

Deities and Myths of India's Stamps

Demystifying Mythological Images on Stamps from Princely States

BY VIVEK S. CHOPRA, PH.D.

Garuda, the Hindu syn bird, a bronze sculpture circa 1100-1300. Courtesy of the Asian Art Museum.

There were 39 Indian princely states that issued postage stamps during British imperial rule. The stamps were valid for use only within the political boundaries of the state where the stamp was issued. For many decades, these stamps have intrigued and charmed collectors, mostly due to their crude, rudimentary designs and the fact that they were printed on various types of papers.

Commonly referred to as “the uglies” by philatelic dealers and often found in back-of-the-book or shoebox lots, these stamps hold deep cultural and religious significance within the Indian context and warrant a more comprehensive analysis of their symbolism. Collectors take great pride in these issues, as they were mostly indigenously printed in India with basic technology and materials available to the designers at the time.

Here, I will highlight the stamps of a few of the Indian states that used Hindu mythological figures on their stamps.

This also shows the efforts of the designers and rulers to establish postal systems in rural Indian states in the 1800s.

The material displayed here was created and produced at the place of usage, within the stamp-issuing entities themselves, using simple and often crude techniques such as handstamps or typesetting. These stamps were designed to be used, and though they might appear to lack sophistication of British Indian stamps or contemporary Western issues, they remain a delight to collect and contribute to an excellent area for research.

This article is divided into the following sections:

1. Elephant God (Ganesha) on stamps of Duttia state.
2. Demystifying the Jhalawar stamp design – Garuda (not a dancing nymph).
3. Sun God (Surya) stamps of Jaipur state.
4. Sacred Cows of Bundi State.

Ganesha (Elephant God) on Duttia state stamps

Duttia, located in the Bundelkhand region of north-central India, is home to the stamps featuring Ganesha, the Elephant God. The ruler of the state, Bhawani Singh, began issuing and using these Ganesha stamps between 1893 and 1921. The design of the stamps is simple, with a central depiction of Ganesha and letters surrounding it.

Ganesha, also spelled Ganesh, is one of the most well-known and widely worshipped deities in Hinduism. His images are found across India and beyond, extending to Jains, Buddhists, and various other faiths. Ganesha is easily recognized by his elephant head and four arms. He is revered as the remover of obstacles, the bringer of good fortune, the patron of arts and sciences, and the god of intellect and wis-



Figure 1. Stamps from Duttia with the image of Ganesha, the Elephant God, at the center. Shown is the half-anna green (Scott 6, Stanley Gibbons 8) and 1-anna black (Scott 7, Stanley Gibbons 9).



Figure 2. An 1897 Duttia stationery envelope with half-anna black on buff wove paper without watermark and a blue control handstamp.



Figure 3. Stamps from Jhalawar issued from 1887 to 1890. From left: two shades of the 1-pice: yellow green (Scott 1, Stanley Gibbons 1); and blue green (Stanley Gibbons 1a, no Scott number), and the eight-sided quarter-anna (Scott 2, Stanley Gibbons 2), printed on vertically laid paper.

dom. As the god of beginnings, Ganesha is invoked at the start of ceremonies and important activities, and his blessings are sought with the first prayer of the day.

All stamps from Duttia feature Ganesha as the central emblem. In these depictions, Ganesha, seated on a pedestal, holds an axe in his right hand and a lotus flower in his left, while his other two arms rest on his legs (Figure 1).

Similar designs were used for Duttia postal stationery (Figure 2).

Up until 1889, the stamps were typeset, imperforate, and lacked gum. To make them valid, they were hand-stamped with a blue circular control mark. The first issues, from 1893 to 1897, were presumably issued in horizontal strips, as evidenced by the few preserved multiples. From the 1897-98 issues, tête-bêche multiples are known to exist, suggesting the stamps were printed by applying a line in a row, then turning the paper and repeating the process. Later issues were printed using typography in sheets of 16, 30, or 32, and most were rouletted.

