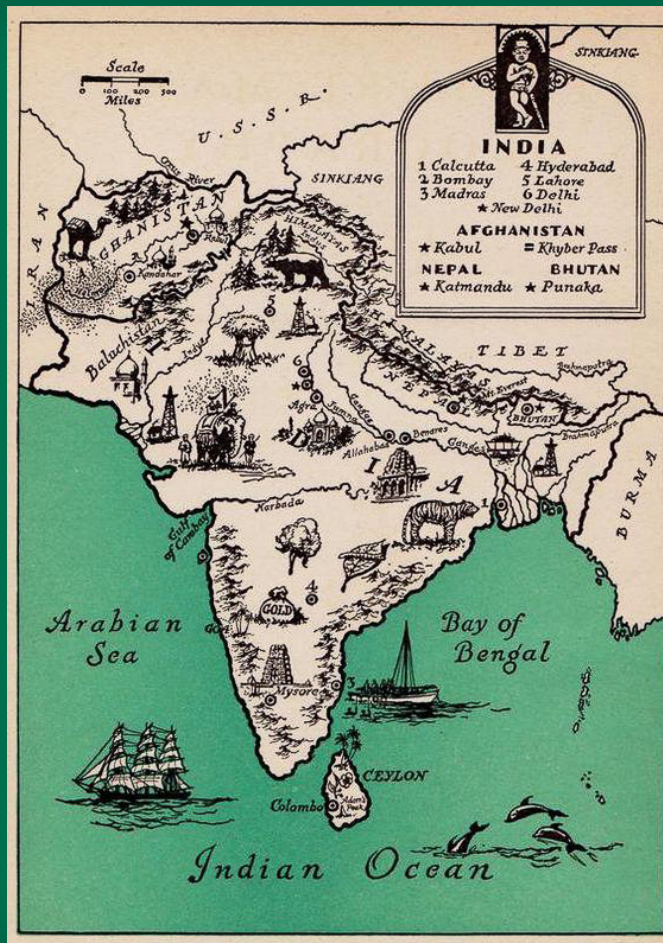


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INDIA'S REVOLUTIONARY LEGACY

A Socio-Philatelic Perspective of India's Freedom Struggle during WWII

APRATIM BHATTACHARYA

Social philately studies postal artifacts as primary historical documents, elucidating the social narratives and motives behind communication. This perspective is indispensable for the Indian freedom movement, where post-1947 commemoratives alone offer too narrow a lens.

Although the non-violent movement of Mahatma Gandhi dominates popular memory, the armed struggle of the Indian National Army (INA) during World War II decisively accelerated Britain's withdrawal. Widespread public solidarity with INA veterans – as well as the Royal Indian Navy mutiny of 1946 – during their trials, signaled a collec-

tive psychological break from colonial authority.

The revolutionary stream was never a scatter of isolated events. Ideologically rooted in the revolt of 1857 – termed the first war of independence by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar – it evolved into an interconnected, continuous struggle culminating in Subhas Chandra Bose's Indian National Army. Bose was a dynamic nationalist leader who entered politics following Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement and championed a radical call for complete independence from British rule; in the 1930s, he traveled across Europe to build international support for India's liberation.

