A Brief History of Postage Stamps of India

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Abstract: *This article describes the origin of postal stamp system in India during the East India Company period. The first postal stamp of the Indian postal system was the Scinde Dawak stamp which was released on 1 July, 1852. Released in the province of Sind by its Commissioner Frere, it was also the first in Asia. The introduction of postage stamps charged fixed rates for conveyance of letter irrespective of the distance thus wiping out several corrupt practices that existed in the system. Apart from the introduction of stamp Frere brough in several changes to improve the then existing postage arrangements. Apart from these stamps, the semi-autonomous princely states of pre independent India used their own stamps or the stamps of British India overprinted with their state's name. The first postal stamp of Independent India depicting the country's flag was released on 21 November 1947. With the evolution of the postage stamps, the method used for printing them has also undergone changes.*

Keywords: *Scinde Dawak, Edward Frere, Rowland Hill, British-India stamps, Azad-Hind stamps*

Introduction

Postal system in India existed long before the Europeans arrived. In the late middle period (1200–1600), rulers of various kingdoms within the Indian subcontinent used a system whereby letters and goods were carried and delivered by couriers, operated mainly through professional runners called *dãk-wallahs* (Mazumdar, 1990). In 1541, Sher Shah Suri (1472? 1486?–1545), the founder of the Sur empire in India introduced horse-back *dãk* system, wherein messages were carried on horseback;

Suri also built the 5000 km long Grand Trunk Road from Bengal to Peshawar for the horse-back *dãk* system (Indian Philately Digest, http://www.indianphilately.net/milestones.html). The *dãk-wallah*-s or *dãwk-wallah*-s (letter carriers) carried written messages earlier on palm-leaves and later on paper (Fig. 1). Dawk is the anglicized version of the Hindustani word डाक, which has come to mean 'post'; 'mail' presently, and *wallah* refers to the person, while *dãwk-bangie*-s transported parcels. A *dãk-wallah* wrapped letters in palm leaves for protection, tied them to a long pole and carried the wrapped packet while running through villages and even forests, risking dacoits and wildlife. After running a defined distance at the rate of 4 to 5 miles an hour (Dodd, 1859), the *dãk-wallah* would hand over the wrapped packet to the next, waiting *dãk-wallah*. While passing through regions infested with wildlife, the *dãk-wallah*-s were accompanied by a couple of drummers (*doogy-wallah*-s) and archers (*teerin-dauze*-s) to protect them (Gilchrist, 1825). Such relay-race-like performance was repeated till the letters reached their destination. The charge levied for transporting the messages depended on the distance travelled by the *dãk-wallah* as well as the weight of the carried messages. However, they were not fixed. Horse and camel dâks were used though rarely in places where the roads were good (Dodd, 1859).

About the 1850s, the British East India Company (EIC) appointed Frere (Portrait 1) as the Provincial Commissioner of Sindh to reform the postal system to suit their trading requirements (Ramon Marull Philatelic Collection, 2023). Henry Bartle Edward Frere (1815–1884) was the sixth son and ninth child of Edward and Mary Anne Frere and was born in Brecon (Frere, 1886). During 1851, Frere ushered in several major changes, including fixed mail charges irrespective of the distance travelled by the *dãk-wallah*. Furthermore, the EIC increased the use of camel and horse to carry the post which reduced the time taken to travel a distance of 200 miles (*c*. 300 km) from Hyderabad to Sukkur (both, presently in Pakistan) by 11 h and increased the wight of postage carried by seven pounds (*c*. 3 kg). Another method called the 'speed money' system was introduced by Edward Lees Coffey, the Post Master of Sind, to avoid unnecessary delays during transport. According to the system reformed by Coffey, the contractor of the camel-back and horse-back *dãk*-s were either paid extra money as incentives or fined based on early or late arrival of post at the destination (Martineau, 1895).

