

The Postal History of India

Background

The postal history of India is closely tied to India's complex political history. As the Portuguese, Dutch, French, Danish and British colonialists gained power in India, so their postal systems existed alongside those of the nominally independent states.

References to some form of postal service in India date back to the third century B.C.-long before the arrival of Europeans on the continent. Britain's involvement in the postal services of India began in the eighteenth century. Initially the service was administered by the East India Company who established post offices in Mumbai, Chennai and Calcutta (now Kolkata) between 1764 and 1766.

East India Company

Post Office Act 1837 reserved the government the exclusive right to convey letters for hire in the territories of the East India Company.

‘.....and wheresoever within the United Kingdom and other Her Majesty's dominion posts or post communications are now or may be hereafter established the Postmaster General by himself or by his deputies and their respective servants and agents shall have the exclusive privilege of conveying from one place to another all letters except in the following cases and shall also have the exclusive privilege of performing all the incidental services of receiving collecting sending despatching and delivering all letters except in the following cases...’ (Post Office (Management) Act 1837 (1 Vict., c. 33) POST 114/5)

Warren Hastings (Governor General of British India from 1773-1784) opened the posts to the public in March 1774. Prior to this the main purpose of the postal system had been to serve the commercial interests of the East India Company and serving economic and political needs of the ruling authority remained a driving force in the development of the postal service.

British Post Office in India

In 1850 a report was commissioned into the working of the Post Office in India which was submitted in 1851. This report introduced uniform postage rates dependent only on weight (previously charges had been calculated on weight and distance). It also recommended that receipts should no longer be issued for ordinary letters. This streamlined what had previously been a cumbersome process of repeatedly logging all post. It recommended that a Manual of Instructions be supplied to postmasters to encourage uniformity of practice. Parcels postage rates continued to be charged according to distance and weight, but the tariffs were simplified. The recommendations of this report led to the introduction of Act XVII in 1854. However the reforms had a mixed success with some areas persisting in old practices.

From the late eighteenth century political power began to slip away from the East India Company. The Company was finally abolished in 1858 and India became a Crown colony ruled directly by Parliament.

Stamps

The first postal stamp in India was introduced on 1 July 1852 in the Scinde district. In 1854 the introduction of uniform postage rates led to the development of the first postage stamps valid for use throughout India. As with the introduction of uniform postage in Britain this led to a rapid increase in use of the postal system with the volume of mail doubling between 1854 and 1866 and again between 1866 and 1871.

Some parts of India not directly ruled by the British Government entered into treaties with the British Monarchy. These areas are generally referred to as Princely States. There were 652 Princely States in British India but most of them did not issue postage stamps. Those states that did issue stamps fell into two categories-convention states and feudatory states. The convention states had entered into

agreements with the Post Office of India to provide postal services within their territories. These states used the stamps and postal stationery of British India overprinted for use within their state. The feudatory states maintained their own postal services and issued their own stamps. These stamps were only valid within the individual states they were issued in, so letters sent outside the state needed additional British India postage.

The first pictorial stamps were issued in 1931. There was a victory issue in 1946, followed shortly by a first Dominion issue. The three stamps in the Dominion issue depicted the Ashoka Pillar, the new flag of India, and an aeroplane.

Mail Communications with England

In addition to the managing the postal services of British India the Post Office was also heavily involved in the transmission of correspondence between England and India.

In the 1820s Thomas Waghorn began investigations into improved mail routes between England and India. This led to the establishment of the overland route between Alexandria and Suez. The result of this was a great reduction in the time taken for mail to travel between England and India. Mails had previously taken three months to reach England, but Waghorn's letters accomplished the same journey in just 35 days. Letters conveyed by Waghorn carried their own cachet 'Care of Mr Waghorn' and examples of this are held in the philatelic collection of The Royal Mail Archive (requires an appointment as these items can only be viewed under 1:1 supervision). After ten years of Waghorn's efforts the British Government and the East India Company were convinced of the viability of this route and took it over.

The India Mail Service carried diplomatic mail between the two countries. This service involved specially appointed Post Office staff of higher grades accompanying the mail from London to Marseilles where responsibility would be transferred to the P&O purser of the ship bound for India. These staff were referred to as India Mail Officers. They carried out three trips a year and were on stand by for a further three. The archives have various accounts of what this work entailed.

Independence

After independence responsibility for postal services transferred to the new Indian Government. However Britain continued to be involved in postal services to India in the same way as it managed other international postal services. This is reflected in the archives by files referring to matters such as the deteriorating relationship between India and Pakistan in the 1960s and the impact this had on delivering and receiving post to and from these countries.

The Indian Postal Service today has 155 000 post offices making it the most widely distributed postal service in the world. The size is a legacy of the numerous postal systems eventually unified after independence. In addition to postal services it also provides additional vital services to remote areas, such as savings bank and financial services.

Records relating to Indian postal history held at The British Postal Museum & Archive (BPMA)

The BPMA holds many records of relevance to India. However due to the way in which these records were created and used they are not all gathered together in one convenient group, but are spread through various record series in the archive. Most of our records relate to the interaction of British postal services with those India, especially the transport of mail. A particularly rich source for records relating to India are our minute series, these include:

POST 29 Packet Minutes Documents.

POST 122 Registered files, minuted, and decentralised registry papers (this series is currently in the process of being catalogued and therefore is not yet fully available)

POST 33 Registered files minuted papers

POST 30 Registered files minute papers

We also have relevant information in

POST 43 Overseas mails: organisation and services—packet boats and shipping.

We have some philatelic material relating to India including

POST 141 Phillips collection (available online)

POST 52 Stamp Depot relating to the contract with De La Rue

Philatelic collection (Indian stamps, Waghorn material, and India Letters)

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Occasional India related records occur across many of our other series including visual materials in **POST 118** photographs (mainly of mails being prepared, or en route to India) and **POST 110** posters (mainly advertising air mail routes to India).

Other relevant records may be found at The National Archives and the Asia, Pacific and Africa collections at the British Library.

Further information

An Outline of Postal History with a History of the Post Office in India- Ivie G J Hamilton 1910 (reference in the BPMA Library 1 Ham)

[Wikipedia: India Post](#)

[Mana: British India](#)

[National Archives](#)

[British Library: South Asia Archive & Library Group](#)

[India Post](#) for information on postal services in India today

The Royal Mail Archive Search Room at Freeling House is open Monday to Friday, 10.00am - 5.00pm, and until 7.00pm on Thursdays. We are open selected Saturdays 10.00am - 5.00pm, please call or see our website for dates.

Please bring proof of identity to get an archive user card. In most cases there is no need to make an appointment, but please contact us in advance if you have any questions.

The Royal Mail Archive www.postalheritage.org.uk

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