

# 1950 - 2016: The *Malabar Princess* Has Not Yet All Revealed

Jean Voruz, *Consilium Philateliae Helveticae*

## Introduction

In a late German auction, the unexpected finding of a pretty degraded paper shred brought me back memories of old readings as well as touching treks around the Mont Blanc Massif (Franco-Italian border). Indeed this letter sent in 1950 from Madras to Germany via Chamonix and Geneva could only be a survivor from the mythical *Malabar Princess*.



Fig. 1 An aircraft Constellation of Air India  
(© R.A. Scholefield)

## The Story

3 November 1950. The Lockheed L-749 Constellation of Air India (Fig.1), coming from Bombay / Mumbai to London is about to land in Geneva. Following a stop in Cairo, its cargo holds carry 297 kilos of mail bags. The aircraft initiates its descent over the Alps under miserable weather conditions in zero visibility. At 10:45 the radio contact with Geneva is lost. The *Malabar Princess* just struck the Tournette Rocks on the Franco-Italian border in close proximity of the top of Mont Blanc, the highest peak of the Alps (Fig. 2 and 3).

The aircraft wreckage, dislocated at an altitude of 4,677 meters (15,350 feet), is identified only two days later by a Swiss pilot thanks to a short sunny break. Hundreds of scattered pieces on both Italian and French sides, as well as an absolute calmness around the scene of the crash, confirm the absence of survivors. Despite this, two lifeguard teams start climbing from Chamonix and St-Gervais while weather conditions are terrible again. Those from Chamonix will be stopped very soon: their leader René Payot is tragically swept up by an avalanche. Those from St-Gervais keep braving the dangers up to the mountain top.

On 8 November at 10:10, in a deep and unstable

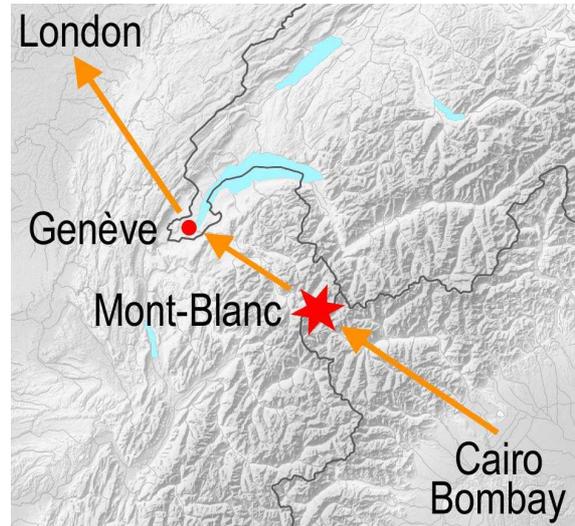


Fig. 2 The Mont-Blanc area before the approach to Geneva airport (map from the author)

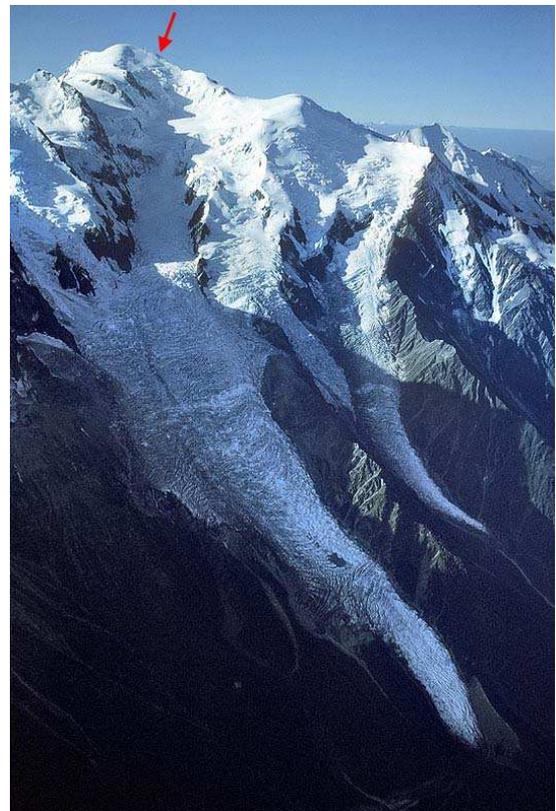


Fig. 3 Impact point of the *Malabar Princess*. The glacier of Bossons makes clear the route taken by the wreck and its contents during the years and decades which followed.

snow, under a temperature of - 40°C and howling winds over 130 Km/h (80 mph), the climbers discover the aircraft debris (Fig. 4), bodies torn to pieces and... mail. An arm emerges from the snow, the index finger extended upward to the sky! They will explore this scary scene for about fifteen minutes at most, being threatened by the risk of freezing or exhausting to death. Taking with them loose objects not yet buried under the snow, a mail bag, the postcards and letters they found (Fig. 5), they go back down to the valley



Fig. 4 Piece from the fuselage of the Malabar Princess. The first lifeguard team had been welcomed by this enigmatic Indian princess who seems performing a strange macabre dance.

and can officially confirm the fatal outcome of the air disaster.

