

As chairman of Air India, JRD Tata would take personal interest in even minute issues like a dirty toilet inside the aircraft, wordings on Air India hoardings or the level to which wine was poured into a wine glass. The remarkable success story of Tata Airlines, which was later nationalised, also holds business management lessons for present day airlines which are facing losses year after year.

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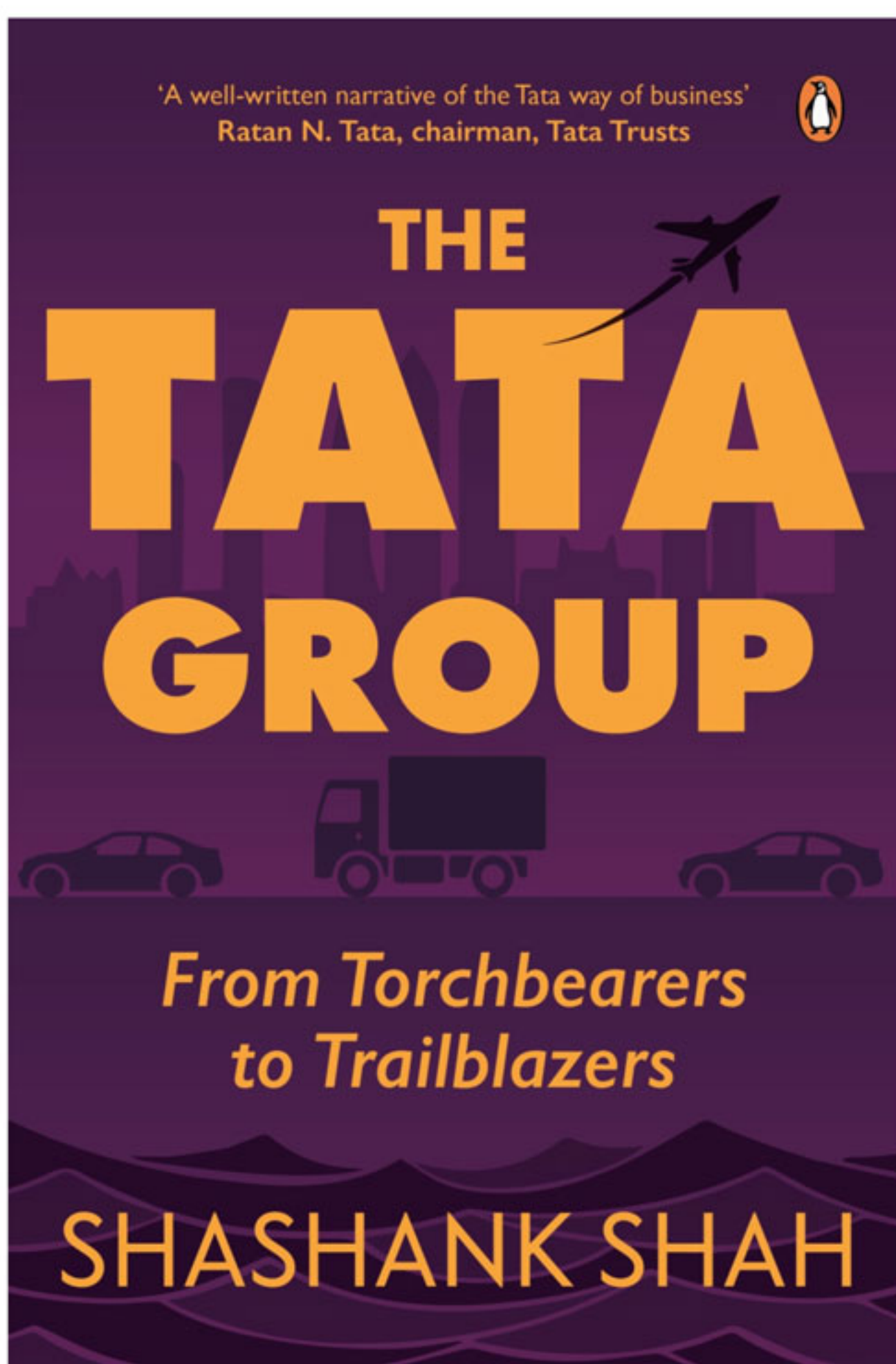
Industrialist JRD Tata used to shame Air India crew over dirty airline counters by requesting a duster and wiping it himself. Photo: HT

New Delhi: A pioneer of civil aviation in India, JRD Tata was so committed to Tata Airlines that even after India's first commercial airline was nationalised into Air India he continued taking deep personal interest in the functioning of the carrier as its chairman. Such was his hands-on approach that on one occasion he didn't shy away from joining crew to clean a dirty aircraft toilet.

According to a new book *The Tata Group: From Torchbearers to Trailblazers* by management strategist and researcher Shashank Shah, Jehangir Ratanji Dadabhoy Tata used to micromanage **Air India's** operational aspects after he was appointed chairman of the national carrier following nationalisation in 1953.

"If he saw a dirty **airline** counter, he would shame everyone by requesting a duster and wiping it himself. On one occasion, he rolled up his sleeves and helped the crew clean a dirty aircraft toilet. From the inside decor to the colour of the air hostess' saris; from wordings on Air India hoardings to the availability of toilet paper in lavatories on-board, JRD set high benchmarks in hands-on leadership," writes Shah, a visiting scholar at the Harvard Business School.

Read: [Is the Tata group's love for aviation blind?](#)



Published by Penguin, 'The Tata Group: From Torchbearers to Trailblazers' presents a biographical sketch of the Tata Group of companies by tracing its history.

Replete with riveting tales, the book traces the history of 25 **Tata group** companies using insider accounts from 100 senior Tata leaders. Published by Penguin, the book will be available in the market from next month.

The author says **Tata** would take great personal care of passengers, even when flying as a passenger himself. "Many a times, he wandered about on flights, making notes of tiny details that needed to be fixed, from the level to which wine was poured into a wine glass to the hairstyle of air hostesses," says the book.

"He was particularly concerned that the high standards of Air India International should not be adversely affected by nationalization. Over the next twenty-five years, through personal commitment, he maintained high standards of service at Air India, which enjoyed an excellent reputation among passengers."

The remarkable success story of Tata Airlines also holds business management lessons for present day airlines which are facing losses year after year. According to the book, the airline, founded in 1932, had made a profit of Rs 6 lakh in the fifth year of operation and maintained punctuality at 99.4%.

"Over the years, Air India developed a fine reputation for its high-class on-board service that was talked about with admiration and envy by its global competitors. In the 1950s, when British Airways introduced a jet service that cut a few hours off the trip, passengers still preferred to fly by Air India's slower propeller-driven aircraft, simply because of the way they were pampered onboard," writes Shah.

Air India's downfall began in the 1990s and in 2016-17 the national carrier's total **losses** accumulated to a staggering Rs 47,145.62 crore. Earlier in the year, the government's plan to offload 76% of Air India's equity share capital as well as transfer management control to private players failed as the sale did not attract any interest.

Read: [Tata begins due diligence to buy Jet Airways from Naresh Goyal](#)

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