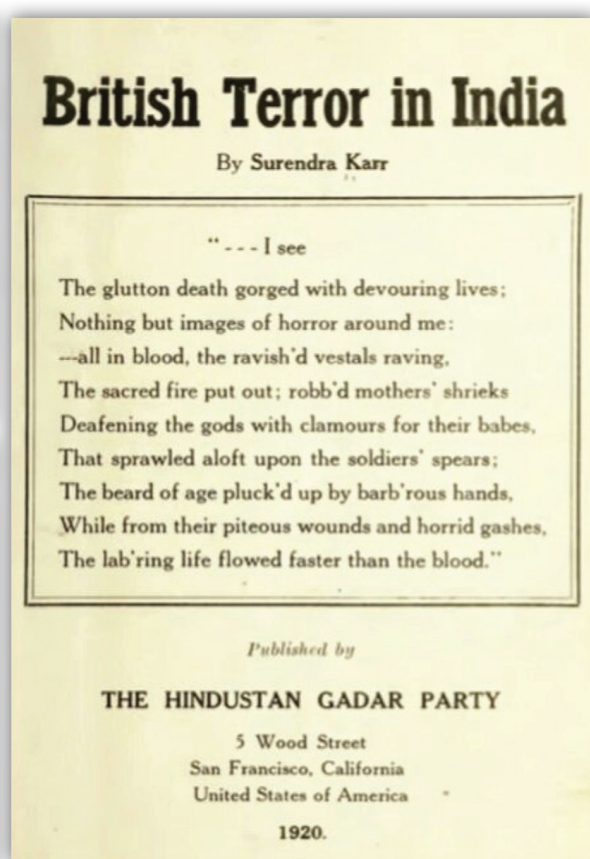


Figure 1. A cover sent from Lonsing to Seattle, censored at Bombay (station 31). It is addressed to Surendranath Karr, a member of the Ghadar party. Karr, a prominent Ghadar revolutionary, exposed British colonial atrocities through pamphlets and magazines.

Robert Clive's victory at Plassey (1757) turned the East India Company from trader to empire-builder, using sepoy regiments, those made up of native soldiers, to defeat Indian powers like the Marathas. British political and legal systems, imposed with scant respect for local frameworks, bred resentment that culminated in the revolt of 1857. After the bloodshed, the Crown waited until 1877 to proclaim Queen Victoria as Empress of India.

The famine of 1876-78, which killed 5 million to 9 million people, pushed Allan Octavian Hume to found the Indian National Congress (INC) in 1885 as a platform to discuss Indian grievances under colonial rule.

Initially moderate, the INC began to radicalize in the 1890s under leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak. During the 1897 Poona plague, Tilak sharply criticized British plague-control measures – such as intrusive house searches and violations of religious customs – through his newspaper *Kesari*, fueling public outrage. In this climate, the Chapekar brothers assassinated plague commissioner W.C. Rand. Their execution, followed by Tilak's arrest for incitement, sparked widespread nationalist fervor and a surge in revolutionary activity.

There was a rise of secret revolutionary groups, such as Jugantar and Anushilan Samiti, committed to armed struggle. Overseas, Shyamji Krishna Varma founded India House in London, drawing in figures like Savarkar, Madan Lal Dhingra, and others. Vinayak Savarkar's *Indian War of Independence* (1909) reframed 1857 as a secular uprising and lamented the absence of a post-revolt vision. Dhingra's 1909 assassination of Curzon Wyllie prompted a crackdown, pushing revolutionaries toward Germany and the United States, where the Berlin Committee and the Ghadar Movement would soon emerge (Figure 1).

World War I widened the battlefield. Rashbehari Bose and Jatindranath Mukherjee plotted to arm Indian soldiers. The 1915 Singapore Mutiny showed growing unrest. British intelligence crushed these efforts, and Rashbehari Bose fled to Japan. The 1919 Jallianwala Bagh massacre – where General Dyer's troops killed nearly 1,300 peaceful protesters – galvanized Gandhi's non-cooperation movement and inspired a new generation of revolutionaries, including Bhagat Singh and Chandrasekhar Azad.

Subhas Chandra Bose entered the freedom struggle through the Gandhian non-violent movement in the early



Figure 2. Imperforate Azad Hind stamps, designed by Werner and Maria von Axster-Heudtlass under Netaji's supervision, symbolized a vision for nation-building. Except for the 1R+2R, perforated versions exist for all denominations. No genuine contemporary mail using these stamps is known from Germany or India. Indian covers (1947-1964) are favor canceled, while German usages are likely forged.



Figure 3. A postcard sent from Selawal, India, to an Indian prisoner of war held in Sarawak after the fall of Singapore. It is censored by British Indian post office in Bombay and was handed over to the Japanese Red Cross. Services to POWs were suspended by the Japanese. An attached slip indicates "Borneo Prisoner Camp" in Japanese and the boxed "INCONNU/RETOUR" in red. This is one of 10 recorded.

1920s. Though initially aligned with the Indian National Congress, he soon grew disillusioned with its moderate stance. Elected Indian National Congress president in 1938, he resigned in 1939 over ideological differences and moved to Calcutta to take part in local politics. Escaping house arrest in 1941, he traveled to Germany and founded the Free India Center.

Postage stamps were prepared (Figure 2) in anticipation of Bose's new Azad Hind Government, symbolizing a holistic vision for nation-building. However, with Germany's attention diverted to its invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 under Operation Barbarossa, Bose realized that reaching India via the Northwestern Frontier – through Soviet territory – was no longer feasible. Consequently, he shifted his focus to Japan.

