

World Air Mail Day- 18 Feb 2026 Press Coverage via PTI

(This report has been published by Economic Times, New Indian Express, Hindustan Times and other major newspapers throughout India on 18 February 2026).



13 min that shrunk world in 1911: World's first Air Mail by airplane in India made it global 'Ground Zero'

By Jemima Raman

CHENNAI: Exactly 115 years ago, on a crisp February morning, 23-year-old Frenchman Henri Pequet climbed into the open cockpit of a fragile Humber biplane. As he cleared the banks of the Yamuna River, the roar of his engine announced the birth of a global revolution. It was the day when India became the "Ground Zero" of global airmail.

Today, February 18 is celebrated as World Airmail Day, marking that historic 13-minute hop from Allahabad to Naini. While we live in an era of instantaneous digital pings, the world of aerophilately is turning its eyes back to India to honour the moment communication truly took flight.

For Bengaluru-based Piyush Khaitan, an avid collector and Fellow of the Royal Philatelic Society London, these 13 minutes represent a lifetime of forensic pursuit.

Khaitan, Founder & Managing Director of fintech firm NeoGrowth Credit Pvt. Ltd, has spent nearly 20 years conducting a detailed census of material from this flight -- particularly, the "Holy Grail" of Indian philately, the Black Cachet.

"To an untrained eye, the Black Cachet may appear to be just a different ink impression, but it is the rarest and most selectively used marking of the 1911 First Aerial Post," Khaitan told PTI.

While most of the 6,500 letters carried that day were struck with magenta ink, Khaitan's census has confirmed only 22 unique Black Cachet items.

"Earlier research suggested only nine examples, but documentation was scattered across auction records and private collections without verified details," he said.

The evidence suggests these were likely reserved for prominent personalities, indicating a controlled use at the very birth of airmail.

In high-stakes collecting, perfection is often less interesting than a well-documented error. Khaitan points to a "unique" item in his collection: the first known underpaid airmail cover in the world. A sender in 1911 franked a letter to France with the rate for Britain, falling short of the international requirement.

"A so-called 'mistake' reveals how the postal system truly functioned at the very birth of airmail," Khaitan said.

The letter was franked with 1 anna, the Imperial rate to Britain, but as it was addressed to France, the rate was 2½ annas. Khaitan's research uncovered that the deficiency was charged at double the shortfall. The cover was marked with a "T" cachet in Bombay and traveled to Paris, where French postage-due labels were applied.

"What makes this extraordinary is that the letter was still accepted and flown on the historic February 18 flight before the underpayment was even processed," Khaitan noted.

According to him, the choice of Allahabad was not a grand imperial design but a result of practical opportunity.

"The United Provinces Exhibition provided an ideal platform to demonstrate powered flight," Khaitan pointed out.

Captain W Windham of the Humber Motor Car Company, said Khaitan, was keen to promote his aircraft, and a mail flight offered both publicity and prestige.

"There was also a philanthropic heart to the flight; proceeds from the special airmail cess supported the construction of the Oxford & Cambridge Hostel in Allahabad," Khaitan said.

Khaitan also believes that despite his youth, Pequet understood the significance. "Aviation was in its infancy, and every organised flight was pioneering," he pointed out. Pequet's achievement was later recognised by France, which issued a commemorative stamp in 2011.

For collectors, the chase includes 'Pequet Cards' signed by the pilot. "They were estimated at 63 just 25 years ago; my census now has the number at 118," Khaitan said.

The physical condition of these 115-year-old letters tells its own story. "India's heat and humidity are not ideal for preserving paper; very few examples survive in pristine condition," Khaitan added. This rarity attracts forgers "like moths to a flame," requiring specialised equipment like the VS-6000 series for forensic analysis, Khaitan added.

To promote global awareness, the Air Mail Society India Foundation (AMSI) -- where Khaitan serves as chairman -- is organising AMSIPEX-26, a virtual exhibition from February 14–22. Featuring 185 frames from 12 countries, the event includes a day-long webinar on Wednesday and the release of a Souvenir Book. Simultaneously, a standing display is being held at the Royal Philatelic Society London, featuring award-winning airmail exhibits.

Reflecting on his study of these 13 minutes, Khaitan noted that the experiment was the catalyst for the global networks we depend on today.

"The 1911 experiment demonstrated that mail could move through the air, cutting time and reshaping possibilities. It also led to the development of civilian air transport with bigger, faster and safer aircraft, modern airports and navigational facilities," Khaitan said.