

## Before take-off: waiting for India's globalization at the Sahar International Airport in 1974

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Fig. 36/37: Left: Mumbai, Sahar International Airport, photograph from the 1960s. Right: Verso of the above-mentioned postcard.



“On my way to Delhi! My dear Sachse! Let me thank you one more time for the Christmas gifts Nehru got me, especially Forster’s volumes. I am glad he’ll go back in three days, even though India’s climate is now at its best, but the stay was hectic. 1000 greetings from [unreadable name]”

These few lines by a German traveler, written to a friend in Leipzig, suggest that the purpose of his Indian trip was not tourism. His journey was hectic, and he is happy that his friend can return to Germany, even though, as he notes, the weather has turned pleasant. Looking at the postage stamps, we can guess that it is early or late 1974 in Mumbai when

the city enjoys the moderate sun of winter. Not a tourist, he probably is not a hippy either. In the 1970s, the many Westerners who traveled to India to experience the local spiritual heritage did it through the "hippie trail," a popular overland route that went through countries such as Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and finally, India. But our German traveler picked a photo of Mumbai's airport, suggesting he was travelling by air, a true privilege in the 1970s when a round-trip from Germany to India could have cost the price of a car.

The Sahar International Airport, as it was then named, is photographed from its outside. The photograph captures the terminal's entrance, with its pristine white concrete walls supported by light pillars. The flowers add a touch of warmth and beauty to the scene, creating a striking contrast with the concrete and steel of the airport. The red flowers of the West Indian Jasmine, widely used in weddings, bloom throughout the year in South Asia. As for the sunflowers, a symbol of hope and renewal, they seem to be a fitting metaphor for the airport that was going to take India on a global journey.

### **When India was sleeping: the modest role of Mumbai airport in 1970s India**

However, in the early 1970s, India was still sleeping. In the photograph, the airport is deserted, and the only movement in the picture comes from the parked cars, which gives a sense of stillness and emptiness. The Sahar International Airport was built during the British colonial period in India. It was commissioned by the British government and constructed by the Public Works Department of the British Government in India. After India's independence, the airport was nationalized and was placed under the control of the Indian government, managed by the Ministry of Civil Aviation and later by the Airports Authority of India, which is responsible for developing and managing airports in India. As a functional building, mostly meant to fulfill the needs of the colonial administration, the airport was the opposite of impressive. What strikes is the minimalism of the façade of the terminal building, in the epoch of Art Deco. In

addition to the main terminal building, the airport also had several other buildings and facilities built in the same architectural style, such as the control tower, the cargo terminal, and the maintenance hangars.<sup>1</sup> When it would be revamped as the modern Chhatrapati Shivaji International Airport in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the airport would over-emphasize Indian elements such as dome-shaped roofs, arches, tall and slender columns with traditional Indian motifs. In the early 1970s, the Sahar International Airport could not accommodate more than 600 passengers at any time and served a limited number of domestic and international destinations.<sup>2</sup> Also, it hosted a few cargo flights, transporting sensitive goods such as electronic components, machinery, and high-value goods. The postcard was probably sent by airmail service, along with other small packages and parcels.

### Dreaming of greatness: the ambitions of an Indian airport

Still, the Sahar International Airport was India's largest airport at the time, and the main entry gate to the country, probably explaining why our German traveler first landed in Mumbai. The cities of Delhi, Kolkata, Chennai, Ahmedabad, Bengaluru, and Hyderabad also had international airports, but Mumbai was a major center of cotton trade and textile production and the main financial hub of India, connected to the world.<sup>3</sup> Also, it was home to the famous Tata Airlines. The airline is

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- 1 For a view of the airport in 1970, see *Mumbai Airport, 1970s India*, HD from 16mm, YouTube. s. d. URL: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oQDGa7g\\_P\\_I&ab\\_channel=Kinolibrary](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oQDGa7g_P_I&ab_channel=Kinolibrary) (15.02.2023).
  - 2 Shoba, Gupta; Singh, Uday Chander, "Travellers Can Breathe Freely with Brand New and Improved Terminal at Sahar in Bombay", *India Today*, 31/12/1980. URL: <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/tourism/story/19801231-travellers-can-breathe-freely-with-brand-new-and-improved-terminal-at-sahar-in-bombay-773676-2013-11-29> (15.02.2023).
  - 3 Patel, S.; Masselos, J. (eds.), *Bombay and Mumbai: The City in Transition*, New Delhi, New York, Oxford University Press, 2003.

intertwined with the history of India's aviation.<sup>4</sup> It was founded in 1932 as Tata Airlines, later nationalized in 1946 and renamed Air India. In the 1950s, Air India became one of the first carrier in the world to operate jet aircraft, and it was also one of the first airlines to fly to the United States and Canada. When Sahar International Airport was built and opened in 1942, the company was one of the main carriers operating out of the airport, alongside Indian Airlines, which mainly served domestic routes. Amongst the foreign airlines, the leading ones were British Airways, Air France, Lufthansa, KLM, and Pan American Airways. Although the airport looks asleep in the photograph, India was on the cusp of a significant transformation. A symbol of British colonial engineering, it became the symbol of India's dream of greatness as India gained its independence in 1947. In the early 1970s, the country was emerging from its post-independence economic struggles and was starting to industrialize, leaving behind its primarily agricultural economy.<sup>5</sup> The development and operation of a major international airport like Sahar International Airport represented a significant investment in the country's transportation infrastructure. It symbolized the country's will to integrate with the global economy and its efforts to project a modern and progressive image of India.