In Tokyo, Rashbehari Bose, then a prominent expatriate leader, emerged as a unifying force for the Indian diaspora

in East Asia. He promoted armed resistance through his writings praising Savarkar while cautiously criticizing Gandhi's conciliatory stance. In 1941, he founded the Indian Independence League (IIL) and the Indian National Army (INA) from captured British Indian soldiers. Despite his efforts, the movement lacked cohesive military leadership, paving the way for Subhas Chandra Bose's arrival.

Indian Independence League

In March 1942, Rashbehari Bose convened the Tokyo Conference, at which the Indian Independence League (IIL) was formally established. The IIL united Indian expatriate associations across Japan and Southeast Asia. At the same time, a resolution created the Indian National Army (INA), marking the start of a coordinated military effort for Indian independence.

The league gained momentum after the fall of Singapore, when thousands of British Indian soldiers became Japanese POWs (Figure 3). Many prisoners were persuaded to shift allegiance and join the Indian National Army to fight against Allied forces in the Burma campaign.

By the end of 1942, around 40,000 POWs, along with expatriate Indians – mostly Tamils from Singapore and Malaya – had enlisted. The army's goal was not to install a Japanese puppet regime but to secure a free and independent India.

The Indian Independence League functioned through a council of action, for political and military strategy; local branches managing operations like training, messaging, and propaganda; territorial committees overseeing regional coordination; and a committee of representatives elected by both civilians and the army (Figures 4 and 5).

To spread its message, the league used Japanese pictorial magazines and organized crash courses in intelligence and warfare. The Indian Swaraj Institute, linked to Japan's Imperial Army Nakano School (primary training center for military intelligence operations), provided crash courses in espionage, surveillance, and communications for Indians (Figure 6).

By April 1943, the Bharat Youth Training Centre (Figure 7), founded by Rashbehari Bose, began training civilian recruits in advanced warfare. These efforts laid the foundation for a more organized military force, even as Bose's declining health created a leadership gap.

Subhas Bose's arrival and formation of the Azad Hind government

In July 1943, Subhas Chandra Bose arrived in Singapore after a perilous submarine journey from Europe via the Indian Ocean. Upon arrival (Figure 8), he assumed leadership of both the Indian National Army and the Indian Independence League, unifying the military and political arms of the nationalist movement in Southeast Asia.

Bose's dynamic leadership revitalized the INA, which had lost momentum due to earlier organizational setbacks. On October 21, 1943, Bose proclaimed the establishment of the provisional government of Free India (Arzi Hukumat-e-Azad Hind) in Singapore. Recognized by Axis powers including Japan, Germany, and Italy, Bose became head of state, prime minister, and minister for war and foreign affairs, while Rashbehari Bose was named supreme advisor. The proclamation



Figure 4. A cover dated March 18, 1943, from Sibui to Sarikei (Sarawak) bearing a cachet of unpartitioned India with the nominal 8-sen rate for letters up to 2 ounces. The Indian Independence League's vision was that of an unpartitioned subcontinent. This is the only known envelope of the IIL known in Sarawak.



Figure 5. An envelope dated October 7, 1943, bears the post office savings issue from Tangkak Sub-branch (the reverse is shown in inset). This is the only recorded correspondence from any Indian Independence League sub-branch.

held deep symbolic significance, asserting India's right to self-rule and galvanizing support from the Indian diaspora and Axis allies.

The Indian National Army became the official army of the Azad Hind government. In November 1943, Subhas Chandra Bose attended the Greater East Asia Conference in Tokyo (Figure 9) as a recognized head of state, marking a major diplomatic breakthrough. His presence signaled international recognition of the Azad Hind government and its role in Japan's vision of a post-colonial Asia.

By year's end, the Japanese handed over the Andaman and Nicobar Islands – captured from the British in 1942 – to the Azad Hind government, reinforcing its claim to sovereignty.

Local mail service was not resumed until April 1943. Japanese authorities overprinted low-value King George VI stamps with a “” before the denomination, likely adapted from date slugs (Figure 10). There are many forgeries of these stamps. The islands, once a British penal colony where revolutionaries like Savarkar were imprisoned under brutal conditions, held powerful symbolic weight in the nationalist imagination.

Regiments of the INA

The Indian National Army was organized into key military regiments, including the Gandhi, Nehru, Azad, and Subhas brigades. In addition to these conventional units, it maintained a dedicated special operations and intelligence wing known as the Bahadur Group, tasked with reconnaissance, sabotage, and liaison activities.