The choice of Ganesha as the central motif of Duttia's stamps remains unclear. The worship of Ganesha is typically seen as complementary to the worship of other deities, and Hindus of all sects invoke Ganesha before beginning prayers, important tasks, and religious ceremonies, due to his role as the remover of obstacles and the bringer of good luck.

Additionally, the Ganapatya sect, which worships Ganesha (also called Ganapati) as the Supreme God or Prarambham (first/beginning) in Hindu philosophy, may have influenced the choice. However, the Ganapatya sect is primarily centered in Maharashtra in western India and parts of southern India, not in Bundelkhand, where Duttia is located. This adds an element of intrigue to the decision to feature Ganesha on the stamps of Duttia.

The later issues of these stamps (issued from 1897-1940) are readily available at affordable prices for collectors to enjoy and do research.

Demystifying the Jhalawar stamp design

This design is not a dancing nymph, but Garuda, the eagle avatar of Vishnu.

Jhalawar issued only two stamps for postal use as described in Stanley Gibbons catalog. The 1 pice was issued in July-August 1886 and the quarter-anna was issued in July-August 1890 (Figure 3).

These stamps were printed with typograph printing methods in strips of 12 on vertically

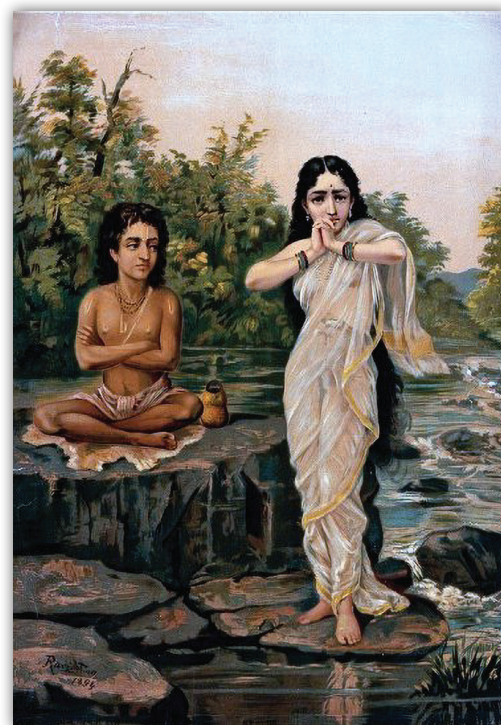


Figure 4. Rambha tries to seduce Shuka in this painting by Raja Ravi Varma (Courtesy Wikipedia).



Figure 5. Garuda portrayed as a semi-human being carrying Vishnu in a painting from Punjab Hills (c.1725). (Courtesy Wikipedia, Brooklyn Museum).



Figure 6. The Jhalawar Royal Crest has a shield in center that shows Garuda flying with a bow in right hand and arrow in left, with wings as found on official letterhead.

or horizontally laid paper and are found in many shades of green. Four pice was equal to 1 anna, hence both stamps had the same face value.

There has been a long-standing debate on the design found on the stamps of the State of Jhalawar. In the Stanley Gibbons catalog, the design found on the stamps are described as "Figure of an Apsara 'Rhembha,' a dancing nymph of the Hindu paradise." This was first described in the October 1887 edition of *The Philatelic Record*, and in *Le Timbre-Poste* in the following month.

The stamp was described earlier in *Der Philatelist* under the title of "Jabrapathan," a typographic error of "Jhalrapatan," the capital of state Jhalawar. In that article, the design was described as, "The object in center was stated to represent an Apsara, or dancing Nymph of the paradise of India, and it appears to be a very roughly drawn dancing figure of some kind."

Surrounding the central design on left is Raj Jhalawar in Devanagari script and on the right, the same is reproduced in Persi-Arabic. The top (Devanagari) and bottom (Persi-Arabic) state the denomination of 1 paisa and quarter anna. According to Wikipedia, Rambha (Rhembha in the Stanley Gibbons catalog) is one of the prominent apsaras, the celestial nymphs of Svarga (heaven), in Hindu mythology. She is

extolled to be unrivalled in her accomplishments in the arts of dancing, music, and beauty (Figure 4).

