

THE INDIAN INDEPENDENCE CACHET FROM JAPAN

by Ashish Talwar

In August 1947, British India was in turmoil because of its partition into India and Pakistan. The entire country was engulfed by communal tension, riots and the largest refugee crisis ever seen as 14 million people were displaced.

The Indian Army itself was being divided into the two emerging nations but in Japan, 3,500 miles away from the trials and tribulations back home, Indian and prospective Pakistanis soldiers were jointly preparing for celebrations. The Indian Army was stationed in Japan as part of Brindiv (British and Indian Division) which functioned under the BCOF (British Commonwealth Occupation Force). Brindiv had arrived in Japan in March 1946 and its Indian postal contingent was called the Force Postal Unit with Field Post Offices (FPOs) at 56, 77, 148, 651, 652 and 653, the Brigade HQ FPO was 112. While the full extent of Brindiv's postal services is beyond the scope of this article, it is pertinent to mention that while it had no direct postal relations with either Japanese or U. S. Army Postal Services. Brindiv had reciprocal relations with other BCOF postal services, Australia and New Zealand. And it also provided over the counter facilities to Commonwealth Air Force personnel in two of its FPOs where the Royal Air Force post offices did not provide such services. In fact, most of the surviving mail stamped from Indian FPOs in Japan is found used by RAF and other British military personnel.

In the days leading to 14/15 August 1947, the diplomatic and military leadership of British India in Japan planned celebrations at all places where Indian troops were stationed. The major celebration was held in Tokyo where a ceremonial parade was held and a ceremonial dinner hosted at the Imperial Hotel. Flag-hoisting ceremonies, feasts, firework displays and games were conducted wherever Indian forces were stationed. To create a lasting memento of these Independence celebrations, a philatelic event was planned as fortuitously for collectors, an enterprising postal officer was stationed in Japan as the Postal Officer of the Indian contingent of the BCOF. His name was Diljit Singh Virk, (1914-1997) and he went on to head the Indian Army Postal Service. He is recognized as one of India's most eminent philatelists and a signatory of the Royal Philatelic Society's Roll of Distinguished Philatelists.



fig. 1

The cachet

Virk details the creation of the cachet, "Apart from feasting and jousting, the Postals were in the unique position of marking the occasion for all ranks of the Contingent by impressing some mark as a memento on their mail. I racked my brains for a suitable device and came up with a crossed flag design. This was several days before Independence Day and sample flags of India and Pakistan had not then been received in Japan, not in our Headquarters at Okayama in any case. Two postal clerks of my unit, a Mahratta Hindu and a Punjabi Muslim



fig. 2

collaborated in drawing what they thought were the new National Flags and I ordered the preparation of rubber stamps from a Japanese dealer." [1] This lack of information regarding the actual National flags of both nations resulted in major anomalies in the Independence Cachet design (fig. 1). The Indian National Flag has 24 spokes in the Ashoka Chakra (wheel) in the centre while the Cachet has 5 spokes that look like a star. Similarly, the Pakistan National Flag has a vertical line dividing it into green and white colours which is missing in the cachet. In fact, the designer used the exact design of the flag of the All India Muslim League party, on which the Pakistani Flag is modeled. Rubber stamps of the Independence Cachet were supplied to the Brigade HQ FPO 112 at Okayama with orders to impress it on all mail passing through it from 15 August 1947. Virk records that it was used after 15 August but gives no definite date regarding its stoppage. Most likely it was used for a week beyond 15 August because the latest example I have seen is 21 August (fig. 2). In spite of it being a semi-official cachet, the Independence Cachet remains one of the great rarities of Indian and Pakistani philately. What is important to note from Virk's writing is that there was more than one rubber stamp and resultantly, more than one stamp pad was used to ink the rubber stamps. Thus colour variations in the ink are to be expected. Seven covers were accessible to me for this article, and on each, the Independence Cachet (fig.1) is 50mm by 36.5mm. Its colour from the ink pad used varies from blue (fig. 2) to purple (fig. 3) with the latter being usually found on philatelic covers that were not mailed.