A postcard (Figure 11) was sent September 22, 1943, from Gandhi Regiment of the Indian National Army located at Jitra to Jasin. It was censored at the camp in manuscript by Arumugam, and carried to Alor Setar (boxed civil censor and postal mark). Despite their ideological differences, Subhas Chandra Bose held deep respect for Gandhi and strategically named INA regiments to inspire both the expatriate Indian community and captured Indian POWs.

To develop a professional officer cadre, the army established training schools in Malaya and Singapore (Figure 12) where selected recruits received instruction in military tactics and leadership.

The force also included the Rani of Jhansi Regiment (Figure 13), a pioneering all-female combat unit commanded by Captain Lakshmi Sahgal. Named after Rani Lakshmibai, of Jhansi – a prominent figure in the First War of Indian Independence (1857) – the nomenclature sym-



Figure 6. A 1942 envelope with a “Dai Nippon” overprint on Straits settlements issues sent to Klang that pays the 8-cent letter rate from the India Swaraj Institute. It is obliterated by a general post office postmark of Penang. This is one of two surviving examples of mail from the India Swaraj Institute.

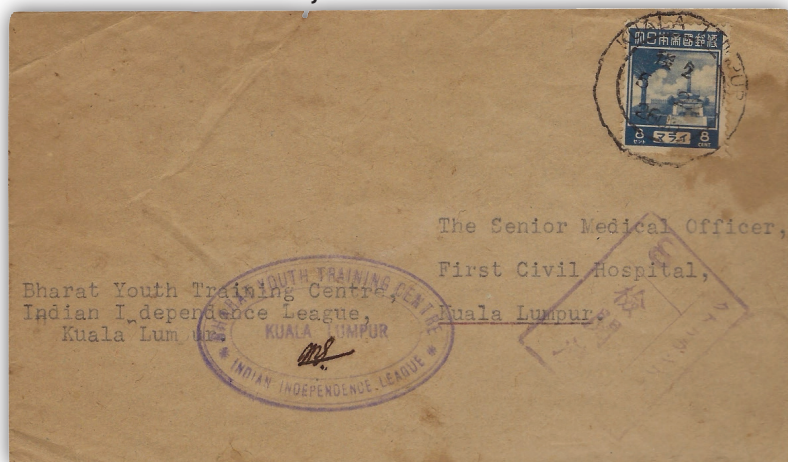


Figure 7. An envelope from Bharat Youth Training Centre in Kuala Lumpur postmarked May 22, 1942, using civil censor unit No. 8. This is the only surviving example of mail from the center.



Figure 8. In this official press photograph, Subhas Chandra Bose arrives in Southeast Asia in July 1943. He is received by representatives of the Indian Independence League.



Figure 9. An original press photo of a November 1943 Tokyo conference presided over by Japanese Premier Tōjō and attended by representatives of Burma, Manchuria, China, Thailand, the Philippines and the provisional government of Free India. Subhas Chandra Bose is on the extreme right of the front row.



Figure 10. These overprinted stamps have been widely forged, and authenticity can only be verified through established provenance. Approximately five sets are known to exist with traceable provenance. As no functional postal system existed, all known covers are purely philatelic in nature.

bolized a direct ideological connection. Rani of Jhansi regiment is regarded as one of the first all-female combat regiments in modern military history.

Battles of Imphal and Kohima

Subhas Chandra Bose integrated the Indian National Army into Japan's 1944 military strategy during Operation U-Go, which aimed to invade India through Manipur and Nagaland. The INA's battle cry, "Chalo Dilli" (Onward to Delhi) symbolized a push toward Indian liberation and the recapture of the Red Fort.

On April 14, 1944, Colonel Shaukat Malik, of the army's Subhas Brigade and attached to the Japanese 31st Division, raised the Azad Hind flag in Moirang (a town in the state of Manipur in far eastern India west of Burma, today Myanmar), marking the first symbolic hoisting of the Indian tricolor on Indian soil under Bose's provisional government.

The army developed its own private mail system that allowed secure internal communication within Japanese-occupied territories and between military and administrative arms. The army's private mail network operated independently of civilian systems and included its own censorship protocols and hand-stamps, which were used to regulate and authenticate correspondence sent from field units to central headquarters.

