

## **MARCOPHILY- A STUDY OF “COMET” TYPE CANCELLATIONS OF INDIA**

By  
**Dr.P.G.Krishnamurthy**

It is very well understood by Philatelists as well as stamp collectors that some sort of indelible markings applied on adhesive stamps or the imprinted stamp of the postal stationeries, to prevent their re-use, are called cancellations. No doubt there are varieties of names given to such markings and their use has been recorded from the middle of 18<sup>th</sup> century ie since the beginning of the establishment of any type of organized postal operations, either in the form of “manuscript marking” (eg: Free franking Privileges indicated by the autograph of high government officials) or in the form of a post mark applied at the post office (a) to indicate postal charges have been paid – hand struck postage stamps – or charges have to be collected at the time of delivery – “hearing” postmarks (b) to denote the place, date and time of dispatch of the postal item – date stamps (c) to denote the mode or type handling of any particular mail piece – “instructional” marking (d) to denote route by which the mail was transported – “transit” marking and (e) to denote date of delivery. An exhaustive list of all such types with universally acceptable definitions, is being compiled by the Postal History Commission of the F.I.P. Due to pioneering work of stalwarts around the world, there exists today authentic monographs about these markings of almost all countries up to the “classic” period ie upto 1880 and in few isolated cases upto 1940 even. Right in our own home front the publications by Mr. Hammond Giles, Col.D.R.Martin & Mr.Jal Cooper springs to our mind in this connection. However it must be admitted that such compilations are non-existent regarding the “intermediate” period (ie upto 1900) or the modern” period (ie after 1900) The only exception I could record here is the very useful work of Bring. Virk on Postal Markings of Indian Army Postal System during World War II. Few of the reasons for such paucity of published information are (i) due to rapid and explosive growth of postal net work as well as mode of operations and procedural modifications, astronomic varieties of these markings are being used, leading to impractical/impossible situation of comprehensive study of ALL Postal markings by one collector; (ii) no strict procedures are being followed by the postal authorities either for the simultaneous introduction of a single type of marking in all the permanent post offices of our country or for the withdrawal of one type from usage; (iii) no standard design for any one type of marking is being adopted while preparing these devices at the Central Postal Stores Depot, for supply to various post offices in our country and (iv) wide spread” wrong” usage of number of these markings create mind boggling confusion to the efforts of dedicated philatelists interested in the study of Modern Postal History. To Cap it all, the complete records are either not available even at the source ie archives of Postal Department itself or they are not made available for research work by a member of the public. Hence background reference material itself has to be pieced together by a postal historian, punctuated with large number of hypothesis, conjunctures and personal opinions. In spite of all these difficulties, definite head way is being made by “study circles” and it is hoped that serious collectors will join hands in these constructive endeavours so that (a) many of the puzzles can be reasonably solved, (b) authentic facts could be recorded, as the events occur, to help future postal historians in their efforts to interpret the developments and (c) true enjoyment from this marvellous hobby could be derived by all the members of this close knit fraternity. This article is an attempt at recording information on one small segment of Postal activity in India. All the observations are deduced by the author, from examining his personal collection If there are any mistakes in the interpretations, they are solely due to the lack of deeper understanding by self and no external agencies need be blamed.

At the same time, the author will be extremely grateful to (a) constructive criticisms, (b) actual specimens – postally transmitted entire pieces of types not concerned in this discussion or at least Xerox copies of them, to make this study more detailed and complete and (c) copies of any official notices/communications regarding this subject, which can put the deductions on a more firmer ground.

Marcophilily is the fascinating division of study of postal cancellations, through which a wealth of material/information can be gathered. In spite of the fact that few of the most recent cancellations are as rare as some of the adhesive stamps of “classic” period, traditional postal historians look down upon this field. However, it must be admitted that more catalogueing of all types of cancellations or an in-depth study of one family of cancellation, does not contribute significantly to the postal history per se. Nevertheless, a clearer understanding of all aspects of the design, the introduction and actual usage of these postal cancellations, provide important indicators in the practical development cum working of postal system of any country. How many of us will not be overjoyed to acquire and add to our collection, a genuinely used postal item with the concentric circle date stamp of the Royal Camp (PO), Madras, for (a) this post office operated just for three days, (b) it was situated in a remote corner of the “out of bounds” area of Governor’s Estate and (c) tight security arrangements were made, preventing the general public from making use of the facilities. This leads to the logical enquiries on the following aspects (a) though the itinerary of this Royal Visit contained programmes of stay at all major centres in India why a special post office was opened only at Madras? (b) What was the volume of mail (including philatelic items) handled by this post office? (c) Were there any other types of cancellations used here apart from the two as shown in fig 1 a and 1 b? and (d) Did the Queen Elizabeth enjoy the Royal Privilege of “free franking” even at this post office, operated in a commonwealth country? Etc etc. In addition to these important questions, few other mundane aspects like the strength of the personnel who manned this office, hours of business etc can also be added to the list and when clear answers to all of them are found, a small chapter in the modern postal history of India could be completed. This foregoing example must give to any reader a collector at least a taste of work that can be carried out by Marcophilists.

“Comet” cancellations, as the name implies consists of a “head”-circular in nature-forming townmark portion on the left. Initially these were all of “hand stamp” type and the dies were made of cast steel to ensure long life). The general patterns, with the average size of various parts are shown in fig 2. Barring minor variations, almost all the cancellations examined by the author are of this single design-dimensionally speaking which leads to the first major conclusion namely that-one common “dummy” or “skeleton” outline drawing was invariably used while preparing the design for a specific post office. Provisions for inserting the moveable fonts, either in three lines or two lines as the case may be, in the centre portion of the “head” in slots, are made while casting the die, such that the cancellor can be “set” while using it on any specific date at the post office. The need for this cancellation must have arisen due to the fact that (a) the wavy lines, leave a light and crisp impression on the stamp while performing the act of defacing it and (b) the town mark portion is further to the left and hence away from the printed region, resulting in clearer and full impression-absolutely required for establishing beyond doubt the day, time and office of dispatch even if the postal employee had not been very careful while producing the “strikes”.

It can be categorically stated here that these hand stamps were invariably used as “dispatch” marking only at the first post office forwarding ordinary mail and never as a back stamp ie delivery marking or as transit marking. It can also be recorded that these are the fore runners of the currently popular rotary die cancellers as used in semi automatic machines found in all major mail processing centers. These were introduced most probably in 1940 (the earliest example in my collection is from Bombay GPO dated 28<sup>th</sup> November 1940), they were extensively used in 50's but thus usage gradually diminished due to the following unfavorable conditions. They were heavy (roughly 250 gms including the screwed on wooden handle) and the large area of the “face” of the cancellation necessitated large size in to pads than the usual 15 cms diameter ones found in post offices or careful handling by the class IV employee at the post office it “full and clear” impression is to be obtained. These must have proved to be major drawbacks, which ultimately lead to the withdrawal of these hand stamps from use though out India around late 60's or early 70's. As with everything else connected with India P&T, it is not unusual to find some isolated cases of usage of this type of cancellations from few Post Offices even as late as early 80's. I have in my collection postal items from BELTANGADY dated as late as 27.7.84. Thus the whole “active” life span of this type of cancellation is only two decades (!) during which a bewildering array of major design variations were incorporated in their “make-up”. Though no claim at completeness is being made in this study as presented here in, it is believed that this work can be considered as another hesitant “first” step in the desirable direction. Where ever possible, plausible logical explanations not necessarily following the chronological pattern are provided. Some of the observations may not be correct in the strictest/sense of the word and I am willing to correct them where ever formed necessary.