The cacheted covers

The cover in fig. 2 in my collection was mailed with the Independence Cachet on an official BCOF envelope with India KGVI 1½ annas cancelled from FPO 112 at Okayama to Lancashire, UK by a personnel of His Majesty's Forces. The first attempt to apply the Cachet failed due to lack of inking so it was applied twice. The faintly seen postmark is 20 August and on its reverse are RAF Post Japan



fig. 3

postmark of 21 August and a Lancashire delivery postmark of 29 August. The cover exemplifies the operational extent of Indian FPOs and the popularity of Indian stamps which were extensively used by RAF personnel. Fig. 3 is a 'purely' philatelic creation from Rajesh Mittal's collection, recorded by Proud 2. It has the complete Victory KGVII Set of 1946 cancelled by 15 August cds of FPO 112. It has no delivery or transit postmark. Two similar philatelic creations from this FPO have also been recorded. The cover in fig. 4 from Sunil Ranasaria's collection was sent from Shanghai on 25 July 1947 to Okayama, BCOF, Japan. Transit cds were applied at No. 8, Australian Base Post Office, attempted deliveries were made on 9 August at FPO 653, 10 August at FPO 77 and finally on 11 August at FPO No. 651. Finally it was found that the addressee was back in India and the cover was sent back to Okayama. Fortunate to have been in the wrong place at the right time, the cover received the prized Independence Cachet. Thus adorned it was finally delivered to the addressee on 20 August.



fig. 4

The unique cacheted crash cover

Initially Indian airmail from Japan was routed through Australia but switched to Hong Kong after the establishment of a flying boat link between Hong Kong and Japan. Upon reaching Hong Kong, the mail connected with the BOAC 'Dragon' flight which took three days to fly between Hong Kong and UK with stopovers at Bangkok, Rangoon, Calcutta, Karachi, Bahrain, Basra, Cairo, Augusta and Marseilles. A junior commissioned officer was posted by Brindiv at Hong Kong to exclusively deal with its airmail.



fig. 5

Fig. 5 from my collection is the only recorded crash mail with the Independence Cachet. The date of posting is not legible as stamps were washed off but FPO 653 is clearly seen. Located in Tokyo, FPO 653 serviced Indian troops who did guard duties at key locations. The cover then passed through Okayama

Cachet's rarity

As per Virk's official order, the Independence Cachet should have been impressed on all mail routed through Okayama for at least a week and it would be easy to assume that given the popularity of Brindiv's FPOs, numerous covers should have survived. But by August 1947, the Indian Army had already begun withdrawing from Japan. Hence, mail was few and far in between and by 12 August, half

of Brindiv's FPOs had been closed. On 20 October 1947, the last of the rear part of the Indian Army left Japanese soil. As a collector of Indian Independence stamps and covers, I have been on the lookout for the Cachet since the late 1990s. After two decades of researching and searching, I have seen or recorded only eight covers and acquired only two (*figs. 2&4*). A couple of other collectors claim to have cached covers in their collection but I have not seen them. Even if those are taken into account, not more than ten covers are recorded but I hope that after reading this more covers will surface. Virk had termed the Independence Cachet '*a philatelic rarity and a lasting reminder of the work of the Indian APS in Japan*' 4. Seven decades later, the search for his creation continues.

References

1. Brigadier D. S. Virk (editor), *Army Post Offices and Philately*, Army Postal History Society, 1980.
2. Edward B. Proud, *History of the Indian Army Postal Service, Volume III*, 1980.
3. A. E. Hopkins, *A History of Wreck Covers Originating at Sea, on Land and in the Air*, Robson Lowe Ltd., 1966.
4. Brigadier D. S. Virk, *Indian Army Post Offices in the Second World War*, Army Postal History Society, 1982.