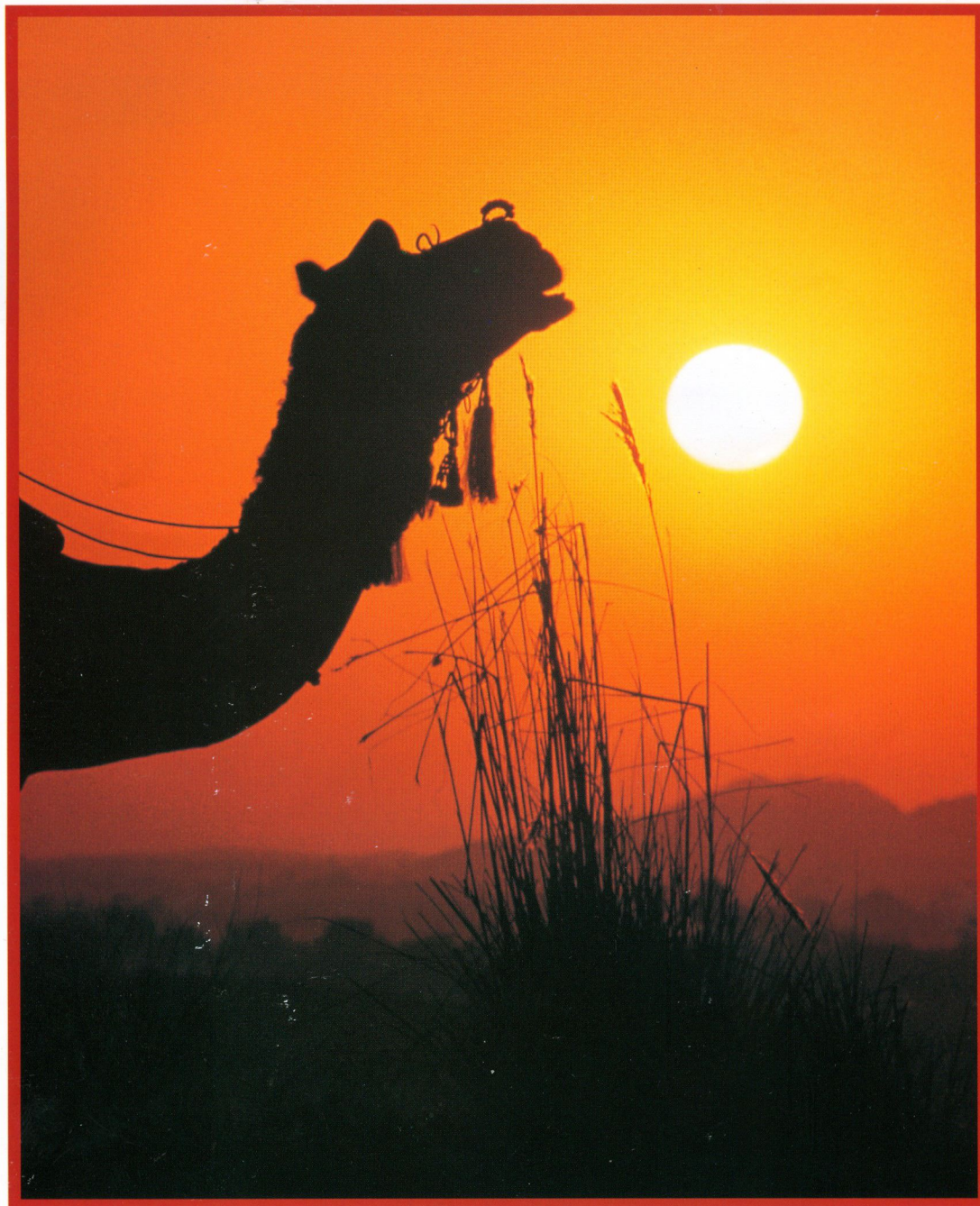


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December 1999

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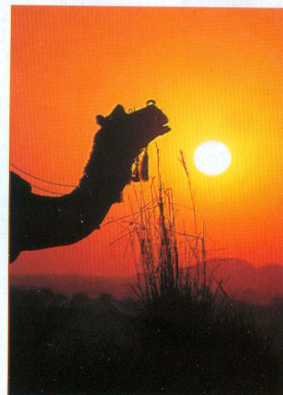
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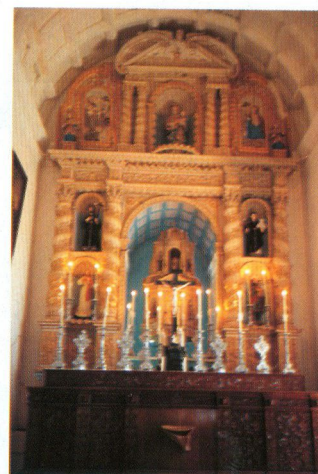
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OF INDIA

STORY OF INDIAN POSTAGE STAMPS

Text and Photographs: Nihal Mathur

It is no coincidence that one of the most prominent categories of Indian stamps is commemorative of the saints, religious leaders and philosophers from this country. After all, if there is anything that India bequeaths to the world community, it is the richness of its spiritual thought. In this historically secular land, where all religions flourished, there are stamps that celebrate all faiths and creeds. Along with the Hindu and Christians saints, we also find stamps on Jain & Buddhist monks, the Sikh gurus and holy shrines of Muslim mystics. Even the old Jewish synagogue in Cochin, Kerala, was commemorated on its 400th Anniversary in 1968.

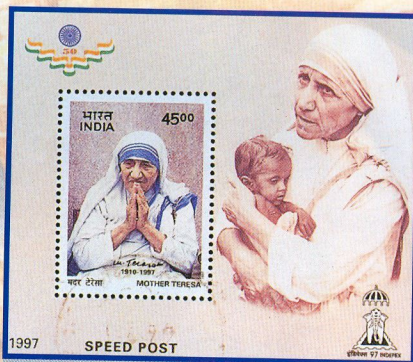
Along with the ancient sages, India has also recognized the contribution of well-known modern day philosophers like Jiddu Krishnamurti who declined the role of the World Teacher bestowed upon him by the Theosophical Society. And of course, there is the towering personality of Swami Vivekananda who carried the message of India's spiritual consciousness across the world with his historic address at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. Over the years, three stamps have been dedicated to Swami Vivekananda, marking his birth centenary in 1963, centenary of his Chicago address in 1993 and in 1996, the 25th anniversary of the Vivekananda Rock Memorial — one of the most glorious national monuments of our country. Situated at the tip of the Indian sub-continent, it "symbolizes the spirit of India, confluence of its cultures, religions, and societies".

Below: In the gallery of Indian stamps, Gandhi, the father of the nation, holds the most prominent place

Right: Stamps reflect the world of Indian art. A set on 'Festival of India' depicts both ancient tradition as well as modern art



