

Gandhi Centenary Year

Date of issue: 13 AUGUST 1969



In 1968 Lord Mountbatten of Burma was invited by the President of India to be Chairman of the UK Gandhi Centenary Committee: with the agreement of the British Government Lord Mountbatten accepted. From the Committee he selected about ten to form a Working Committee: it was a meeting of this Working Committee that suggested a commemorative stamp. The Committee thought it was an excellent idea but the representative from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office pointed out that Lord Shepherd, Minister of State FCO, had already raised this matter with the Postmaster General (PMG), John Stonehouse. The PMG had turned down the suggestion on the basis that it was impossible to celebrate every important event and the Post Office had to be selective. Nevertheless the Committee remained strongly in favour of the idea and on 19 December 1968, Lord Mountbatten wrote to the PMG asking him to reconsider in view of the special significance that the centenary had for the people of Britain. Lord Mountbatten pointed out that of the other 25 countries celebrating the centenary, several were believed to be contemplating stamps. Lord Mountbatten concluded the letter 'the Committee felt that in view of our special close ties with India and with Gandhi himself, it would be most unfortunate if we lagged behind the tributes paid by other countries in the philatelic world'.

On receiving this letter the PMG reconsidered the position and wrote to George Downes, Director Operations and Overseas and Chairman of the Stamp Advisory Committee, to say that he thought they should now concede on this one. On 23 December, Downes replied to the PMG saying he felt the PMG had been right in September to tell Lord Shepherd that to issue a Gandhi stamp would establish an awkward precedent and it would be hard to refuse requests to commemorate other statesmen that have played an important role in British history, such as Roosevelt, Kennedy and Eisenhower. Nevertheless, Downes realised it would be difficult to 'resist a plea from one so eminent as Lord Mountbatten' and he

therefore reluctantly agreed that it may be best to concede. Downes added that it would not be possible to include a Gandhi stamp in the Anniversaries series, and that an August date would be best in the 1969 stamp programme. Downes imagined that this would be acceptable to Lord Mountbatten as the centenary year ran from October 1968 to October 1969.

During December the PMG wrote to Lord Shepherd, mindful that he had been the first to suggest a stamp, saying that having reviewed the position he now felt it would be appropriate to issue a Gandhi stamp in 1969. Lord Mountbatten was also informed of this decision and wrote to the PMG thanking him, saying that August 1969 would suit the Committee 'very well indeed as the actual Centenary of his birth occurs in October, 1969 and the celebration lasts a year beforehand as is always the custom in India!'

Press and Broadcast Notice PB11 was issued on 12 January 1969 announcing the stamp, the first time a statesman from overseas had been commemorated on a British postage stamp.

On 31 January J R Baxter of the Operations and Overseas Department (OOD) advised the PMG that it was necessary to decide the issue date and value of the stamp. The India High Commission had told OOD that an August date was acceptable as it fell within the Centenary Year. An August date from the Post Office point of view was necessary for operational reasons. Baxter suggested that the most appropriate date would be 13 August, the Wednesday preceding 15 August, Independence Day in India. At that time Wednesday was considered the best day for new issues as far as counter work was concerned. Since the stamp was to commemorate a statesman from India, Baxter felt it would be advisable for it to be the basic airmail rate to that country, 1s 6d. The PMG agreed to these recommendations.

ARTISTS INVITED

On 9 January 1969 John Grant of the Council of Industrial Design wrote to Don Beaumont (OOD) with names of five artists. They were Rosalind Dease, Martin Stringer, Abis and Stribley, Biman Mullick, and Healey and Mills.

The list was considered by OOD to be a bit light on proven artists. It was decided to include Philip Sharland as he was considered by B Sproat (OOD) to be 'a bright boy with ideas these days'. Healey and Mills were not invited, but the stamp printers, Harrison and Sons Ltd and Bradbury and Wilkinson and Co Ltd, were also invited.

INSTRUCTIONS TO ARTISTS

The instructions to artists were sent out on 29 January 1969. Only one design was required, but artists could submit alternative designs if they wished. The design was to be drawn four times linear stamp size: a template was enclosed to give guidance to size. The artists were told that it was essential that the design included the denomination in clear Arabic numerals (1s 6d), the inscription 'Gandhi Centenary Year 1969', and a profile portrait of the Queen (specimens in different sizes were enclosed).