First Postal Stamp of Undivided India

In Great Britain, before the introduction of postal stamps, the letters were post marked with ink and the receiver — not the sender — had to pay the postal charges on receipt. Members of the Parliament had the privilege of dispatching letters free, although this privilege was abused by many of them. Further, the mail-deliverers were bribed for delivering the letters (Hill, 1837) causing significant monetary loss to the postal system. In 1840, Rowland Hill (1795-1879), a school teacher, invented the pre-paid postal mechanism by the use of postage stamp which revolutionised the postal system (Hill and Hill, 1880; Smyth, 1907). Following this model, as one other improvement of Indian postal system, Frere introduced postal stamps. The first stamp of undivided India was released in the province of Sind by Frere (Portrait 2), then the Commissioner of Sind (1851–1859) on 1 July 1852 (Lowe, 1951). Referred as the *Scinde Dawak* stamp, it was the first postal stamp in Asia. By 1856, this stamp introduced by Frere, came into use throughout British India (Martinaeu, 1895). Frere was ably supported by Coffey who helped in designing the stamp. Frere states (Martinaeu, 1895, Vol.1, page 78):

"The stamp ….. was the first postal stamp used in India, and this is its history. The postage arrangements in Sindh were, as you may recollect, in 1850, very imperfect; the province was poor, and did not pay its local expenses; and when we asked for more and better post offices, we were reminded of our poverty, and told that when the Government of India could afford money to spend in Sindh, there were many things to be provided before post-offices could be thought of. So, as we believed that post-offices were not luxuries, we considered how we could make the most of such means as we had, and our postmaster, Mr. Coffey, being a man of resource, we hit upon this expedient. We got the stamps, of which you sent me a facsimile, manufactured by De la Rue and Co., and they were issued……"

Frere further states (Martinaeu, 1895, Vol.1, page 79):

"I believe the success of the plan was one inducement to the introduction soon after of the present system of postage stamps, as our Sindh experiment showed that the fancied objections of natives of India to postage stamps were quite groundless. You may recollect it used always to be said that, 'prepayment by stamps might do very well in Europe, but would never do in India.' But this proved to be no more true of stamps than it has been of railways and every other innovation."

He further states (Burrow, 1890):

"The system worked very well, and, of course, very cheaply, for we got a complete network of post offices and postal lines all over the country without expense."

The introduction of postage stamps by the Post Office Act in 1854 charged fixed rates for conveyance of letter irrespective of the distance thus wiping out several corrupt practices that existed in the system (Misra, 1959). Frere's services were recognised by both the both houses of Parliament and he was made a Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath (KCB) (Chisholm, 1911).

The earliest *Scinde Dawk* stamp was pressed onto a thin layer of red sealing wax on paper and bore the Merchant's Mark of the EIC (Fig.3). This mark or 'chop' (derived from the Hindi term chaapa = stamp) included 'E I C' in the three segments of a heart-shaped shield; a symbolic 'boat sail' occurred at the top of the heart. The value of the stamp was '½ anna' ('anna' is derived from the Sanskrit अन्न meaning 'food' and was the currency used in British India; one anna was the 1/16 of a rupee) embossed at the bottom. However, being made of sealing wax, the stamp was brittle and had to be replaced in two years after its introduction with colourless stamps on 30 September 1854. These new stamps were embossed without colour on either white or blue paper (Fig. 4); even these colourless stamps were hard to use since they were invisible under candle light when pressed on to white envelopes. Hence, another die of this stamp was made by de la Rue & Co. in England, which was embossed in blue with an peripheral ring (Fig. 5). The Blue Scinde Dawk stamp had a short life as it was withdrawn due to the introduction of new stamps from Calcutta for all-India use.

According to Wadia (1963), the design on the Scinde Dawk stamps (seen clearly in Blue Scinde Dawk stamp) is interpretable in two ways. Hausburg, an expert on stamps of India interpreted it as representing the 'East India Company's Merchants' Mark' which was in use by the British from the time of Charles II of England (*r*. 1660–1685). But in 1928, Major Rybot of the Indian Army explained the design as follows (Wadia, 1963, page 293-294).

'Traders and shippers of olden times ascribed the terrors and perils of the sea to the wrath and fury of the Evil One. To counteract these devilish onslaughts, they employed all sorts of religious or magical

means, and invariably placed their ships and merchandise under the protection of God and His Saints. One of the means devised to this end was the use of the Merchants Mark, which, in essence is a very ancient Christian sign composed of an "X" (a cross) and a "P", the first letter of the name of Christ in Greek. From this design is derived the Mystic Sign of Four, which is to be found at the head of every genuine Merchant's Mark'.

