



## The Oldest Letter Box in India

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When was the last time you posted a letter or send a postcard? In today's world it is all electronic and instant, but one can't forget the excitement of sending and receiving mail, be it a birthday card or a letter from an overseas friend. The plop of the letter falling inside the letter box, or the times you had to stuff it down because the box was already filled to the brim, these are all things of the past.

I have discovered an early British era letter box in a small village on Odisha. It was a chance discovery, I had gone for relief distribution in the flood affected areas Jajpur which had been engulfed by floods earlier this year - we had a boat load of food supplies to unload. We saw a small white building on high ground, with a few people waiting in the verandah. We docked their and gave away a few of the bundles we were carrying. It was then that I noticed that it was a post office, in one corner of the verandah there was the familiar sign of India Post in red and white. It was typical British ingenuity that the Post Office was built on high ground, I was told that it had never been flooded all these years.

The wall mounted Letter Box was painted in the traditional post office red, but what drew my attention was the Royal emblem, the years of painting over had muted the florid and calligraphic



details that it must have originally had. The dust and grime of ages, the peeling paint, all told of its antiquity. I was transfixed, never before had I seen such an old postal relic of the past. Mailboxes are usually durable and persistent. They can stand for centuries through ravages of nature like heavy



rain, strong winds and violent storms. This one was one living example of old faithful.

The small verandah was crowded with distressed and hungry people hence I kept my excitement low. However on the short time I was there, I gathered the information that the Post Office had a very interesting history behind it. I told myself that I would come back some other day.

And come back I did! I did quite a bit of ground work on the Post Office and scoured the old archives. There was rich history attached to this small post office tucked in this little corner of rural Odisha.

The Post Office at Kaipada is midway between Kendrapara and Jajpur. The post office was of British era, the building had had been constructed way back in 1901. It dominates the village of Kaipada even today as it has been for over a hundred and ten years. It still retains its classical and traditional elegance. During its early time, the village of Kaipada could boast of only one institution- its Post Office. One just had to stroll past the little village Post office to feel the glamour of the place and meet a host of interesting characters.

The Post Office is tucked some twenty metres away from the main road, in a thicket of tall trees. It stands on a two acre compound - the land has been Postal property since yore. There is a small orchard of fruit bearing trees and a big pond in the front where the fresh water attracts young boys and girls to bath while the thick and old trees adds to the aura of romanticism of bygone days. The scene could have been straight out of the last century. The present building is a two roomed affair, with the verandah out in the front where the letter box has been affixed in one

corner. The ruins of the Postmaster's residence are just behind the present building.

In bygone days the post-office was the centre of all village activities. The Sunday morning that I was there, it became the social centre for an animated two hours or more. The entire postal workers and the nearby villagers gave me so many snippets of its history, I was overwhelmed.

I could not trace out the exact date when the letter box was affixed to the wall, but it is must be between 1901 and 1905. This might not be the oldest letter box in India, but I am certain it is the oldest one that is still in use. The mail is cleared twice a day, as has been done since the early days of the last century. These wall mounted letter boxes first appeared in 1857 in England. The earliest known use in India is in 1885, I guess this must have been one of the early examples. All mailboxes shipped out of England bore the royal badge. Whenever there was a change of regime, so was the badge. No wonder, mailboxes bearing royal badge of different regimes on the sides can be found even today in the streets of England. The front of the letter box usually has the royal cipher, "V.R", "E.R" or "G.R" denoting Queen Victoria, King Edward or King George. In present day Britain, the Letter Boxes are all inscribed with the Royal Badge of the present Queen Elizabeth the Second.

The Kaipada Letter Box must have started off as a Victorian one, and seen the transition to the Edwardian and then the Georgian ciphers. Even though these ciphers were not in predominant use on the letter boxes in India, but the early ones that were manufactured and shipped to the colonies all bore the inscriptions which was in cast iron, and hence whenever they were painted the Reginal Insignia was also highlighted. I would have loved to scrape of the



peeling paint to see the original inscription, but I am sure the encrusted ravages of time has erased any remnant of its original words.

I had sent the photographs and details of the letter box to the Letter Box Society of Britain. A British philatelist friend and postal historian who did a lot of ground work tells me that these type of boxes were made by the London firm of W.T. Allen and Co. , who manufactured and shipped letter boxes for Colonial Post Office the world over between 1881 and 1963. Many of these boxes are still found in villages of England.

The letter box stood in one corner, a silent sentinel who has seen the world go by. The road from Kendrapara to Jajpur has rich history attached to it. In short, so much has changed in the century of the Letter Box's existence, but that morning, while I was photographing it from various angles and hearing the tales of the villagers, it seemed I was back in time. Nothing had changed- nothing. The letter box was still emptied twice daily; letters were still posted in it. The mail run was the same that has been for years. The Letter Box was a time capsule, and I was there to open it. It was rather strange that so many people, both officials and others had seen it all these years. I was told that many times newsmen had descended on the spot and photographed the place for its historic importance in the Freedom struggle, but the letter box, in one corner, had escaped notice.