1947-2000



Left: India pays homage to Mother Teresa, angel of the poor
Below: Stamps also commemorate postal history in India by issuing stamps on landmark events. On the leaf bottom left is Jal Cooper, father of Indian philately

Nearly a third of all stamps issued since independence are, in Philatelic parlance, dedicated to "Personalities" — essentially, the People of India from all walks of life. But of course, the largest category belongs to the nationalists who fought for the independence of India. All the luminaries of the freedom struggle are remembered and honoured for the role they played.

However, it is Gandhi, the father of the Nation, who has truly been celebrated with nearly two dozen commemorative issues and a long running series of definitive stamps that capture different moods and many glimpses from the Mahatma's extraordinary life. Gandhi's protégé and India's first Prime Minister, Jawahar Lal Nehru, who brought a new movement of non-alignment in a polarized world, also left his stamp on the philatelic imagery of India.

Indian stamps also pay a nation's tribute to the sacrifice of its soldiers, martyrs and heroes, the statesmanship of its politicians and administrators, the selfless service of its social reformers and educationists, the pioneering work of its industrialists, scientists and professionals like engineers, doctors, lawyers etc. The contribution of the artists — the poets, writers, dancers, actors and film-makers are also celebrated along with those of Indian sportsmen and naturalists. But in celebrating the celebrated, the ordinary people of India are not forgotten. On the contrary, the simple folks of this populous nation find their rightful place in many a commemorative and

A kaleidoscope of Indian life and culture through the world of philately.



definitive stamp that also projects rural life and their humble yet significant roles. Most noteworthy, however, is the famous caricature of RK Laxman's "Common Man" in a stamp that celebrates the 150th anniversary of The Times of India

newspaper. Besides, there is yet another set of commemorative stamps on the Native Tribes of India that gives due recognition to the indigenous people.

