

The real Punjab Mail

by MANOHAR SINGH GILL

The Orient Express was made famous by Agatha Christie. In the days of the raj the most romantic train on the sub-continent was the Frontier Mail which ran from Bombay to Punjab and the Khyber Pass. Men like John Masters have described the fascinating journey by this train, full of bearded Sikh soldiers and hawk-nosed Pathans, from the sultry Bombay coast to the dry uplands of Punjab and the Frontier Province. The Punjab Mail was another such train.

Today the Punjab Mail, which runs from Bombay to Ferozepur, is no longer a carrier of romance and mystery. That honour belongs to another Punjab Mail, which is not even a train but only a happening and an experience. It starts from Heathrow airport, outside London, and finds its way to the land of the five rivers, via Frankfurt, Dubai and Delhi.

Heathrow is one of the world's busiest airports, and on any day it is crowded. But there is a special rush — and a special flavour about it — when Air India leaves for Delhi.

The passenger lounge is crowded with multi-coloured turbans, black and peppered white beards, flashy salwar kamizes, covered over with incongruous looking English fur-coats, and wailing child-

ren that crawl about under the legs of parents, huddled in groups.

Loved ones are leaving for a visit to Doaba, and half of Southhall has come to see them off. While the men wait around, the women have a hearty gossip. Bashful brides, with faces covered from the view of their men, are given last-minute instructions by mothers-in-law on family politics in the village. Farewell gifts of five or ten-pound notes are pressed on reluctant hands. There is much sniffing behind veils at the thought of parting.

MYSTIFIED

Suddenly somebody points to his watch and cries that the plane is about and they must hurry. With the memory of overcrowded Indian trains; which leave half the passengers behind, ever present in their minds, the passengers and friends make a rush for the Customs check-in counter, pushing "gora log" out of the way. Last-minute farewells and instructions are shouted as the passengers run down the corridor to the plane. The English watch in mystified silence and express their feelings with a shrug.

The luggage — numerous overloaded bags and gathris — is the type best suited to the Punjab Mail. The anxiety to find a seat, remembered

from their train days back home, makes everyone push past the smiling air-hostess, completely ignoring her charms. They are almost surprised that there is a chair for everyone. Bags are piled on the laps of protesting neighbours, and the Punjabi stretches himself out in relief at having made it.

SWEET-VOICED

Once airborne, they pull out bottles of Scotch and begin to celebrate the pleasures of leaving England and the anticipations of arriving in their Punjab village. Countries and airports pass; announcements are made by sweet-voiced air-hostesses and films are shown, but our Punjabi is not interested. He drinks steadily and floats even higher than the 30,000 feet of the Boeing. At Dubai some more compatriots come aboard, with shining leather jackets; rolled up air mattresses, transistors, and of course the ubiquitous bottles of Scotch. Now it is truly like the Punjab Mail. The odd non-Punjabi passengers burrow deeper into their seats in their anxiety to be non-conspicuous.

The Punjabis, with the London bottles finished and the Dubai ones started, almost take over the air train. Food is refused and drink is generously offered to known and unknown neighbours. I know a true story in which a Dubai man kept

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on pressing a drink on a vegetarian type in the next seat. He could not understand the refusals and took them for rudeness. Somewhere over the Arabian Sea he stood up in his seat and poured a full bottle of Blackdog over his neighbour's bald pate and shining suit.

By the time they approach Delhi, in the early hours of the morning, most are sozzled and snoring. Bleary-eyed, they stumble into the muggy heat of Delhi and are wrung out by the Customs. Outside, taxis driven by Punjabis wait with engines ticking over. They pile into them, five or six to a vehicle, their fat beer-tummies squeezed together, and head for Jullundur.

Anyone driving to Delhi in the mornings is bound to run into dozens of yellow and black taxis near Karnal, all heading north. The returning prodigals can be easily recognised. On top of the taxis are packed the brightly coloured and smartly designed check travelling cases of the Londonwallahs; the owners in flashy suits snore on each other's shoulders inside. Through the rear windows one can see a pile of transistors, tape-recorders and other gee-gaws of the West.

Every time I pass this daily caravan, heading for Jullundur, I say to myself: the real Punjab Mail has arrived and, as always, is dead on time.