should be doing in aerospace. He listened very attentively to suggestions that the establish-



A page from J R D's scrapbook

ment of an Indian aerospace industry quite outside of HIAL and the defence-controlled plants was long overdue and entirely feasible. Long a supporter of private initiative it is a measure of his wisdom when he remarked that the most likely success would be for a mixed private-public industrial manufacturing enterprise – not only of aircraft but also the accessories and ground handling equipment related to extended civil aerial operations. Perhaps he was reminiscing about free India's first joint undertakings between Government of India and Tata's.

JRD was well known in international aviation circles for his pioneering work. Invited by the President of IATA JRD joined the executive committee in

1952 and then went on to become the President in 1958. He contributed much to the work of this international clearing house for airlines and the industry especially on questions of airworthiness of aircraft and welfare of the passengers. Many international aviation organizations – among them the Federation Aeronautique Internationale (gold medal 1985), the International Civil Aviation Organization (Warner Award 1986) and the Daniel Guggenheim medal (1988) honoured JRD for his distinguished services to aviation.

It is interesting to speculate why with all his keen interest in aeronautics the Tata group never established the equivalent of Telco in aviation. Actually in the early years of World War II a Tata

aircraft company was floated with the objective of assistance to the war effort and through it to build up the nucleus of a post-war Indian aircraft industry. The De Havilland Mosquito fighter-bomber was selected in preference to other machines as its wood and fabric construction was considered easier and quicker to build than all-metal aircraft requiring special tooling and metal processing. Apparently a beginning was made in Poona but the then British Government cancelled the order and the plans fell through. At about the same time another venture, that of Walchand Hirachand began in Bangalore in cooperation with the Karnataka State and later the Central Govt which took over the enterprise in the late forties. The story of HIAL is another book. JRD remained helpful but aloof.

JRD's ideas of the coming air age which he spoke about in the early forties encapsulate his vision – much of which has come to pass – perhaps some elements even sooner than he had predicted. He said<sup>2</sup> in 1943... 'The most important consequence of the arrival of the air age will be to make the world one neighbourhood and to bring its people closer together physically'. Not unaware of the involvement of airplanes in war it is characteristic of the man that in public and private he laid greater emphasis on the peaceful uses as a unique component of transportation systems. His 1961 Commonwealth lecture to the Royal Aeronautical Society<sup>3</sup> admirably describes the story of Indian Air Transport from the beginning to the post independence years – a 30-year period in which JRD himself played a very significant role first as a pioneer and then as an able imaginative and concerned leader helping Indian air transport to cross various pitfalls and problems and finally settle down to a relatively smooth existence.

Sir Ben Lockspieser, a well known British scientist – who was a member of the post-war (1948) Reviewing Committee of the Indian Institute of Science, considered the scope of aviation in India as vast. He saw the subcontinent with enormous natural and human resources waiting to be developed and put to use for its people. He emphasized aeronautical research and civil aviation as an integral combination in plans for national progress. JRD later as President of IISc Court must have felt

elated at this reinforcement of his own vision. During his life he did his best to sustain the airline business even though his dream of combining private enterprise with enlightened public policy never did materialise to usher in a self-supporting Indian civil aviation sector which, working efficiently, would transform itself from a net consumer to a generator of wealth. Recent decisions in opening civil aviation for private operators and general indications that manufacture of civil aircraft would no longer be under the Defence umbrella

are signs, somewhat halting and confused in terms of a clearly enunciated aviation policy, that the message has at long last got through to government. Initiatives such as those of NAL and a few Indian industrial houses in venturing into aircraft design, manufacture and operations will sorely need someone of the calibre and vision of JRD to help actualize the potential that still awaits Indian aeronautical enterprises. If realized, it would be a fitting tribute to JRD's memory.

- 1 Lala R M - *Beyond the Last Blue Mountain, A Life of JRD Tata*, Viking Penguin Books India (P) Ltd, 1992
- 2 Tata, J R D., *The Dawn of the Air Age*, Speech to the Bombay Rotary Club Nov 2, 1943 in 'Keynote' Excerpts from JRD's speeches (eds Sabawala and Lala, R M) Tata Press, Bombay 1986
3. Tata, J R D., *J Roy Aero Soc*, 1961, 65, 1-25

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