In 1934, Gandhiji began his celebrated Padayatra with the mission of Harijan upliftment and abolition of untouchability. In was on the 31<sup>st</sup> May 1934, while on his way from Kendrapara to Bari that the Mahatma stopped at Kaipada. He had rested under a big Banyan tree near the Post Office. Narayan Chandra Panda, the octogenarian retired post master told me of the

eventful day. He was young lad, just ten years old, and had seen the Mahatma. The villagers had all gathered under the tree and Gandhiji had curiously enquired about the Post Office building which stood by the side of the Road. One of the villagers had run to get the Post Master's chair, but the Mahatma had refused to sit on it and had sat down under the tree, spending a good one hour. Two other villagers in the nineties, Dadichi Sahoo and Gouranga Dhall, both told me of the day they had walked with Gandhiji till Bari.

The seeds of the freedom movement were sowed in the minds of all the people of the area after Gandhiji visit. He had advised Congressmen all over the country to take up rural reconstruction. At the end of his Padayatra in Orissa, at Bhadrak, he advised Congress workers to go back to villages. Many took up the cause. The Quit India Movement in 1942 was the expression of India's last push towards its "tryst with destiny." Jajpur and Kendrapara were the hotbed of all revolutionary activities. The Imperial Government of Odisha had declared all Congress bodies unlawful and arrested many of the leaders. There was a huge public uprising and people took possession of government offices and burnt them down.

The Sub Post Office of Kaipada, with its old Letter Box, too played a very significant part in the revolt. The then Postmaster, Gobind Chandra Das got wind of the coming action and on the 20<sup>th</sup> August he packed up all the postal stamps, cash, seals and other important fiscal items and along with a runner took off for Kendrapara where he deposited the items at the main Post office there. He left the Post Office to his assistant, Narayan Chandra Panda, and warned him of the impending threat.

Popular history says that on the 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1942, the Post Office of Kaipada was



burnt down, it was the only symbol of the British Raj in the vicinity, and the freedom fighters vent their ire on this vestige of oppression. A crowd of 200 surrounded the Post Office and set it on fire, but as it was a pucca building, only the papers and furniture was destroyed. The armed Police soon arrived but was prevented to enter the village. They later on came in six boats and managed to arrest ten persons. The handcuffed prisoners were being taken to Jajpur, when a mob of a thousand persons attacked the police. The police opened fire killing four and injuring a dozen. The four who fell down by the pond in Kalamatia were Sanada Swain and Hadibandhu Panda of Krushnanagar village, Sauti Mallick of Srirampur and Mayadhar Bhuyan of Hatasahi. Some of the people told me that even an airplane had dropped tear gas shells on the crowd, but I still have to ascertain the veracity of this fact. There is a small martyr's memorial for the dead in the nearby village, where a lip service homage is paid to them on every anniversary.

However, Narayan Chandra Panda, who had been charge of the Post office on the fateful day, told me a very different story. I spent a good hour with the old postmaster, the sad and rheumy eyed man recollected what all has happened. According to him, the Post Office was not actually set on fire completely, only a few papers were taken to the Verandah, (where incidentally the old Letter Box has been all these years) and burnt. Even the furniture was spared, and I think the tables, almirah and chairs are still being used.

Panda told me that he has appealed to the crowd that burning the post office would be of no use and the government would not build another one. It would be the village's loss. He even told the crowd that the postmaster had taken away all the stamps, cash and seals. He

remembers taking down the portrait of King George VI from above the Postmaster's Chair (he showed me the nail from where the portrait had been hung, it was still in place!). He had given the crowd many of the postal forms and stationery. All these were taken to the verandah and a bonfire was made where the King Emperor's portrait was burnt. He says that earlier in the morning he had taken whatever little was left of the records and put in the secret underground safe of the Post Office. Surprisingly, the present Post master did not know anything of the safe - a steel almirah had to be moved for me to see it. The safe has no longer been in use since decades, it was a small underground cavity with a heavy steel cover. The lid was jammed and it took a good bit of pulling before we could open it.

I was hard pressed to find any other postal ephemera at the place though I did find an old disused letter box in the ruins of the postmaster's residence. I am sure after my visit the locals will now be proud of the letter box. It is about time that India Post took stock of the fact and does what ever it can for this important heritage of Indian history. My British friend warned me that if news of the Letter Box travelled, it should be properly protected; these period letter boxes command a very good price in the antique market.

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