

Synopsis

I wrote this article to educate and demystify the stamps of the Indian Princely States. My aim is to renew interest in these issues and to highlight their true historical and cultural value for a wider audience

This article examines the mythological imagery on postage stamps issued by the **Indian Princely States** under British imperial rule. While these locally produced issues have long been dismissed by dealers as “the uglies” due to their crude appearance, they are in fact deeply meaningful cultural artifacts. Created with simple, often makeshift printing methods, they embody indigenous design, religious symbolism, and the efforts of smaller states to establish functioning postal systems in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The study is organized into four key case studies, each showcasing a different deity or sacred motif:

- **Duttia (1893–1921):** Stamps issued under Bhawani Singh prominently depict *Ganesha*, the elephant-headed Hindu god of beginnings, wisdom, and the remover of obstacles. All postal issues and stationery featured Ganesha, though the reason for his selection remains unclear, as Bundelkhand was not a center of Ganapatya worship. These issues, ranging from hand-stamped, imperforate typeset stamps to later typographed sheets, demonstrate the persistence of local identity expressed through religious iconography.
- **Jhalawar (1886–1890):** Long believed to portray the apsara *Rambha*, essays, family testimony, and royal crests confirm that the design actually depicts *Garuda*, the eagle mount of Vishnu, holding bow and arrow. This reinterpretation **and original research** resolves a century-long philatelic debate first propagated by 19th-century journals and catalogues. The confirmation of Garuda’s identity aligns the stamp imagery with the Jhalawar royal crest and essays showing the deity’s characteristic beak and weapons, offering new clarity for collectors.
- **Jaipur (1904 onward):** The Sun God *Surya* appears on Jaipur’s first stamps, reflecting the Suryavanshi Rajputs’ claim of descent from the solar dynasty. Lithographed locally at the Durbar Press, these early issues show Surya in his chariot, pulled by horses symbolizing light and time. Surya became an enduring motif of Jaipur’s postal identity, echoed in later issues and cancellations showing the rising Sun.
- **Bundi (1914–1940):** The “Sacred Cow” issues feature the ruler flanked by revered cows, a symbol of Hindu piety and protection. Produced with rearrangeable clichés, the series generated nearly sixty identifiable settings across decades, providing rich scope for plating and research. These designs also recall local legends of Maharaja Raghubir Singh defending sacred cattle, embedding regional mythology into postal imagery.

Across these four states, the article demonstrates how seemingly crude designs reflect **religious devotion, political identity, and regional printing practices**. Essays, proofs, and variations reveal a complex genealogy of experimentation and adaptation. The stamps show that Indian States were not simply copying imperial models but asserting their own narratives through philately.

The author concludes that these stamps, far from being “uglies,” are in fact **vivid cultural documents** that link philately with mythology, art history, and political authority. They remain accessible for collectors while also offering fertile ground for advanced research and exhibition.