Shown (Figure 14) is a triple-censored cover bearing a 15-cent Siamese colonial issue sent in June 1944 by a soldier of the Indian National Army and censored by two units of the Azad Hind Fauj (AHF) to Tapah, Perak. It has been ad-

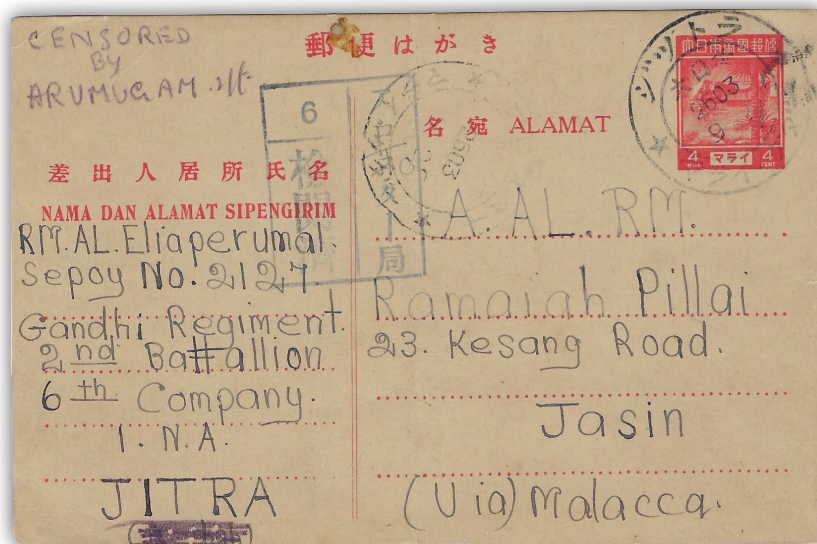


Figure 11. A postcard sent September 22, 1943, from Gandhi Regiment of the Indian National Army located at Jitra to Jasin. It was censored at camp in manuscript by Arumugam, carried to Alor Setar (boxed civil censor and postal mark). Despite their ideological differences, Subhas Chandra Bose held deep respect for Gandhi and strategically named INA regiments to inspire both the expatriate Indian community and captured Indian POWs.

dressed c/o Station Commander INA, Jitra, presumably by the censoring officer.

Despite initial successes, the campaign stalled due to fierce Allied resistance to the north at Imphal and Kohima, compounded by monsoon rains, logistical failures, and disease. The anticipated mass uprising did not materialize. Following Japan's surrender in August 1945, the Indian National Army disbanded. However, the INA trials at the Red Fort later that year sparked widespread protests, reigniting nationalist sentiment and further weakening British colonial authority.

Trials, mutiny and Indian independence

The battles of Imphal and Kohima were among the most decisive campaigns of World War II in the Southeast Asian theater. These battles marked a turning point by halting the Japanese advance into India and forced a major retreat of Japanese forces from Burma. This victory springboarded British re-occupation of Burma.

The British aimed to undermine the Indian National Army by trying its members for treason in the Red Fort trials, held from November 1945 to May 1946. This proved to be a grave miscalculation by the British. When news of the Indian National Army's sacrifices and valor reached the Indian masses, it ignited widespread national unrest.

The wave of sympathy and outrage aligned closely with what Subhas Chandra Bose had envisioned, that the INA's struggle would inspire a broader uprising against British colonial rule. The British administration, already economically and militarily exhausted from World War II, feared the possibility of a mass revolt on the scale of the 1857 uprising.

The Royal Indian Navy, largely comprised of Muslim sailors (Figure 15), undertook ad-hoc missions during WWII. After the war, many were decommissioned and housed in overcrowded camps in Bombay, leading to discontent. Following the INA trials, the disaffection grew.

In 1946, a group known as the "Azad Hindis" vandalized His Majesty's Indian Ship *Talwar*, a shore establishment, triggering arrests.

On February 18, 1946, thousands of sailors refused to assemble, marching in defiance through Bombay and seizing Royal Indian Navy ships, sparking a full-fledged rebellion (Figure 16). This incited nationwide labor strikes and public protests that further convinced British policymakers that their hold on India was untenable. The events were covered internationally, including on the front page of the *New York Times* (Figure 17).

While the vision of revolutionaries was that of an undivided India, the Indian Independence Act of 1947, passed by the British Parliament, partitioned British India into two independent dominions, India and Pakistan, effective from August 15, 1947, based on religious lines.

One of the enduring legacies of Bose's leadership was the popularization of the salutation "Jai Hind," a phrase that became a rallying cry for Indian nationalists. Meaning "Victory to India," it was adopted as the official greeting of the Indian National Army and promoted by Bose to foster a sense of unity, discipline, and patriotism.