The Women of India also find pride of place in the world of Indian stamps. Amongst women saints and heroines from Indian history, there are many eminent daughters of this land that are honoured for their contribution to Indian society, culture and polity. Undoubtedly, it is Indira Gandhi, the former Prime Minister of India, that has the most prominent position along with the Albanian born Mother Teresa, Noble Peace Prize winner who had dedicated her life to the service of the poor. The Department of Posts is also proud to have released a special stamp that salutes Indian Women in Aviation, once an exclusive male preserve. But the beauty and dignity of Indian

women, however, find reflection in two endearing sets of stamps that cherishes the Traditional Brides of India and Portraits of Rural Women from the four corners of the country.

If there is any consistency of theme in Indian stamps, it is on the Children of India. Almost uninterrupted since 1957, stamps have been issued on every 14th of November, officially designated the "Bal Din" or Children's Day. 14th November is also the birthday of Jawahar Lal Nehru who has been fondly identified as "Chacha" or "Uncle" of the Indian Children. Each year a special commemorative stamp on Children's Day is issued which deals with the special needs of children — like Care of Girl Child,





Facing Page: Habibur Rehman, a wonderful philatelist, has many stories to tell on Indian stamps. Left: The extraordinary diversity of India's flora and fauna is reflected in this colourful montage on Indian birds. Below: The world of Indian stamps also celebrates India's premier institutions

Child's Food and Nutrition, Child's Play or Study, each underlining the nation's commitment to the well-being of the children of India.

The History of India from ancient times to modern is recounted in a series of stamps that celebrate the architectural heritage of India. The Taj, Qutub Minar, Hawa Mahal, and the Golden Temple are just a few amongst a whole lot of other historic monuments, including a set on The Forts of India, that speak about different periods of Indian history. Seals excavated at Harappan sites recall the antiquity of the Indus Valley Civilisation that existed between 2500-1500 BC. Stamps also honour the historians who tried to decipher the Indus script that still remains enigmatic. India also paid its homage to Max Mueller, the German scholar of Sanskrit at Oxford, who never visited India but whose translations of the Rig-Veda brought an understanding of Vedic India (1500-500 BC) to the Western world. A set of 4 stamps highlights the major centres of Buddhist India (500-50 BC), namely, Kushinagar, Vaishali, Nalanda, and Bodhgaya where Buddha gained enlightenment.

History blends into art with exquisite specimens of Indian sculpture, depicting a Didarganj Yakshi in polished sandstone or a 9th Century AD Kalia Mardana in bronze. The Department of Posts produced a fascinating set of stamps on "The Treasures from Indian Museums" — the first having begun with the creation of the Indian Museum at Calcutta in 1814. This set brings a variety of artefacts that span not only the

Stamps act as cultural ambassadors reflecting 5000 years of Indian civilization

Kings! From the Salar Jung Museum in Hyderabad there is a jewelled dagger and a knife believed to belong to the Mughal Emperor Jehangir and his consort Noor Jehan.

Some of the most stunning examples of Mughal and Rajput schools of miniature paintings have been reproduced in large sized stamps. Over the years, Indian stamps have also brought out other rich traditions of painting in India including, cave fresco from Ajanta, folk painting on cloth from Rajasthan, traditional style of Raja Ravi Verma and of course, works of modern Indian masters like MF Hussain and Raza. India has also acknowledged the contribution of Ananda Coomaraswamy, a distinguished art historian from Sri Lanka whose famous work "Arts & Crafts of India and Ceylon" brought about a better appreciation of Indian art in the Western world.