The artists were instructed that, in accordance with the limitations set by the printing process, they were to use no more than four colours. Black was not to be used as a background although a white background was acceptable. The background colours were to be no deeper than mid-tone. The stamps were to be printed by Harrison and Sons at their printing works in High Wycombe using the photogravure process. This process reproduces a number of graduated tones and therefore the artists were advised to take care in using materials that permit photographing each tone in its true value. A shade card was enclosed, to be used as a guide to the overall tone range available. The completed artwork was to reach Don Beaumont, GPO Headquarters, by Monday 24 February 1969. The fee for the completed design was 60 guineas, with an additional 190 guineas, a total of 250 guineas, for the successful design. The instructions were to be treated as confidential and personal to the artist receiving them. Harrison and Sons and Bradbury Wilkinson were instructed that any design they submitted was to be a collective effort on the part of the designing staff and not from individual designers.

ARTWORK RECEIVED

Designs were received as follows (allocated numbers for ease of reference):

B Mullick (received 17 February 1969) – 1, 2 (a further 15 rough designs were also submitted)

P Sharland (received 24 February 1969 – 3 to 5

M Stringer (received 24 February 1969) - 6

R Stribley (received 24 February 1969) – 7 to 9

Bradbury Wilkinson (received 24 February 1969 – 10 to 15

R Dease (received 25 February 1969) – 16 to 19

Harrison and Sons (received 7 March 1969) – 20 and 21 (plus a selection of further rough designs).

Because of the extremely tight schedule, it was impossible to convene the Stamp Advisory Committee (SAC). The designs were, however, shown to eight members of the Committee, individually. The recommendations, together with all of the drawings, were on 5 March submitted by G Downes to the PMG. They were marked as follows:

Set A by Biman Mullick - an Indian artist
Set B by Philip Sharland
Set C by Martin Stringer
Set D by R Stribley
Set E by Bradbury Wilkinson artists
Set F by Rosalind Dease.

The recommendation was design A3 by Mullick although the right hand panel incorporating the lettering and the Queen's head would probably need to be slightly redesigned to ensure a better balance. For second choice the members were equally divided between C1 and F2.

The inclusion of the Indian flag on Mullick's design provoked some discussion within OOD. It was suggested that whilst the flag provided a more meaningful and pleasing background than the all-orange alternative, the PMG might feel that its use (without the Union Jack) on a British stamp was unacceptable. The matter probably went no further than OOD, as there are no records of any comment by the PMG on this matter.

On 6 March the PMG forwarded to G Downes (OOD) his agreement to the selection of design A3. Before having the Gandhi stamp essayed it was decided by OOD to check that the Indian flag was correctly shown and that the High Commission found it acceptable. It was also decided to check as to whether it was correct to include 'Centenary Year 1969' when the year was really October 1968 to October 1969.

On 10 March the Mullick design was shown to Mr Kidwai, Minister for Education and Scientific Affairs, Indian High Commission, to check technical details. Mr Kidwai, in turn, showed the design to the High Commissioner. The High Commissioner gave his approval but felt that the colours of the flag were not the right shade and he therefore provided a flag so the printers could achieve the exact colours.

Mr York, of Harrison and Sons, was handed the special stamp drawing and flag on 17 March in prepare essays. On 10 April 1969 Harrison sent essays to Beaumont at GPO Headquarters. On 11 April the final essay was approved by the Indian High Commission.

THE QUEEN'S APPROVAL

On 17 April the PMG submitted an essay to the Queen, who approved the design on 21 April 1969. On 5 May, Beaumont forwarded an approved essay to Harrison and Sons.

PAYMENTS TO ARTISTS

The payment of £162 10s was made to Mullick, with each of the other artists received £63, on 4 June.

PRESS SHOWING

At the SAC meeting held on 21 May, G Downes, Chairman, told the Committee that essays of the approved design had been prepared. He added that it would not be easy to achieve the right impact on the press with just a single stamp; however, the Post Office was considering a press launch at the Indian High Commission, providing the Commissioner was in agreement. This idea was rejected, for reasons unrecorded, by the Public Relations Department, as the Chairman informed the SAC at its next meeting: a normal press showing had been decided upon by the Public Relations department although representatives from the Commission were invited.