### Rooting for the world: locating the airport in Mumbai

The airport's location, near the city of Mumbai, made it easily accessible to the large population of the city, and it was also located near the coast, which allowed for aircraft to take off and land over the sea, reducing the noise pollution over the residential areas. Located in the suburb of Santa Cruz, it was built on land primarily used for agriculture and was relatively flat and open, making it ideal for constructing runways

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- 4 Tata J., "The Sixteenth British Commonwealth Lecture: The Story of Indian Air Transport", *Current Science*, 1994; p. 455–479.
- 5 Rothermund, Dietmar, *India: The rise of an Asian giant*, Yale, Yale University Press, 2008.

and taxiways. In the 1970s, it would have taken 45 minutes to an hour to reach Colaba by taxi, as the airport was not well connected to public transportation. It was however signaling an early shift in the city-core of Mumbai.<sup>6</sup>

Our German traveler, as he left the airport, would have first passed through the surrounding neighborhoods, likely a mix of small, densely populated residential and commercial areas with small shops and businesses.<sup>7</sup> The buildings in these areas would probably be relatively low-rise, made of brick or concrete. He would then likely see more open spaces and greenery, including small farms and fields, wetlands, and mangrove forests.

*Fig. 38: North-western suburb of Mumbai, residential buildings built in the 1970s.*



These areas would be dotted with small villages and rural communities with traditional occupations such as fishing. Getting closer to Co-

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- 6 Sita, K.; Phadke, V.S.; Swapna, Banerjee (eds.), *The Declining City-Core of an Indian Metropolis: A Case Study of Bombay*, New Delhi, Concept Pub. Co., 1988.
- 7 For photos of Mumbai during its transformative years after independence till the early 1990s, see: Dwivedi, Sharada; Mehrotra Rahul, *Bombay The Cities within*, Mumbai, Eminence, 2001.

laba, our traveler would start to see more densely populated areas, with taller buildings and more developed infrastructure. The streets would be more crowded, and there would be more traffic. Alongside establishments from the Victorian period, he could begin to see a few buildings made of concrete and glass.

### **Rising above the Paddy: the transformation of Mumbai's airport**

The airport's area of Santa Cruz, once in the suburbs of Mumbai, is now at the heart of the city. From a population of about 6 million inhabitants in the 1970s, the city hosted more than 21 million individuals in 2023, transforming the face of the city.<sup>8</sup> Thanks to its easy access to international and domestic travel, Santa Cruz has accommodated several large companies, including multinational corporations, which has led to the development of many service-based industries, such as banking, finance, and insurance.<sup>9</sup> The transformation of the airport, known as Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport since 1999, reflects the growing demand for air travel in Mumbai and India.

As India liberalized and globalized in the 1980s, putting an end to the "Hindu" rate of growth (a witty term invented for the 3.5% rate of growth that had prevailed till then), the airport underwent several expansions and renovations to keep up with the growing demand for air travel. With the liberalization of India's economy in the 1990s, the airport expanded to accommodate larger aircraft and to improve passenger facilities. In 2006, like most Indian airports, it was privatized and bought

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8 Saglio, Marie-Caroline, "Mumbai: mutations spatiales d'une métropole en expansion", *Mappemonde* 62/2, 2001; p.26-31. URL: <https://doi.org/10.3406/mappe.2001.1654> (15.02.2023).

9 Imbach, Ruedi, "Vers une «global city region»? Stratégies économiques, déploiement spatial et politiques d'accompagnement à Mumbai", *Métropoles*, 2011/9. URL: <https://metropoles.revues.org/4469> (15.02.2023).

by the Adani group, owned by one of the country's wealthiest men, a tycoon whose fortune was made by developing global infrastructures in India. The old terminal, visible in the photo, does not exist anymore and has been replaced by two new terminals. The main terminal building was also stretched and renovated to provide more passenger space, and new facilities, such as duty-free shops and restaurants, were added. With the continuous addition of new runways and taxiways, the airport is now one of the busiest in India. It handles about 50 million passengers and 1 million metric tons of cargo annually.<sup>10</sup>

Our German traveler would not recognize Mumbai's airport anymore. Now a blend of traditional Indian and modern styles, featuring a central dome structure with arched openings and intricate carvings combined with clean lines and sleek glass facades, the airport that once reflected the country's sleepiness now represents the airport's emphasis on global lifestyle and economic prosperity. The India that was waiting at the terminal of the Sahar International Airport in 1974 has taken off.

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*Fig. 39: Mumbai, Malabar Point and Bombay Bay in 1900, before the international economic boom and trade globalization.*

