

My memories of the air hostesses of the 1950s



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In the mid-1950s, when I was in my senior school, we were staying at Dhanraj Mahal in Bombay (now Mumbai). At night, after lights out, our rooms would be flooded with the neon blink of Air France, Alitalia, TWA, Qantas, BOAC, and JAL billboards, which were mounted against the walls of our building, all brilliantly lit up. All these international carriers had their offices inside the premises of Dhanraj Mahal.

As I drifted off to sleep, these billboards created their own magical illusions of distant lands. In the mid-50s, air travel was possible only for the affluent few. But for the less fortunate, the sense of wonder which flying created was reinforced by each of these billboards.

En-route to Churchgate, where I boarded the train to my school to Bandra every morning, I would see further evidence of the thrills of flying long distance by Swissair and Pan Am. There was also a sweet KLM jingle aired on Radio Ceylon, called "Flying the Golden Circle", the words of which have blurred with time, but the tune still resonates in my heart. Have you heard it?

The best billboard, by far, was that of Air India, prominently put up from Marine Drive all the way to Breach Candy. Even those who did not have the good fortune to fly by Air India knew that something special awaited them, on the day they could fly by Air India – courtesy that very adorable Maharajah.

As the years rolled by, the royally turbaned, red coated, lushly moustachioed, aquiline-nosed Maharajah took on so many different incarnations, each one surpassing the last.

Each one subtly conveyed delightful tongue in cheek humour, a bubbling love of adventure, and a hint of mischief.

To quote "He can be a lover boy in Paris, a sumo wrestler in Tokyo, a pavement artist, a Red Indian, a monk... he can effortlessly flirt with the beauties of the world. And most importantly, he can get away with it all. Simply because he is the Maharajah! He has ... become the most recognizable mascot the world over."

Today, I discovered that the Maharajah and I are the same age. All of 65. Well, well! But he is ageless, whereas time has taken its toll on me!

On my return journey from Bandra to Churchgate in the evening, the first class ladies compartment would be crowded with air hostesses of almost all the leading airlines. Impeccably dressed, they exuded an air of understated elegance and great finesse. Their presence transformed the first class compartment of the western railways to the glamorous interiors of a saloon car of the Orient Express.

I loved observing them and listening to their light banter, ranging from the clipped British, to the musically intoned French to the bewildering sing-song lilt of Japanese, to guttural German. Just listening to the various accents was like watching an enchanting performance.

Despite their long hours of flying, they bore not a trace of jet lag. All of them were immaculately turned out, not a hair out of place, be it a bouffant or a French roll. They wore the sheen of exclusiveness with élan, which only international travel could impart.

To my adolescent eyes, blondes, redheads and brunettes spelt everything that was wonderfully foreign. The European and American stewardesses, looked trim in their crisp blouses tucked into short tight skirts, in muted shades of fawn and grey or an occasional navy blue, their feet shod in patent leather stilettos.

A lasting image is of smoky eyes, which looked from half closed lids with magnificent curling lashes, as the lady flicked open a lighter, and lit a slender cigarette poised delicately between her index and middle fingers. There was something alluring about this action, which had a touch of Lauren Bacall and a hint of Ava Gardener in it.

What enchanted me was the way they sat, legs neatly crossed at the ankles, their faces glowing with the subtlest of makeup. They spoke softly, exchanging notes of various stopovers, interesting people they met, perfumes, liquor and chocolates they had collected at different duty free airports.

To a gauche schoolgirl in her teens, the perfumes they used created a special allure. There was Yardley, Revlon Max Factor and Dior in the air. And soon, I was after my father for something equally good for me. Being a doting father, he indulged me with my first Elizabeth Arden's Blue Grass, and then Goya #1, Goya #3, and a perfume simply called Primrose.

There was the graceful language of their hands as they straightened out the hem of skirt, or tucked a trailing curl behind an ear, or snapped open a vanity case, or dabbed the light film of sweat from an upper lip with the tiniest of hand kerchiefs, delicately lace edged. Tissues had not debuted then, thank God.

But the ones who stood out in this crowd were our own Indian air hostesses in their rich silk saris, in tantalizing peacock hues, which were matched with their high-necked blouses accentuating their swan like necks. Their Centaur pins kept in place the gathered folds of the *pallus* on their shoulders.

In the course of these journeys, I made friends with an Indian air hostess, Anjali Kadam. Initially she was aloof, but when we met oftener, I found her to be the very personification of charm. I was so enamoured by her grace and absolute femininity that I named my eldest daughter Anjali.

Today air travel has become commonplace, globalized and therefore pedestrian. Not a single Air India hostess of today, (who are mostly matrons past their prime waging the eternal battle of the bulge, and plastered with garishly applied loud make up) can hold a candle to the 24 carat ones of the '50's. ❖

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