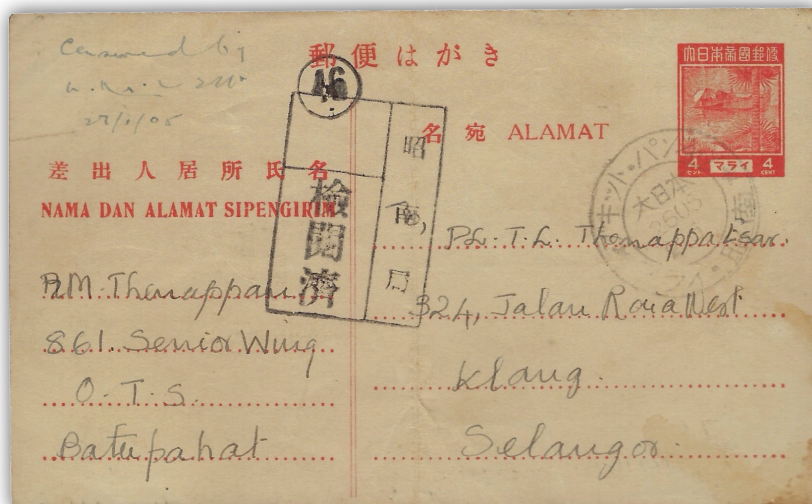


Figure 12. A postcard sent January 27, 1945, from the senior wing of Officers Training School in Batu Pahat, sent to Klang, Selangor. It was censored at camp (army captain's manuscript), but mailed from a civil post office of Bukit Panjang, Syonan, nine days later, on February 5.



Figure 13. A postcard sent and censored June 3, 1944, at Syonan Civil Censor station No. 34, sent from Rani, of Jhansi Camp, to Selangor with strong patriotic contents (bottom left) about the impending campaign. At bottom right is an original photo of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment in parade published in *Shashin Shuho* (ca. 1943). This is the only discovered postcard from the regiment.

After independence, “Jai Hind” was embraced by the Indian armed forces (Figure 18) and continues to be used as a national slogan to this day.

Notes

Preserving the legacy and artifacts of the Indian National Army has faced significant obstacles. After the British reoccupied Singapore, Lord Louis Mountbatten ordered the demolition of the INA memorial built by Subhas Chandra Bose, viewing it as a symbol of rebellion. Many INA and Indian Independence League correspondence were either destroyed by recipients fearing postwar repercussions or confiscated and classified. Detailed accounts of the Indian National Army and Indian Independence League remain scarce, often sidelined due to post-independence political dynamics in India.

The postal items in this collection have been carefully curated by the author, with key contributions from Dr. Hock Khoon Chua, adviser emeritus of the Penang Philatelic Society, who has researched this area for more than 50 years. Rarity assessments are drawn from Chua’s census, the author’s inquiries with collectors and dealers, and auction record analyses.

Critics have debated Subhas Chandra Bose’s wartime alliances, especially those who seek to preserve a narrative focused solely on non-violence. However, scholarship confirms that Bose’s engagement with Axis powers was strategic, not ideological. A prolific writer and respected leader, his speeches and correspondence show no evidence of anti-Semitism.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I thank my wife, Trina, for her unwavering support and the personal sacrifices she made to sustain this passion—now shared with our baby girl, Anika, whose patience has been a true inspiration.

I am deeply grateful to Dr.

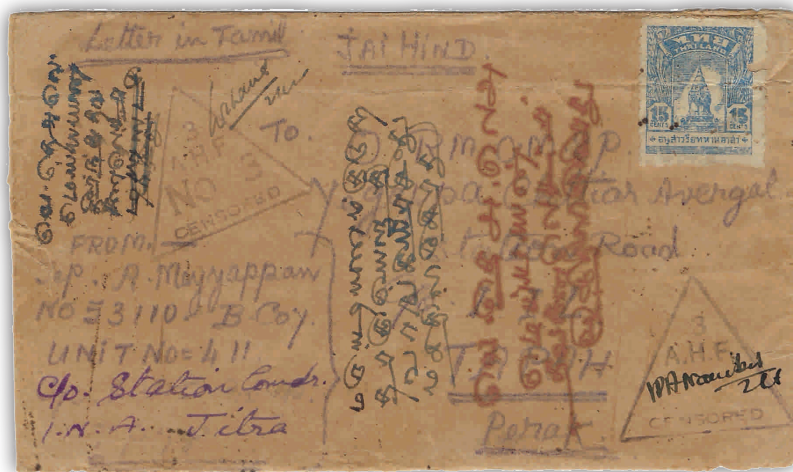


Figure 14. The date of the manuscript censor on reverse (December 6) indicates that the letter was carried by the private messenger system of the INA. It is the only known cover carried by private messenger system of the INA bearing AHF censorship markings.