If one looks at the image on the stamps it does look like a dancing figure, but a careful look shows that there are weapons in the hands of the image. Typically, weapons are found in the hands of Indian deities to symbolize their power, protection, and the ability to overcome evil, embodying both their divine strength and their role as protectors of cosmic order.

There was an article in 2011 in the India Study Circle journal in which an interview of Her Highness Maharani Shiv Kumari the Rajmata (Queen-mother) of Kotah was published. In that interview, she mentioned that the stamp of Jhalawar depicts "The Garuda," regarded as the vehicle of Vishnu holding an arrow in his left hand and a bow in the right (Figure 5).

This was corroborated with the royal crest of Jhalawar, which has a shield in center that shows Garuda flying with a bow in right hand and arrow in left, with wings (Figure 6)

In Hindu mythology, Garuda is the king of birds and a kite-like figure with beak and wings. He is shown either in a zoomorphic form (a giant bird with partially open wings) or an anthropomorphic form (a man with wings and some ornithic features). Garuda is generally portrayed as a protector with the power to swiftly travel anywhere, ever vigilant and an enemy of every serpent. Interestingly, Garuda is also the national emblem of Indonesia, a modern-day nation in Southeast Asia.

This interview of the descendant of the royal family of Jhalawar asserts that the design is not a dancing nymph, but Garuda. Hitherto, there have been no actual stamps, or essays or proofs that show that the design depicts Garuda. The official letterhead contains a seal of Jhalawar depicting Garuda in the central shield as well as official envelopes that contain another seal in back which has Garuda in central shield (Figure 7).

Recently, I found two essays that clearly



Figure 7. Below, the official Dragon pair seal is found on the reverse of royal envelopes in which the central shield shows Garuda flying with bow and arrow in hand. Above, the front of a cover shows five quarter-anna stamps (Scott 2, Stanley Gibbons 2) to pay the registered rate, canceled with intaglio seal cancel.



Figure 8. The essay shows printing on thin wove paper in black with the Garuda holding a bow and arrow. This is a unique example of an early concept design for the issued stamp.



Figure 9. An essay shows printing on thin wove paper in black for the second stage of an early design for the issued stamp.

show that the design is indeed Garuda. The first essay is in black and shows a design from an early die where the letters on the left and right are horizontally transposed, as compared to the final design as shown (Figure 8).

The Raj Jhalawar in Devanagari characters is seen on the right (as compared to left in issued stamps) and the same in Persi-Arabic on left (as compared to right on issued stamps).

The central figure shows a clear “beak” (signifying Garuda) and arrow in right hand and bow in left hand with wings and tail. The essay is on thin wove paper and the incomplete transfer of the impression might have been the reason to not use this design in subsequently issued stamps. This essay is of highest importance in Jhalawar philately as it solves the long-standing debate over the design being Garuda and not a nymph.

The second essay (Figure 9) also is similar, with the design in black, but the impression is crisper and closer to the final issued design, but letters are still transposed horizontally. The image shows a clear “beak” of Garuda, but the bow and arrow are not as clearly imprinted as the final issued design. The central design looks almost like the issued stamp shown in Figure 3 along with lines and lettering around the central figure.

I have also tried to investigate the first noted stamp more closely and attempted to identify if any impressions show the beak, as seen in the second essay. My hypothesis is that in early impressions of the stamp, one should find a “beak” in the central figure. I did find two stamps (center and right in the strip of three) printed on horizontally laid paper (Figure 10). This clarifies that the central figure is indeed Garuda and not Rhembha, “the dancing nymph.” I hope these observations will help collectors attribute the early impressions correctly in their collections.



Figure 10. A strip of three Jhalawar stamps (Scott 1, Stanley Gibbons 1) printed on horizontally laid paper; the central and right hand stamps show the “beak” of Garuda.



Figure 11. A complete sheet of 12 of the 1904 dull red stamps from Jaipur (Scott 2, Stanley Gibbons 4), with sheet number “841” in red manuscript in Devanagari script inverted at lower right.

