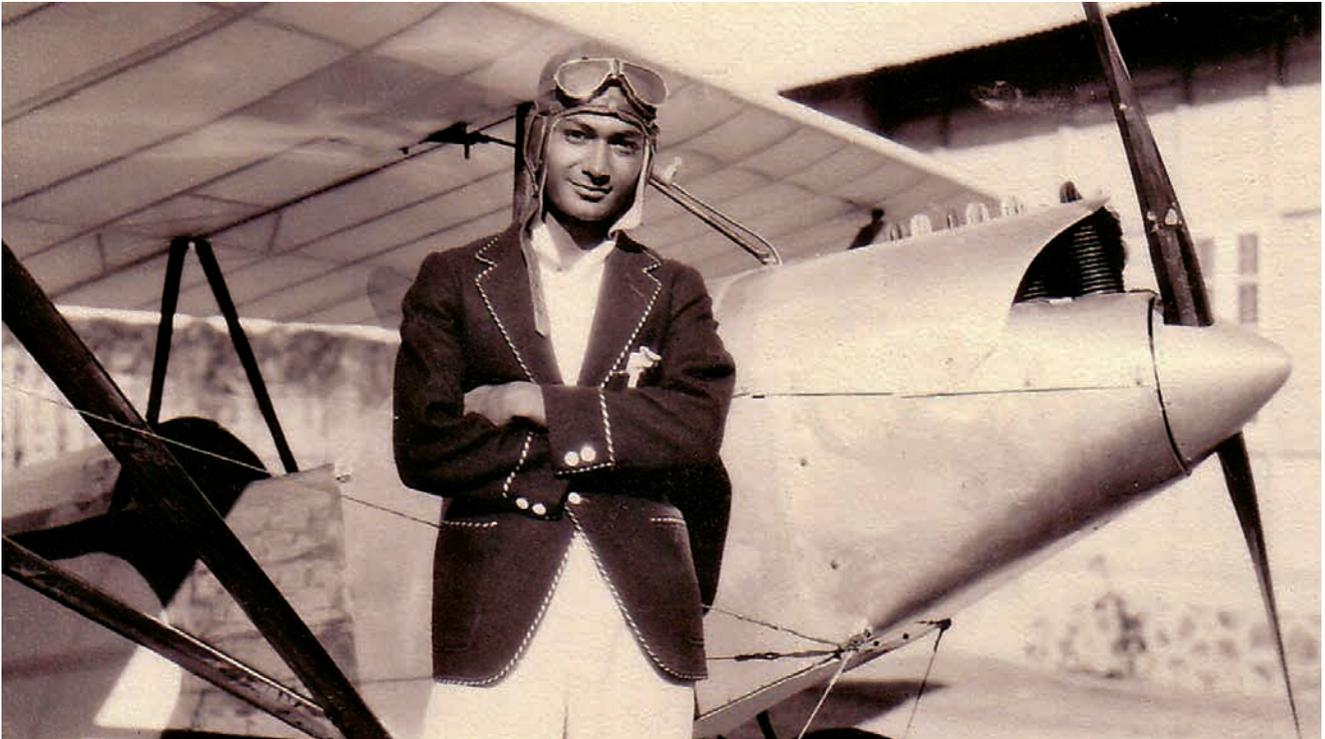


India's Aviation Pioneer

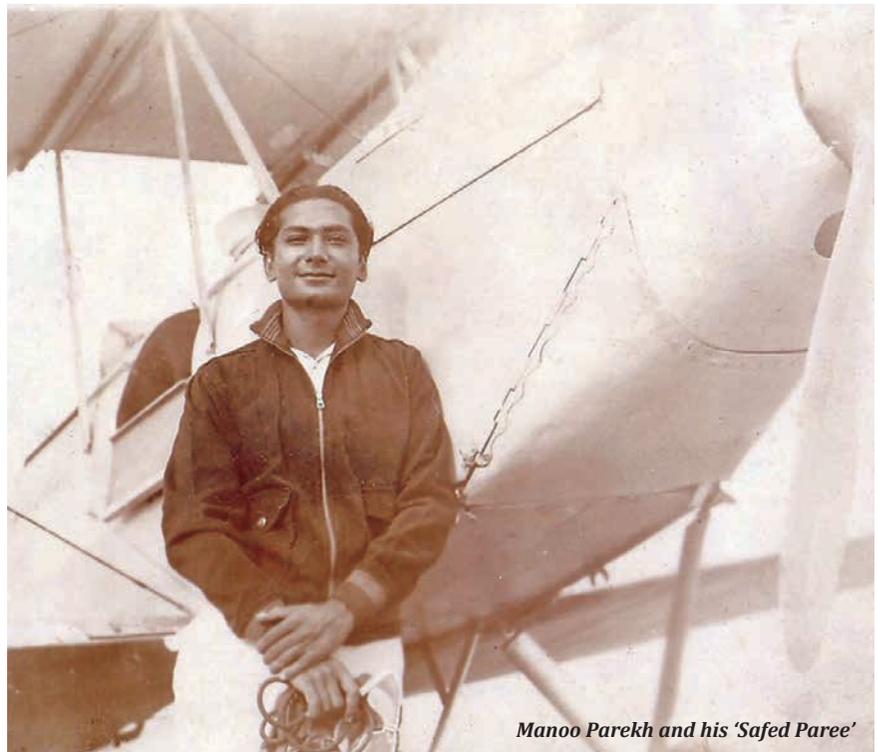
Manoo Parekh (1911–1983)



It's hard to believe that Manoo Parekh, born in 1911, a jeweller's son from Jamnagar in Gujarat, gave up his family business to get into aviation as early as in 1931, even before the Indian Air Force was established.

Having a scientific bent of mind, he first invented a peanut shelling machine in 1929 for which he was given a Gold Medal but his passion was in aeroplanes. He purchased magazines like *Popular Science* and *Popular Mechanics* from where he imbibed plans to build an actual aircraft! He started off by collecting bicycle wheels, pipes, wires and fabric but later had to import the engine and propeller from the UK.

Having then constructed an aeroplane, at a total cost of some Rs 5000, he didn't know how to fly it! He requested many trained pilots to flight test his aeroplane but they were apprehensive about of this homemade airplane which he called *Safed Paree* ('White Angel'). Yet, Manoo didn't give up. Finally a British pilot, after a complete check, agreed to test fly it, which



Manoo Parekh and his 'Safed Paree'

he did and later exclaimed that it was “a very gentle baby to fly”!

During those days in India, there was no certification authority and so Manoo's pilot's license was given by the British. Manoo's father Uttamchand then sent him to the Karachi Aero Club for continuing his flying training, and this was where he met the legendary JRD Tata and earned his 'B' licence.

All this while, even as he was carrying out flying, he remained a *Gandhivadi*, following the nationalist leadership of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Manoo had a Bell & Howell 16mm camera with which he continuously recorded many historical events over the years 1928 to 1932 which involved India's freedom struggle. Mahatma Gandhi, Sarhadhi Gandhi, Subhash Chandra Bose, Saudamini Deshmukh, all of them



Teaching both RAF and RIAF pilots during WW-II

were recorded for posterity in his films. Major events covered by him included were the Salt Satyagrah, a procession of Shaheed Bhagat Singh and the Indian National Congress meeting at Karachi in 1928.

Another interesting event was when he was flying reels of India's first motion picture 'Sayandhri' from Karachi to Bombay. Owing to a technical fault, he and his copilot Gadgil force-landed at an open field near Vasavad in Gujarat. After carrying out repairs, they started the engine but the loud sound obviously greatly annoyed a nearby bull which then charged the aeroplane and severely damaged it. The angry bull tossed the aeroplane into the river and after its recovery, it was unceremoniously recovered from the river tied on a bullock cart! For posterity it must be recorded that the aircraft was registered as VT-ADU.