The early mountain equipment makes winter ascents virtually impossible and highly risky, as we have seen. As for helicopters, they are not yet able to fly at such altitudes. Thus thorough searches around the crash scene can be undertaken only in spring and summer of 1951. 6 to 8 months later, the site has been widely covered by snow. And the numerous crevasses already engulfed most of the rests.

Some mail is however found from disemboweled bags among rests of luggage, personal belongings and other macabre discoveries. All that can be identified is taken back down to the valley and handed over to the Police of Chamonix. Mail still readable is labelled (Fig. 6) or duly stamped (Fig. 7), and then put back into the mail-stream at the foreseen flight stops of the *Malabar Princess*, i.e. Geneva or London as testified by the postal dated handstamps.

Sent at the end of October 1950, the two illustrated letters will have been distributed respectively 6 and 11 months later to their addressees. Their destinies seem rather happy compared to the most part of the airplane contents. The latter indeed have started a slow and interminable descent down to the valley. At a rate of 100-150 meters (400 feet) per year, the impressive glaciers of Miage (Italy) and Bossons (France) are going to transport all that could not be recovered during the months following the tragedy. On the French side, the mountain gives back in the glacier tongue (Fig. 6) what it took many years ago. The toe of the glacier is located near the village of Chamonix. As such, in 1987 i.e. 37 years later, a landing gear appears out of the ice, followed by an engine in 2008. Every year, and still today, both glaciers reveal their miscellaneous objects of which sometimes human rests, but also postal items.



Fig. 5 Reverse of a letter from Egypt (first recovery of 8 November 1950). Despite the mention *Delayed because of air crash*, the letter was delivered only eight days later.

In July 2010 a Scottish student finds along the Bossons Glacier a mailbag destined for the USA. She will remove the 60 years old contents and identify 75 addressees overseas - or rather their descendants - and let postcards and letters forward (Fig. 8).

In 1966, the crash at the same place of the *Kangchenjunga*, a Boeing of Air India coming from Bombay / Mumbai too, had again precipitated bodies and contents of the airplane into the bowels of both glaciers. On 25 August 2012, a diplomatic bag from this aircraft (Fig. 9) surfaces after an unusual ice melt. During the summer of 2013, a young alpinist discovers a metallic box containing jewels and gemstones. About this dreamlike finding, the investigators tend to identify the Boeing rather than the Constellation.