Sun God (Surya) stamps of Jaipur State

Jaipur was a large state of 15,500 square miles situated in the northeast of Rajputana, which was ruled by Suryavanshi Rajputs (“Suryavanshi” implies the claim of the royal family that they were descendants of the solar deity Surya). Surya is the Sun and the solar deity in Hinduism. Traditionally, it is regarded as one of the five major deities in Hinduism: Surya is ranked along with Vishnu, Shiva, Shakti, and Ganesha, and several temples dedicated to him are found throughout India.

In iconography of Surya, he is often depicted riding a chariot harnessed by horses, often seven in number, which represent the seven colors of visible light, and the seven days of the week.

In Jaipur State, postage stamps were introduced in 1904 under the reign of Maharaja Sawai Madho Singh II, who ruled the state from 1880 to 1922. All adhesives under his rule show the Sun God Surya riding on his chariot.

The first July 1904 issue with three values of half-anna blue, 1-anna red, and 2-anna green were inscribed in English and Hindi. They were locally printed at the Durbar State Press in Jaipur by lithography from hand-drawn stones, with



Figure 12. A registered handmade cover from Bundi local use paying the 3-anna postage with a carmine red joined pair and a single (Scott 17, Stanley Gibbons 61a), canceled with manuscript and a circular datestamp.



Figure 13. Sheets of four of the Bundi sacred cow stamps, both cropped for space: the half-anna cobalt (Scott 15, Stanley Gibbons 37c) and 3-anna chocolate (Scott 20, Stanley Gibbons 57).

the first two stones (known as IA and IB) of the half-anna and both of the 1-anna and 2-anna issues in sheets of 12 (three-by-four) (Figure 11). The last two stones, numbered II and III, of the half-anna were produced in sheets of 24 (six-by-four).

The Jaipur state postal authorities had a real obsession with the Sun. Also, under the reign of the consecutive Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II, the state in 1931 issued a stamp depicting the chariot motif and the datestamps show the rising or shining Sun. Most of these stamps are readily available for collectors and enthusiasts and provide material for excellent material for exhibits and research.

Sacred Cow issues of Bundi State

Bundi issued a series of stamps featuring sacred cows in October 1914 (half-anna value) and February 1915 (2 and 4 annas). These are among the most fascinating issues from the Native States of India.

The design prominently displays the head and body of Maharaja Sir Raghubir Singh at the center, with a sacred cow on either side, each standing on its hind legs.

In India, cows and bulls are revered, with Nandi (a bull) being the vehicle of Lord Shiva. The design draws on the legend of the Maharaja, who is said to have saved sacred cows from slaughter by a Mughal army. This reflects the cultural significance of cows in India, where many people follow a vegetarian diet and consider the cow a sacred animal (Figure 12).

At the top of the stamp, the words "Raj Bundi" are displayed in Devanagari script, while the value characters appear in a similar style at the bottom. The stamps were printed in small blocks of four, using separate clichés that could be rearranged to create different settings. When a new value was needed, the value characters were replaced, and the letters in the top panel could also be swapped out, sometimes in a dif-

ferent typeface, generating further variations.

Over the course of 27 years, the same four clichés were used, resulting in nearly 60 distinct, identifiable settings. A fascinating area of study lies in examining the wear and tear on the clichés due to their extensive use, as these flaws can help identify different settings and establish their chronological order.

These stamps remain highly accessible and present an excellent research opportunity for dedicated philatelists.

I hope this article sparks interest in Indian States stamps both in traditional and topical aspects, as they were locally produced with regional paper and printing techniques, offering a vast array of materials for collectors to explore.

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The Author

Vivek S. Chopra, Ph.D. is a molecular geneticist by training and helps develop drugs to fight blood cancer. He joined the American Philatelic Society in 2021 and has collected stamps for more than 30 years. He mainly collects British India, Indian States, India used in Nepal, and Cape of Good Hope triangles. He is a senior philatelist and head of U.S. for David Feldman Auctions, Geneva. He is a member of India Study Circle, Royal Philatelic Society London, Collectors Club New York, Collectors Club of San Francisco, AAPE, UPSS, and Sequoia Stamp Club.