The Jamsaheb of Jamnagar, supported by his brother Himmat Singh were impressed by Manoo Bhai whom they sponsored to the UK for receiving a commercial pilot license. They were not only royalty but accomplished cricketers, playing in the Ranji and Duleep Trophies. Aviator Manoo would often fly them from Jamnagar to Karachi from where



Bullock power "rescuing" Manoo's aeroplane from the river



A dapper Manoo Parekh with his aeroplane

they would take an international flight to England to play test cricket.

Aviator Manoobhai continued his aviation career which included flying for the King of Malaya. Then came World War II, during which time he imparted flying training to both RAF and IAF pilots. Even though he was a professed Gandhian, the British never arrested him possibly as he was very useful for the defence of India during the War. Did he therefore miss being given the *Freedom Fighter* status since the British never jailed him?

During the turbulent months preceding partition of India in 1947, the Jamsaheb of Jamnagar asked Manoobhai to create an independent *Kathiwari Air Force* but he refused and Sardar Patel requested him not to do any such thing but “Go for One India”. He also flew refugees from Multan in Pakistan to India without any charge.

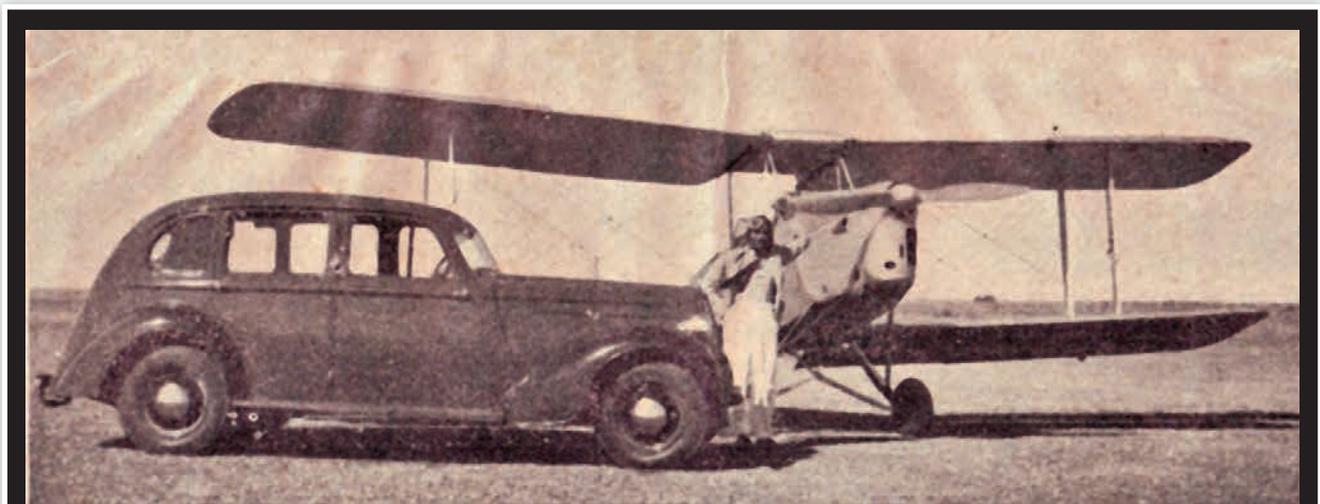
In 1955, even though he had lost his flying licence owing to poor eyesight, continued to retain his hanger No.10A at Juhu Airport in Bombay. In 1962, he applied for an IOC petrol pump in lieu

of his hanger which was opposite the Esso multinational oil company. Of the 427 applications submitted, he got the petrol pump on a prized half acre plot in 1962. Later, his son Jitoo was to open the very first CNG dispensing unit in Bombay in March 1993 which was a huge success, the CNG gas at that time being disbursed at Rs. 9.71 per kilo.

Manoobhai Uttamchand Parekh passed away in February 1983, an unknown aviation hero as the Gujarati's of Bombay and Jamnagar had forgotten him and his pioneering aviation activities which went into oblivion. Till now that is! 🛩️



Article and images from Jitoo Parekh, son of Manoo Parekh B.FA (Cinema), Concordia, Canada



Celebrating 100 years of flying in India, on 16 December 2003 Manoo's photo was proudly displayed at the Nehru Science Centre in Worli, Mumbai.

