

Head Starts & Heart Stops

Of heroes, villains, & giggles...

It was hilarious! Only if one had a whacko sense of humor! It appeared I had discovered mine. I should have flipped. But I hadn't. I was impressed with myself. For not being hassled. The three-hour mess had ingredients of a perfect masala movie. There were heroes, villains, comedians, and the side characters—passionate youth, crying babies, and feeble oldies. The plot was crammed... suspense, twists, thrills, politics, drama, anger, and laughter. Even romance. Ritu and I hadn't giggled in cozy-togetherness so abundantly in a long, long time...

Nov 29, 2015. It was an early morning start. 5 am is a sinful hour to check out of a Goa resort. Especially when the preceding night has wrapped up at 2 am! But we had no option. Not unless we wanted to give my cousin's son's 5 pm wedding a miss. Only Air India provided a decent Goa-Mumbai-Jaipur connection. The Goa takeoff was fine; it was the Mumbai transit where the drama unfolded.

As the plane began its slow taxiing, the flight attendant came rushing "Can you please switch your seats?" Reason? The family sitting across the aisle was traveling with a baby. Which meant that a provision was required for an extra oxygen mask. And surplus breathing masks were available only on our side. We obliged. Our national carrier deserves some breathing room.

Then the plane abruptly halted and cruised back to the gate. An announcement blared after fifteen minutes: A technical snag needed attention. A warm lunch was served. One hour crawled by. Then came the pendulum update. *Good news:* The technical snag had been sorted. *Bad news:* The pilot had left for the day because he was done with his authorized flight hours!! *Good news:* A new pilot was on the way. *Bad news:* There was no ETA for the new pilot!!

There was a stunned silence. Except for a grey-haired business classer who lost it. He fearlessly took upon the fight for our consumer rights. Single handedly, he gave it off to the head flight attendant! The experienced lady patiently dodged his verbal diarrhea for fifteen minutes. Then calmly put him in his cushy place with her masterpiece "I have been flying Air India since before you were born; please show some respect!"

Our champion had sunk. But not before he had passed on the leadership baton. Not to anyone in my vicinity. We mid-rowers were busy perfecting our middle-class 'spectator' role. However, the back-rowers had rallied and marched to the front. Our new torchbearer was an overzealous NRI. His booming voice convincingly echoed. "The women and children are dying for oxygen! On humanitarian grounds, open the goddamn doors!!"

The doors opened. The sky bridge was stormed. The crowd made it to the locked door at the other end of the bridge. Door hammering was beyond our NRI's league. It was time for desi aggression. A new leader was born. He threatened the ground official "Sir, kindly open the terminal door. Else we are going to beat you up." The official shrugged. There was no provision to unlock the terminal doors from inside.

That's when street leadership emerged. A collegian climbed down the stairway adjacent to the plane door. His plan was ambitious. Storm the runway. Stop other planes from taking off. Capture media attention. The crowd cheered. The strategy lasted solid ten seconds. The airport security with their guns did the convincing part. Our new leader retreated sheepishly.

All the cradles of leadership had fallen. It was blame-game time. Two camps sprung up. Pro & anti Modi. "Where are our promised achhe din?" came Bihari-accented provocation by a Modi-baiter. "Lost in the sins of the previous government", a voice from Maharashtra retorted. The slogans started heating up. Thankfully, the new pilot's arrival came to the rescue. Everybody clapped. All was forgotten. Celebrations galore!

Except for a passenger who stuck to her principled stand. She was a well-polished lady. She had been demanding through the commotion for her checked-in bags to be unloaded. 'Boycotting is the only way to teach Air India a lesson,' she had repeatedly declared. She claimed to be a TOI journalist, one who intended to head straight to the press and deliver a first hand account of the misadventure.

A senior Air India official was summoned. The official explained that searching and unloading her bags would delay the flight by one more hour. But the journalist refused to back off. Additionally, she had reservations on the reliability of the new pilot! A Chinese traveler panicked at her pilot inference, and wished

to disembark as well. Helpless, the airline official conceded. The offer to disembark was extended. Ritu and I took up the offer. The three-hour circus had ensured that our wedding rendezvous was history.

The four of us made our way back into the terminal. Our bags took another hour. Meanwhile, we bonded and exchanged B&B invites—Pune, Bandra, and Shanghai. Before adieu, I queried our only successful leader of the day “Why were you flying to Jaipur?” “Puja at my in-laws,” she replied. I dropped a tongue-in-cheek liner “Good, so now you don’t need to visit your in-laws”. And that’s when she went all LOL and ROFTL before finally catching her breath “Thank heavens! How I managed to wriggle out of my dreaded interaction!”



Whose (air)line is it anyway...

Ritu and I giggled nonstop on our drive back to Pune. Who was the hero and who was the villain? On one side was Air India who majorly messed up but still tried its limited best to serve—oxygen masks, warm lunch, honest announcements, patient tackling, appeasing demands. On the other side was our new friend who intelligently manipulated the system to service her personal ends. She grounded a flight full of frustrated passengers for an hour by invoking her principled stand!

Air India's heart was in the right place, but the head was not. The journalist's head was in the right place, but the heart was not. Sometimes I wonder which one of the two combinations is a lesser evil in business and in society? Perhaps the most interesting responders can educate me over a home-cooked meal at my place...