

# Rabindranath Tagore

## one of the first celebrity air travellers of India

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**Y**ou've heard of test driving before selecting a car, but have you heard of or even imagined a test flight before undertaking a flight?

Impossible as it may sound, but that was exactly a reality in the city of Calcutta when a foreign airline company with direct support from its origin country's government arranged one for a very special passenger only to check his level of comfort in air travel at the ripe age of seventy-one. The very special potential passenger was Rabindranath Tagore, then India's one of the top global faces, along with Gandhi.

Tagore was too frequent to travel abroad from his teenage days, and by the time he reached his late sixties, he had made countless trips to many countries across Europe, North and South America, and Asia. His health started failing at the end of 1930 after his visit to Russia and America, and he slowed down in his travels abroad.

When he was almost settled with this painful reality that he would not be able to travel abroad anymore, he received a royal invitation from the Sultan of Iran, Rahlavi Reja Shah, to visit his country as a royal guest. Initially reluctant but engrossed with the temptation of seeing a new land and the chance of knowing new people with a new culture, Tagore finally accepted the invitation with the tough condition of travelling by air from Calcutta, stopping in Allahabad, Jodhpur, Karachi, and finally the city in Iran. Travel by ship in that hot summer was not prescribed by his doctors, considering his age.

Tagore had his first experience travelling by air on 16 April 1921 when he, along with his son Rathindranath and daughter-in-law Pratima Devi, took a two-hour flight from London's Croydon airport to Paris. The aircraft that he travelled on was named Farman F.60 Goliath and owned by a French company named Campagne Des Grands Express Aeriens. It was one of the pioneering airline companies to start commercial flight service between London and Paris.

Tagore enjoyed the flight and had his wish to make a few more air trips, but they were not all realised.

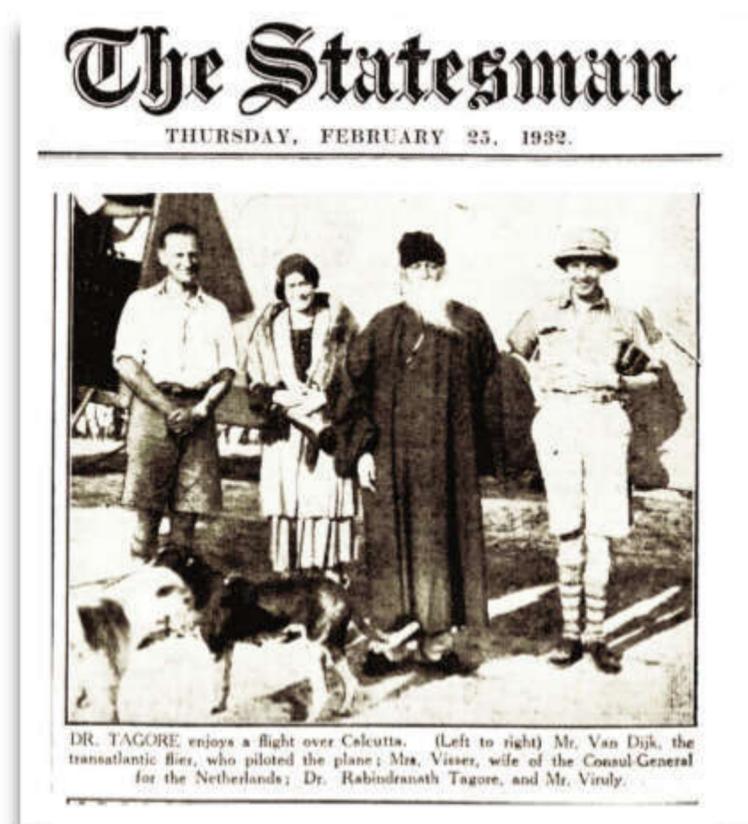
Ten years after that, in 1932, the cult of air travel in India started booming, and Calcutta airport commenced its commercial flight operation in 1924. From 1930 onwards, three foreign airlines, British company Imperial Air, Dutch company KLM Royal Dutch and French airliners Orient all started commercial passenger-carrying businesses. However, in 1932, it was not that popular thanks to its high cost and people's serious doubts about its comfort and safety.

When it was in the public domain that Tagore would be visiting Iran by air from Calcutta, it generated a considerable amount of excitement among people because, before him, no national celebrity was known to travel abroad in this mode of transportation. Once all arrangements were done with KLM, a surprising offer landed from their side. The airline offered a test flight to Tagore over the sky of Calcutta to check his degree of comfort with the change of atmosphere as he was about to travel for three long days, touching five different cities.

