



The Afghan Bulletin

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The Franking Value of Stamps Used During the 1990s

Introduction

After the withdrawal of Russian forces in 1989, no new stamps were issued in Afghanistan until 2002, after the deposition of the Taliban. The governments during that period, such as they were, had other things on their mind than the issue of new stamps. The postal system did however continue to function with post offices making use of the stocks they had of older issues. The lack of effective government during this period meant that the Afghan economy suffered greatly and the rate of inflation was high. Not the millions and billions of German 1930s style hyperinflation, but very high nonetheless. By 1999, perhaps the height of Taliban power, 10,000 Afghanis were equivalent to about 10 pence (GBP £0.10). Or to put it another way: 1 Afghani was worth about 1/1000 of a penny.

This had serious implications for the postal system. The highest value Afghan stamp issued had been 100 Afghani, which by the late 1990s was virtually worthless. With no new stamps being issued, those available could obviously not be used at their face value. The simplest solution would have been to forego the use of stamps and introduce a 'Postage Paid' handstamp, but this does not seem to have been done.

The Problem

The puzzle is to work out the true value of the stamps that were used during this period. It should be noted that–

- I have been unable to find any official records relating to the rates charged. It is quite possible that given the turmoil of those years no records have survived.
- the choice of old stamps affixed to mail does not seem to have been random. A particular issue will be found used for a few months, and will then disappear from use to be replaced by another issue.
- while there are many 'single-franking' covers, there are also many 'multiple-franking' covers. It would seem that the stamps used did have a particular value – so that several different stamps, or multiples of the same stamp, were needed to make up the correct rate – but that value was not their face value.
- Afghan postmarks from this period are frequently poorly struck making them illegible. Covers which could hold important keys to understanding the rates are thus rendered useless.

The Approach

One set of stamps used during this period was re-valued by handstamp. This was the Tourism set, apparently the last set prepared for use in 1989 although it may not have been actually issued until 1990 or 1991. From 1996 this set appears uprated by handstamp as follows–

- 1 Afghani surcharged to become 300 Afghani
- 2 Afghani surcharged to become 600 Afghani
- 3 Afghani surcharged to become 900 Afghani
- 4 Afghani surcharged to become 1200 Afghani

I have assumed that if the Afghan Post Office went to the bother of individually handstamping this issue, then these stamps at least would have used at their new uprated values. This gives a known value without which the task at hand would be infinitely more difficult. These handstamps only appear to have been used for a limited period – the earliest I have seen is September 1996, the latest is June 1998 (although I do have an example with an unclear postmark which could be October 1998). From February 1999 they are used again without surcharge, inflation presumably having made even a few hundred Afghanis meaningless.

The 1951 Bamian Buddha definitive issue

This stamp was of course withdrawn from use soon after issue in 1951. There would therefore be ample stocks of it left down in the Kabul GPO basement making it an ideal candidate to be brought into use now. On the other hand, the Taliban took Kabul on the 27th September 1996 and one of their inflexible decrees was to ban all representation of the human form – this meant for example that television was banned, but radio was allowed. Philatelically, no stamps with people on them are found used during the Taliban time . . . except this one. Even the postal stationery envelope depicting a farmer had to have the farmer covered over. Given that the Taliban hatred of the statues was such that they eventually dynamited them it must have been a very brave postmaster who authorised the use of this particular stamp. Or maybe to the Taliban the Buddha being a heathen idol didn't count as a "human form"?

The stamp is found used during a very short window – February to July 1997 – before disappearing from use. I have one further use of it in what appears to be July 1998 but the postmark is very indistinct.

The face value of the stamp is only 20 poul – but at what value was it being used in 1997?

At last – a use for algebra!

The two covers illustrated as Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 use only a surcharged stamp ('X' which we know the value of) and the Buddha stamp (whose unknown value is 'Y'). Both covers are airmail to the UK and are dated within a month of each other. There is therefore a good chance that the rates for each are identical – the *really* high inflation didn't kick in until a little later. From these covers we can deduce that–

$$X + (5 \times Y) = 11 \times Y$$

We know that $X = 300$, so–

$$300 + (5 \times Y) = 11 \times Y$$

To balance the equation it therefore follows that Y must = 50 i.e.,–

$$300 + (5 \times 50) = 11 \times 50$$

The rate for an airmail letter to the UK at this time was therefore 550 Afghani and the 20 poul 1951 Bamian Buddha stamp was used as a 50 Afghani stamp.



Fig 1. Front and back



Fig. 2. Front and back

Fig. 3 and (next page) Fig. 4 illustrate registered airmail covers to the UK from February and July of 1997 and again use only a combination of surcharged and Buddha stamps. Both are franked with a 900 Afghani surcharge and three Buddhas. Given that it has already been established that the Buddha is worth 50 Afghani, it follows that each is franked with 1,050 Afghani. As we know from the covers in Figs 1 and 2 that the airmail postage rate was 550 Afghani, this means that the registration rate was 500 Afghani in addition to the airmail postage.



Fig. 3. Front and back.

Well, that's the 'true' value of just one stamp established. Established at least for the period February to July 1997 that is! There are plenty more still to be worked out. The next step is to find a cover or covers with only surcharged stamps and another 'old' issue, or perhaps a Buddha (whose value at this time we now know) and another 'old' issue. Unfortunately covers are few and far between – most of those seen are addressed to the BBC – very little mail seems to have been sent out of the country at this time.



Fig. 4. Front and back.

1932: Revised Dates of Issue

Fixing dates of issue for some Afghan stamps can be a bit hit and miss. We don't even know when the very first Afghan stamp was issued. By the 1930s you would expect that the philatelic community would have got its act together and recorded such things – and yet there are still revisions to be made.

The **1932 Definitive issue** is stated as being issued in 'about July' (Patterson¹), or simply 'July' (SG, Uyehara/Dietrich²). However, the 40 poul at least was available from December 1931—the cover on the next page has it postmarked at Kabul on the 28th December, 1931 and I have another cover which although the Kabul postmark is indistinct has a Landikhana transit of 13th January 1932.

¹ *Afghanistan: Its Twentieth Century Postal Issues*, Patterson, 1964, p.40.

² *SG Part 16, Central Asia*, 4th Edn, p.10; *Afghan Philately*, Uyehara/Dietrich, 1979, p.150.



Kaboul 28th December, 1931, Landikhana 3rd January, Sibi 8th January, 1932
(NB The Indian censor markings are also noteworthy . . . but not the subject of the discussion here!)

The 1932 ‘Commemorative Issue’ featuring the National Liberation Monument in Kabul is referred to equally vaguely as having been issued in ‘October’ 1932 (SG³) or ‘October or November’ (Patterson and Uyehara/Dietrich⁴). The cover illustrated shows usage from several months earlier being postmarked at Kabul on the 25th July.



Kaboul 25th July, Torkham 27th July, Landikotal/Peshawar 29th July, 1932

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³ SG, as Note 2 above, at p.10.

⁴ Patterson, as Note 1 above, at p.43; Uyehara/Dietrich, as Note 2 above, at p.152.