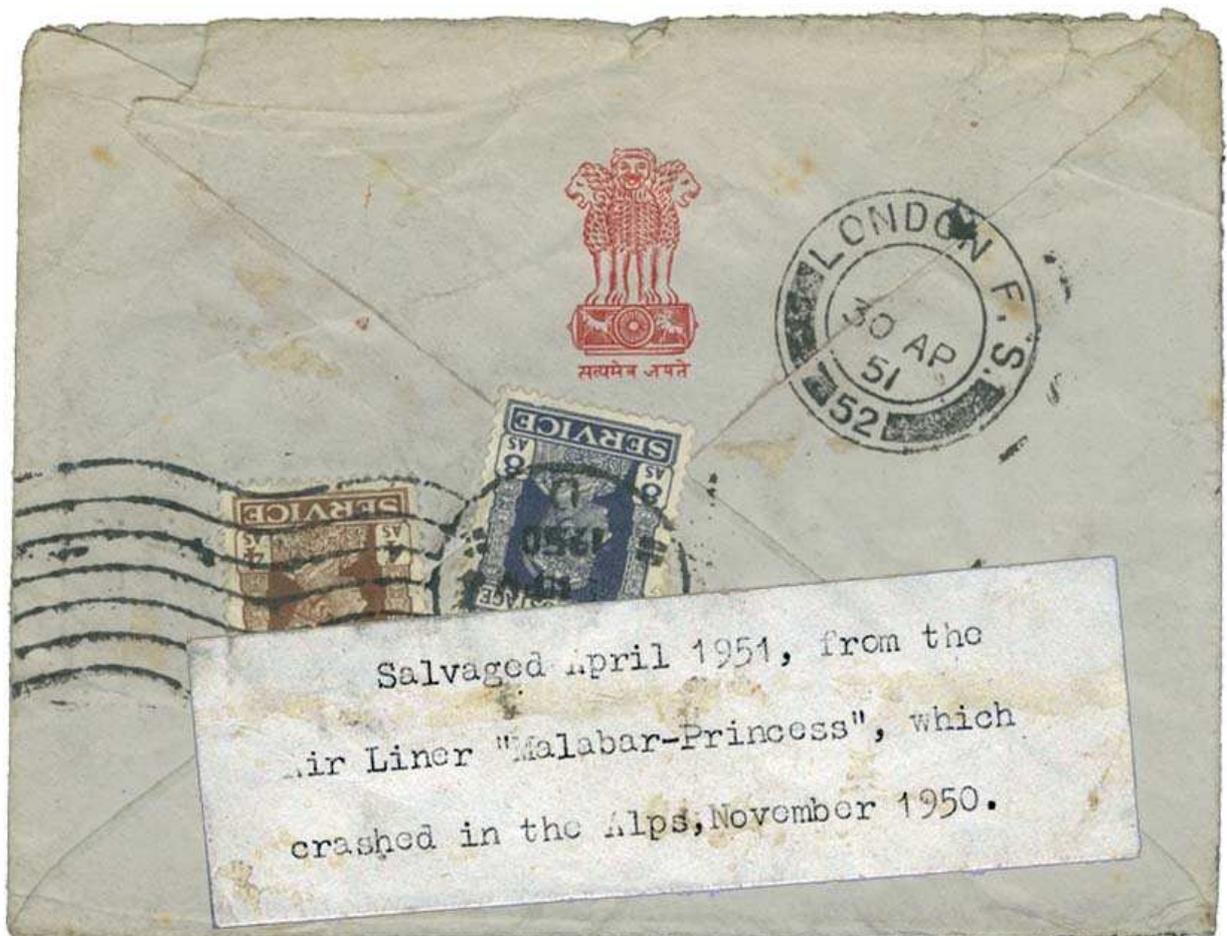


Fig. 6 Reverse of a letter from India (second recovery of April 1951). Privately forwarded up to London where an appropriate label and a dated stamp confirm its reintroduction into the mail-stream.



Fig. 7 Cut-out of a letter from Madras to Bremen, Germany, recovered in September 1951. The Police of Chamonix affixed their seal and the date of 12 Sep. before handing it to the postal administration (Geneva, 17 Sep.)



Fig. 8 Letters from India to the USA recovered in the summer of 2010 around the glacier toe  
(© Scotimage.com)

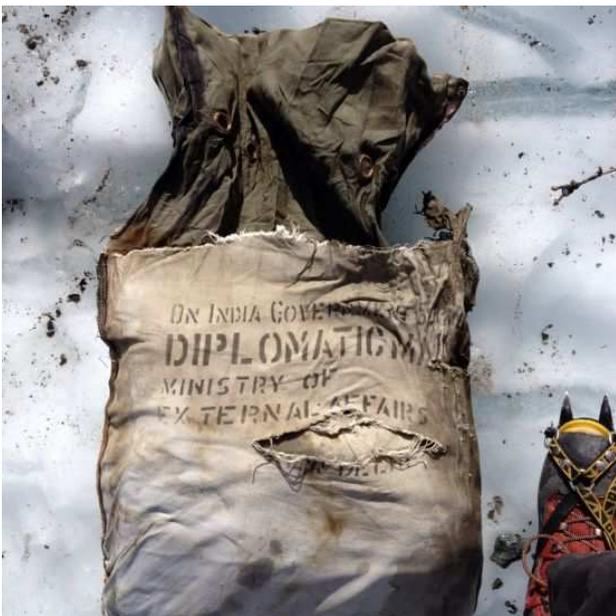


Fig. 9 Diplomatic bag recovered on the glacier in the summer of 2012 from the crash of 1966. Returned as is to the Indian government.

### Conclusion

By an irony of history, the *Malabar Princess* had inaugurated the airline Bombay-London via Geneva in 1948. An Indian commemorative stamp had been issued (Fig. 10).

Letters from India or Egypt are still continuing their slow journeys under tons of ice expected to melt sooner or later. They will perhaps one day complete



Fig. 10 Adhesive stamp commemorating the opening of the airline from Bombay / Mumbai to London in 1948

their postal routes as foreseen, failing to reach their addressees who have ceased to await them.

### Sources

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Free translation from the article issued in OPUS XV  
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