On 21 February 1932, KLM arranged a special test ride for its celebrity customer Rabindranath Tagore. Piloted by one Van Dijik, who had rich experience of flying over the Pacific, the flight took off from Dumdum airport at 4 p.m. and flew at 12,500 ft of height, flying over the Bay of Bengal and returned to Calcutta after 25 minutes of a joyride. Tagore was accompanied by the Netherlands' Council General Viruly, his wife Mrs Visser and his secretary Amiya Chakraborty.

On 25 February, this unique joyride of Tagore was reported in *The Statesman* with his photograph. The event created a sensation across India to note such an honour gained by Tagore from a foreign airline.

Finally, on 11 April 1932, the most famous citizen of Calcutta took his first real air ride from an early hour. He arrived in Dumdum very early in the morning from Khardah, where he was staying the night before. An excited Tagore



described his experience of reaching Dumdum airport from Khadah on that early dawn of 11 April. He wrote that as soon as his car rode the main road from the narrow lane on its way to the airport, the smell of petrol that he smelt made him aware of a new era, whereas the trees on the sides of the dark road were standing like witnesses of an older time. He saw the electrically lit-up airport building from a distance and found a thick cavern of darkness on its runway. He, in that light and shadow, was delighted to see an army of media persons and friends awaiting to see him off at the airport. Among them were his best friend, Ramananda Chatterjee Kalidas Nag, his wife, Prashanta Chandra Mohanalibis, and his wife, Surendranath Kar, etc.

Before leaving, probably no photograph was taken, but Tagore gave an interview to the *Liberty* newspaper describing his purpose and expectation of visiting Iran. It was the first interview given by a celebrity at Calcutta airport. Tagore in that interview

said, "...I am past seventy, and I know I am taking a risk (obviously he was speaking of his impending aerial flight), but when I think that they have invited my country through me, I could hardly deny so cordial an invitation." This very rare interview of Tagore was partly mentioned in Sudip Basu's book.

At 5 a.m., Tagore, along with Pratima Devi and Amiya Chakraborty, boarded the KLM-marked triple-engine Fokker F.12. It was a blue-coloured plane with KLM branded in gold. Tagore described it as a "Jantra Pakshiraj", a mechanical bird, and he found his seat next to a window. Kedar Chatterjee, the managing editor of *Prabashi* and *Modern Review* magazine and also the son of legendary editor Ramananda Chatterjee, was also supposed to accompany Tagore, but he had to fly a few days before due to the unavailability of tickets on that day.

Tagore, after taking off from Calcutta, landed in Allahabad around 11 a.m. He found his flight comfortable,

though the sound of the engine and blades of the propeller bothered him. Among his co-passengers, he found one citizen of Denmark who had his business of sugarcane in Manila Island. Inside the plane, Tagore was photographed by an Indian and British employee of KLM. He was asked to give a few autographs, which he gladly did. Tagore has mentioned that inside the plane, an adequate amount of cheese, bread, chocolate, sandesh and mineral water were provisioned. Tagore, in his Iran travelogue "Parasya Yatri", has written that till the time he was flying over Bengal, the aeroplane was flying at a low height, and finally he landed in Allahabad around 10 a.m., where the aircraft was refuelled. After Allahabad, he touched Jodhpur in Rajputana and Karachi in Sindh. He finally arrived in Bushire on the third day of his trip.

After spending nearly six weeks, Tagore returned to Calcutta on 31 May 1932 and was received by his son Rathindranath Tagore along with Prashanta Chandra Mahanalibis and Nellie Sengupta, who later became Congress President at Dumdum. He was photographed at Calcutta airport with Pratima Devi on that day by the Calcutta Municipal Gazette. His return was widely covered by the press.

Sudip Bau, in his book, has given the cost of air travel from Calcutta to Bushire in 1932. According to him, it was \$166 on one side and \$332 for a round trip.

Tagore's air travel to Iran by making several stopovers in three cities in between created an invisible excitement in India, which was a grand push for the potential air passenger market of India. It broke many myths and baseless surmises that air travel is risky and very uncomfortable. When Tagore took up this flight from Calcutta, almost at that time Viceroy of India also flew from Delhi to Calcutta by air. Both events became exemplary, and both were mentioned in an article published in *The Pioneer* on 22 May 1932.

Tagore created a sensation by boarding a flight from Calcutta. Remembering how he felt when the flight took off from Calcutta, his 1st



flight taken in 1921, from one city of Europe to another, Tagore clearly said that while flying from London, he did not feel the pangs of leaving his land. There was no home calling from the back; thus, it was easy to de-anchor that soil, but while leaving Bengal, he felt the call of home behind.

No doubt, the biggest cultural titan of Bengal was always a Bengali first and then a global icon. No wonder that today, 93 years after his historic flight from Dumdum airport, one can see the entire external façade and roof of the new Calcutta airport terminal, operational since 2013, are decorated with a replica of his handwritten letters and figures.

No doubt this is a fitting tribute to the most famous global city boy of Calcutta.