FIRST DAY COVER (FDC)

The envelope was designed by Biman Mullick, of simple design showing a spinning wheel in red against a white background. The relevance of the spinning wheel was explained by Biman Mullick:

According to Mahatma Gandhi, the development of cottage industry is the answer to industrial dependence. One should at least spin the thread for one's own use, was his idea. In those days and still now millions of his disciples follow his idea and spin their own clothe. In other words Mahatma wanted an industrial revolution through 'Charka', the spinning wheel. Eventually 'Charka' represents not only Gandhi and Gandhism but also became the symbol of the Indian National Congress party as well. Present 'Ashoka's Wheel' on the Indian national flag has a clear link with the Mahatma's Spinning Wheel.

Press and Broadcast Notice PB178 was released on 24 July 1969 giving details of the First Day Covers.

With a 1s 6d stamp, the airmail rate to India, first day covers were expected to reach India by August 15, Indian Independence Day; however, with such covers the Post Office gives priority to the quality of postmarking and thus delays can occur. It may have been optimistic in expecting letters to reach India in two days.

The blank envelope cost 6d from the Philatelic Bureau in Edinburgh and post offices with philatelic posting boxes. The inclusive charge for an official cover fully prepared by the Bureau was 4s 6d. Customers' own addressed envelopes were stamped and cancelled at 2s 6d each. The charge for servicing 50 or more covers to one address was 3s 6d each. The GPO had 494,800 covers printed at a cost of £1,987 14s 9d.

PRESENTATION PACKS

Stuart Rose, Design Director, wrote to OOD on 18 March 1969 expressing concern over the proposed Presentation Pack, namely designing an acceptable pack within the limits that currently surrounded its production.

At that time the GPO was working to a standard shape and size which could accommodate comfortably either four or six special stamps depending on whether a two or three-tier carrier was used. The printing contract did not include provision for a single-tier carrier. The best presentation that could be achieved was to use the two-tier carrier for just the one stamp, which was not considered to be good design by Stuart Rose.

Stuart Rose felt that the idea of a Presentation Pack should be dropped, to concentrate on the first day cover, rather than produce a second-rate job. He added that this was applicable to any one-stamp issue and was only strengthened in this instance by political considerations.

Views were mixed in OOD. J R Baxter suggested that 'if we get a saleable pack, then it need not be ideally beautiful', although he recognised there were alternative views. In the event no Presentation Pack was issued.

Details of the stamp and the artist were given in Press and Broadcast Notice PB167, released on 7 July 1969.

The stamp was the first from the United Kingdom to commemorate an overseas leader, and, designed by Biman Mullick, Indian graphic designer and illustrator, it was also the first to be designed by an overseas artist. The stamp featured the head of Mahatma Gandhi with the colours of the Indian flag in the background. The stamp was issued on 13 August 1969, and withdrawn on 12 August 1970.

It was printed in photogravure (sheet-fed rotary) on non-watermarked coated paper by Harrison and Sons and had phosphor bands. There were approximately 14 million printed, of which 10,804,920 were sold.

THE ARTIST

BIMAN MULLICK studied literature at Calcutta University and won an award for Fine Art in an All-India inter-University Art Exhibition. He came to Britain in 1960, to study advertising design at St Martin's School of Art. Mullick was, in 1969, a visiting teacher in graphic design at Folkestone School of Arts and Crafts and has worked as a graphic designer in Calcutta, Geneva and London. His field of practice included advertising design, typography, book design, packaging and book illustration.

GOLD MEDAL AWARDED

A gold medal was awarded to the British Post Office for the best Gandhi stamp issued by any country in the world, and was received at the stamp exhibition, Philypia, on 21 September 1970 by Geoffrey Vieler, Managing Director, Posts and Giro. The gold medal was presented by Appa B Pant, the High Commissioner for India. Biman Mullick also received an award. The stamp had been chosen by the Indian Philatelic Society from over 60 entries at the international Gandhi stamp exhibition held in Calcutta. Second prize in the category of best display of Gandhi material was also awarded to the Post Office for the display of artwork featuring both accepted and unaccepted designs.

Andy Pendlebury
February 1994

REFERENCES

British Postal Museum & Archive files:

MKD/AN/618 Gandhi FDC

MKD/BS/1753 Mountbatten and Gandhi stamp

Press and Broadcast Notices

PB11 (12 January 1969)

PB167 (7 July 1969)

PB197 (11 August 1969)

PB126 (14 May 1970)

BR240 (21 September 1970).

Stanley Gibbons Great Britain Specialised Stamp Catalogue Vol. 3 Queen Elizabeth II Pre-decimal issues. Stanley Gibbons Publications Ltd