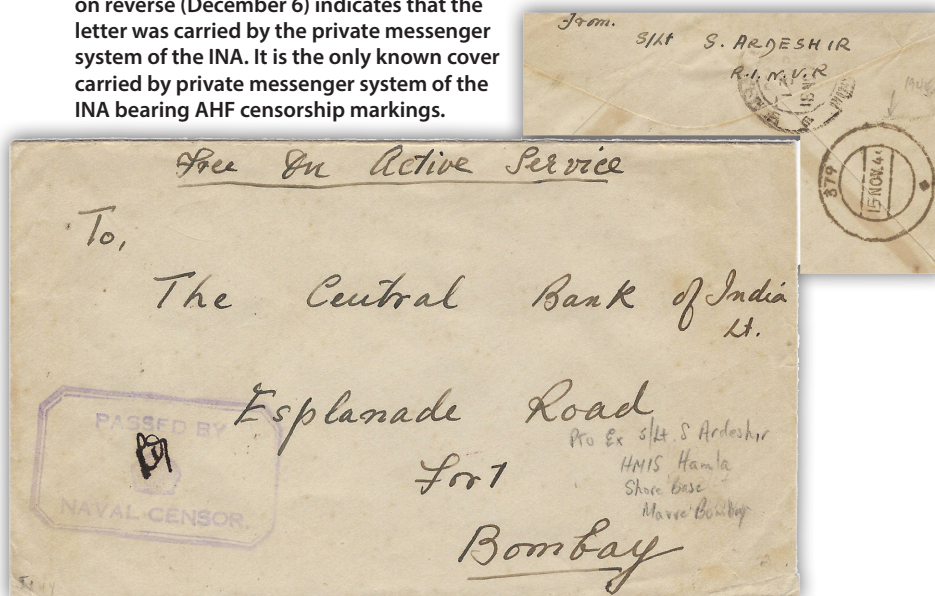


Figure 15. A manuscript “On Active Service” envelope sent November 15, 1944 from HMIS Jehangir with a special numbered datestamp bearing “379” and Naval censor mark. The 379 was used on board the ship, which was anchored in Bombay and functioned as a combined training center of the RIN and took active part in the naval mutiny of 1946.



Figure 16. January 26, 1947: A King George VI postcard that has been uprated (overpaying airmail rate of 8 annas) sent from Bombay to Honolulu, Hawaii. The writer notes several riots in Bombay in celebration of Indian independence. Because all civilian airmail in the Pacific was suspended post the bombing of Pearl Harbor, this was carried by surface route.

Hock Khoon Chua for his guidance in interpreting the complexities of Japanese occupation postal history and for generously entrusting me with a significant portion of his IIL and INA collection, his “fourth daughter,” as he fondly calls it. His spouse’s remark, “A Chinese in Malaysia studying Indian independence,” aptly reflects the movement’s far-reaching resonance.

I also thank Mr. J. Daschadhuri for his help with British Indian postal history, especially regarding field post offices and censorships. Special thanks to Colin Fraser and John Hotchner for their invaluable feedback in refining an exhibit on this topic, and to Dr. Vivek Chopra for encouraging this publication and providing thoughtful editorial input that helped make this story more accessible.

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BOMBAY SWEEP BY FLAMES AS MOB VIOLENCE SPREADS; NAVAL MUTINY CONTROLLED

By The Associated Press.
BOMBAY, Saturday, Feb. 23 —
Flames, sweeping the textile mill area of Bombay during a night of rioting and disorder, were reported early today to have destroyed nineteen grain shops and damaged five of the city’s banks.

Official reports said the mutiny of Royal Indian Navy seamen had been brought under control, however, and reliable sources said mediation by the Congress party had been promised to end the mutiny without further bloodshed.

[The central strike committee of the mutineers was reported by Reuter to have decided to accept British demands for unconditional surrender. The report said the committee would advise the strikers to lay down their arms and resume work tomorrow.]

The Times of India said fifty-nine persons had been killed and 650 injured, including thirty-seven

The disorders, described by a deputy police commissioner as “absolute rebellion,” took the heavy tool of life and property in a daylong series of demonstrations and clashes in which British troops turned machine gun fire on the surging crowds.