Stamps of Native States

The stamps used by the semi-autonomous princely states of pre independent India were of two types. The so-called convention states (as referred to by the philatelists) accepted the British postal system and used the British-India stamps overprinted with their state names (Fig. 6); these stamps were permitted to be used throughout India (Sutton and Anthony, 1966). Such convention states included Chamba, Faridkot, Gwalior, Jhind, Nabha and Patiala. The Princely States (= feudatory states) in India, which complied with the British administration issued their own postage stamps for internal use. These included the states of Alwar, Bamra, Barwani, Bhopa, Bhor, Bundi, Bussahir, Charkhari, Cochin, Dhar, Duttia, Faridkot, Hyderabad, Idar, Indore, Jaipur, Jammu and Kashmir, Jasdan, Jhalawar, Jind, Kashmir, Kishangarh, Morvi, Nandgaon, Nawanagar, Orchha, Poonch, Rajasthan, Rajpipla, Sirmoor, Soruth, Travancore, Travancore-Cochin (Travancore and Cochin merged in July 1949 to form a united state) and Wadhwan (Sutton and Anthony, 1966). They were printed using typography from either copper clichés or electrotyped plates. This method of printing resulted in ungainly stamps and were referred as 'uglies' by philatelists. Cochin was the only feudatory state which issued stamps bearing a water mark of an open umbrella.

Common Stamp for India

The first definitive stamps of values 1/2 anna, 1 anna, 2 annas, and 4 annas for use throughout India were released in October 1854, depicting the head of the 15-year-old Victoria Alexandra Olga Mary (1868–1935, daughter of Edward VII and Alexandra, a.k.a. Princess Victoria), designed by the William Wyon (1795–1851), chief engraver at the Royal Mint. They were designed and printed in Calcutta and without glue on the reverse. Later, after the ascent of Victoria Alexandra Olga Mary to the throne as Queen Victoria was printed within a double-lined oval including the inscription 'East India Postage', intended for use throughout India, were introduced. These stamps were printed by de la Rue in England by 'recess' printing process. They were in use till the British government took over the administration of India in 1858 from the EIC after when, stamps were printed on paper watermarked with an elephant head (Vishnu, 1989) (Fig. 7). In 1902, stamps including the picture of Edward VII came in to vogue. Between 1911 and 1933, stamps carrying the figure of King George V were used. It is said that George V, an amateur philatelist, personally approved these designs. In 1931, India printed its first pictorial stamps which was a set of six stamps (one of them depicting the Red Fort in Delhi) to mark the shifting of the government from Calcutta to New Delhi. From 1882, the elephant head watermark in stamps was replaced with a star and the term East-India Postage was changed to India Postage.

After Independence

The first postal stamp of Independent India was released on 21 November 1947. It depicted the Indian Flag with Jai Hind at the top right corner (Fig. 8). Printed at Nasik Security Press using the lithographic method, it was valued at three and one-half annas and was used for carrying foreign mail.

The Stamps that Never Saw the Light of the Day — The *Azad-Hind* (1854) Stamps

During the World War II, Subhas Chandra Bose in exile planned to get independence for India from the British rule and to create a 'Provisional Government of Free India'. For such a free country, he got a set of stamps printed during his stay in Germany in 1943. Ten stamps bearing Azad Hind (free India) were designed by the German couple Werner and Maria von Axster-Heudtlaß and printed using photogravure method. However, the *Azad-Hind* stamps never came into use. On 21 October 1968, India celebrated 'Azad-Hind Government's 25th Anniversary' by releasing a commemorative stamp featuring a portrait of Subhas Chandra Bose along with the 'leaping tiger' flag that appeared on the Azad Hind stamp released in 1943.

Fig. 1: Dawk Wallahs of Bengal, 1858.

(Source: Sketches of Calcutta. Illustration for The Illustrated London News, 20 February 1858. https://franpritchett. com/00routesdata/1800_1899/dailylife_drawings/ilnviews/dawkwallahs.jpg)

Portrait 1. Bartle Frere (Source: Scinde District Dawks - The Premier Stamps of Asia.
http://www.geocities.com/mjshah.geo/scinde/scinde.html)

Fig. 3: 1/2 (half anna) Scinde District Dawk, or Sindh Post, embossed red sealing wax

Source: Wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scinde_Dawk)

Fig. 4: White Scinde Dawk stamp

Source: http://www.geocities.com/mjshah.geo/scinde/scinde2.html

Fig. 5: Blue Scinde Dawk stamp

Source: http://www.geocities.com/mjshah.geo/scinde/scinde2.html

Fig. 6: Overprinted stamp of Nabha, a convention state. By Apsingh - Own work, Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=9420030

Fig. 7: Elephant's headwater mark on the back of stamps of Pre – Independent India

(*Source:* Mintage World. https://www.mintageworld.com/blog/watermarks-on-stamps/#:~:text=The%20term%20East%20India%20Postage,different%20colours%20marked%20each%20value.)

Fig. 8: First stamp of Independent India

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