Similarly, India has also commemorated Uday Shanker, a versatile dancer who introduced Indian Dance to a world audience. Both classical and tribal expressions of dance find their place in two vibrant sets of commemorative stamps while yet another set on the Masks of India unveils the wealth of dramatic traditions of India. The magic of Indian Classical Music is also portrayed in the commemoration of master musicians like Tansen and Tyagaraja

while other issues display a variety of musical instruments. Images from Indian Literature portrays its authors — from Kalidas, who wrote in Sanskrit in the 4th century AD to contemporary writers and poets in regional languages — have also adorned the spectrum of



millennia of Indian history but also artistic expressions from different regions of the country. From the National Museum in New Delhi there is a stamp that depicts the 2 sides of a Kushan gold coin of 1st Century AD showing Kanisha — the King of

Brides of India



Classical dances of India

The deer, the lion, the leopard and the caracal represent the threatened wildlife of India



Indian stamps.

It isn't as if the gallery of Indian stamps glorifies India's culture and history alone. Indian stamps also project modern India's achievements — the hydroelectric dams, atomic power plants and others that Nehru called "temples of technology". Indeed, the stamps have commemorated advancements in Indian Railways, Aviation, Applied Sciences and Industry. There are several charming sets that capture the romance of the railways with its steam locomotives. Indian stamps have also proudly presented Aryabhata — the first Indian satellite, the first Indian Antarctic Expedition, oil exploration in high sea, telecommunications and many landmarks in India's journey into space.

The glorious heritage of India's natural history comes alive vividly in the vast range of Indian stamps that celebrate the extraordinary biodiversity.

There are delightful stamps on Indian flowers, trees, flowering trees, fruits, medicinal plants and the delicate orchids that grow in the moist regions of the North-East and Southern India. Equally colourful and joyous are stamps on Indian butterflies and birds. India also preserves the memory of Dr. Salim Ali, an ornithologist who was the final authority on the feathered fauna of the Indian sub-continent. Mammalian denizens of the Indian jungles like the monkeys, the deer, Indian elephant & rhino and the big cats etc have all been featured in Indian stamps, along with marine mammals — the river dolphin and the dugong. Popularly known as the sea cow, dugong is a ponderous animal of the water that is found along the coastal regions of India. Series of stamps have also commemorated wildlife sanctuaries, national parks and unique habitats like the untouched and unspoiled Andamans and Nicobar



\$ Simple folk of India find place in stamps that project rural life

Islands and the Himalayas. But undoubtedly, it is the tiger, symbol of India's wildlife that is the philatelic favourite, appearing time and time again — whether to commemorate Project Tiger or the I.U.C.N. (International Union of Conservation of Nature) or birth centenary of Jim Corbett.

Special mention must be made of a remarkable set of stamps on Birbal Sahani Institute of Paleobotany that depict the richness and variety of plant fossils found in India like the Glossopteris. Entombed in stone, it is this primeval plant, estimated to have flourished in the Permian Age, 250-280 million years ago, that was responsible for the precious coal reserves that we find in peninsular India today.

From the serene waters of the Dal Lake in Kashmir, to the Vivekananda Rock Temple at Kanyakumari, from the deserts of Rajasthan to the moist

forests of the North-East, there is no region of India that remains unrepresented in the world of Indian philately. Beginning with the Jai Hind series in 1947, Indian symbols, Indian institutions, Indian cities, sporting events and international gatherings have also been covered in approximately 1600 stamps that have been issued since independence. Besides, as an active member in the community of nations, India has celebrated eminent people and events from around the world.

But the story of Indian postage stamps would remain incomplete without the stamps that commemorate major events in the history and development of postage stamps in India. Beginning with the "Bishopmarks" in 1774 to the introduction of Pin Codes in 1989, the Department of Posts have released many stamps commemorating Pigeon Post, a Mobile Camel Post Office, a portrait of an Early Postman, the India Security Press where, since 1925, stamps have been printed exclusively, among many others. The Department of Posts has also paid homage to Jal Cooper — the father of philately in India.

At the threshold of the 21st century, the Government of India is planning to take out a special series to herald the new millennium. The last issue is slated to commemorate the Tabo Monastery in Himachal that symbolizes Universal Religious and Communal Harmony. The first issue of the millennium would commemorate India's Cultural and Natural Heritage. Whatever be the subject matter of these stamps, what is certain is that these perforated bits of printed paper truly act as cultural ambassadors of this ancient land and go far and wide in the world, reflecting 5000 years of Indian civilisation. In doing that, they carry the very stamp of India to every part of this earth.