The buildings damaged by fire included three branches of the Imperial Bank and two branches of Lloyds.

The British yesterday clamped a 9 P. M. curfew on the troubled area of the city but without effect. British troops had orders to shoot to kill any person on the streets during the forbidden period.

At least thirty persons were known to have been killed in the rioting that started as sympathy demonstrations for the striking seamen of the Royal Indian Navy. The seamen struck early this week, alleging that they were paid less than Britons for the same work, given inferior food, subjected to

69 DEAD REPORTED

British Machine Guns Are Turned on Crowds— 650 Wounded

19 GRAIN STORES RAZED

Rioters Also Damage Banks and Loot Shops—Karachi Rebel Ship Surrenders

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[The central strike committee

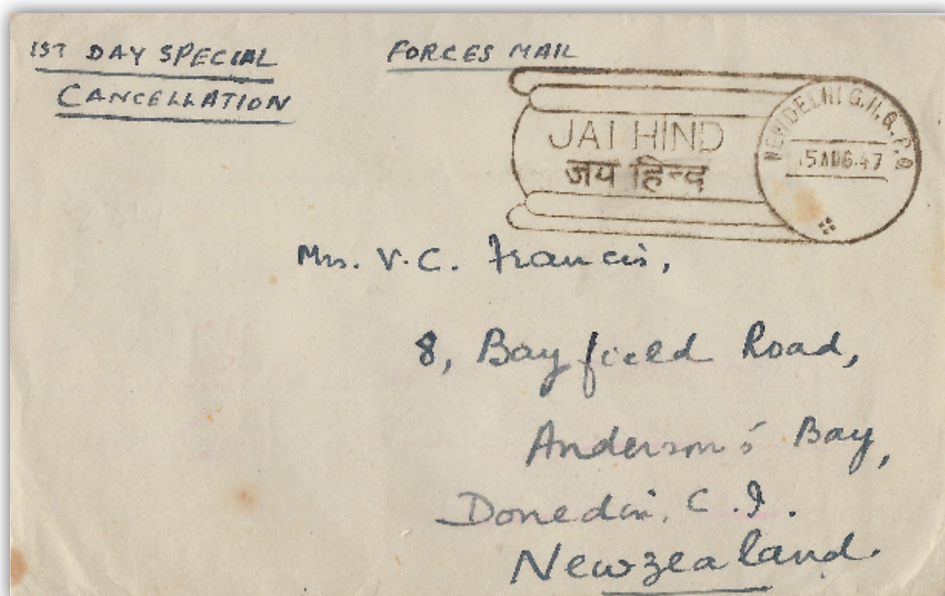
Figure 17. Above, a detail from the February 23, 1946, front page of the *New York Times* reporting on the Royal Indian Navy mutiny in Bombay for which the deputy commissioner is quoted stating the events as “absolute rebellion.” Also, below, part of a picture page from the February 1946 issue of *London Illustrated News* that reported on unrest in Bombay.



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Figure 18. August 15, 1947: A forces mail letter sent postage free from New Delhi General Headquarters of the army to New Zealand. It bears independent India's first postal cancellation, displaying "JAI HIND," symbolizing the enduring impact of Subhas Chandra Bose's leadership and the nationalist spirit he inspired.



The Author

Apratim Bhattacharya is a dedicated collector of colonial Indian postal history, with a particular emphasis on contextual and content-driven analysis alongside postal rates and routes. He regularly exhibits at World Series of Philately and Fédération Internationale de Philatélie exhibitions and contributes articles to leading philatelic journals. He is a member of the Collectors Club of New York and the Royal Philatelic Society London. Within the philatelic community, Bhattacharya is recognized for his exemplary research and discoveries related to the postal history of the 1857 Revolt, the Indian Independence League and the Indian National Army during World War II under Japanese occupation, and early Indian pre-stamp covers. He can be reached at apratim.b42@gmail.com. Professionally, he holds a Ph.D. in chemical engineering and serves as a consultant to Fortune 500 companies in the areas of automation and artificial intelligence. He resides in White Plains, New York, with his wife, daughter, and their Border Collie.

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French India: 1906 (11 September), 1a postal stationery card, datelined Neelapalli, Godavari District, Realized \$531



Canada #95
Mint NH
CV \$5,250
Realized
\$11,800

Canada #110c
Mint NH
XF-S 95
CV \$600
Realized \$1,062



Canada #2152b var
Complete booklet missing all die-cuts
Realized \$4,484