

Celebrating Heroic Deeds

One Man's Struggle to recreate History in Postage Stamps

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The quadri-centennial of the 1604 AD installation of Adi Granth Sahib at Amritsar was celebrated in September 2004 under the auspices of SGPC with great solemnity – essentially as an inter-faith conclave, which was attended by leaders of every major religion as well as India's prime minister. A similar observance of Martyrdom of Sri Guru Arjun Devji in June 2006 has come and gone. The writer of this article, an enthusiastic philatelist – and crusader for celebrating heroism – deploras the passivity of SGPC, and the indifference of the Union Department of Posts, to these historic events of great significance for free India's future generations. His persistence has paid no dividends, but his spirit and morale are soaring. We hope someone is listening. -

Ed. SR

No commemorative stamp was issued to mark the historic inter-faith event on September 01, 2004 of 400th year of the Adi Granth Sahib at Amritsar. The plea made by S. Avtar Singh, President SGPC, vide his letter no. 50803, dated 19.4.2006, and this writer's letters of May 5, 2006 regarding another proposal for the issue of a special stamp to mark Sri Guru Arjun Dev ji's martyrdom quadri-centennial on June 16, 2006 has similarly gone unheeded. Indeed the event has passed unnoticed by Dept. of Post, Government of India. By all surmises, the government of India has ignored the proposal.

As the noted columnist of the Hindustan Times [edition of July 03, 2006] Pankaj Vohra candidly points out: 'The government does not want to disturb the peace of mind of the majority community or face the ire of its critics who want to spare criticism of Chandu Rai for his part in the death, by torture, of Guru Arjun Dev ji.' **Pankaj Vohra has been courageous enough to mention the fact that Government of Pakistan, stole the limelight by issuing a special commemorative stamp in the denomination of Rs. 5/- on June 16, 2006 depicting the golden dome of Gurdwara Dera Sahib at Lahore. Indeed it is the first time that the Pakistan Govt. has issued a stamp in honour of Panham Pir Guru Arjun.**

Knowledgeable Sikhs feel sore over the discrimination practised by the present Congress-led Government that has simply ignored the historic significance of the martyrdom. Most intellectuals maintain silence over such specific matters, and it fell on a keen philatelist, like me to stir up the national conscience. I feel myself duty bound to expose the lapse in this particular area. Unfortunately, I have no resources to launch any campaign. Fortunately I came across Dr. H.S. Dilgeer's article in **The Sikh Review** that jolted me into this writing.

Let us recall that the Government of India's Deptt. of Culture had constituted a National Committee to celebrate the 400 year of the 1st Prakash of Sri Guru Granth Sahib at Golden Temple, Amritsar on 1st Sept, 2004. This National level Committee was headed by none else than our revered Dr. Manmohan Singh, the Prime Minister. The issue of a commemorative postal stamp is the responsibility of the Department of Postal which has failed to notice the momentous event despite the fact that the Late Sr. Gurcharan Singh Tohra, then President of SGPC, had especially written to the Government well in advance. Interestingly the Golden Temple credit corporation of USA, run by the diaspora Sikhs, issued a 37-cent non-official stamp to commemorate that event, depicting Golden Temple, Amritsar. The non official stamp was promptly recognised by the USA postal department for

postage use (acceptable). Many must have seen the USA notification on TV in this respect. **Similarly, the Nepal Government issued a commemorative coin in the denomination of Rs. 250 and a special cancellation provided to mark the 400th 1st Prakash of Sri Guru Granth Sahib on 1-9-2004.** Let me explain that a special cancellation is the alternative honour in lieu of a commemorative stamp. It is sad that Indian Postal department failed on both counts.

Now Pakistan has already issued postage stamp on June 16, 2006 to honour Guru Arjun Dev ji. It is a customary practice for every stamp or coin, and country or agency, to release the first stamp or coin at a special function by some VVIP, in the presence of organisers of the events where they are presented with souvenirs.

Personally, I feel honoured that my name has been enrolled in the V.I.P. list of Department of Posts, Government of India mailing list to receive every new stamp issued by the Government of India Postal Deptt. in a special souvenir stamp Folder from 1968 to June 1984. Then it was stopped without giving any reason. Despite fighting for 2½ years for my right it was never revived. Because I happen to be a Sikh? Under the Right to information Act, 2005 can anyone get me the following information from concerned ministries of Govt. of India?

Why has the Government of India not issued any commemorative postage stamp on the following historic occasions:

- Guru Arjun Dev ji 500th Birth anniversary: 18-4-2004.
- Guru Granth Sahib 1st Parkash 400 years: 1-4-2004.
- Martyrdom of the Sahibzadas, sons of Guru Gobind Singhji 25/28 December 2004.
- Sri Guru Arjun Devji quadri-centennial martyrdom on 16-6-2006.
- Indeed why the Government of India has not thought it fit to honour any Sikh events of historical importance of Maharaja Ranjit Singh ji and Gen. Hari Singh Nalwa in coins, so far?

During British period, only two sets of commemorative postage stamp were released, viz. Inauguration of New Delhi as imperial capital in 1911, and architectural monuments of India. The Sikhs got their due share as on 3½ Anna stamp depicting "Golden Temple" Amritsar in 1935.

After Independence, our Postal department issued a set of six stamps in 1952 on saints and poets series. Those honoured on stamps were: Bhagat Kabir Ji, Saint Tulsi Das, Mira Bai, Mirza Ghalib, Rabindranath Tagore and Surdas (not Bhagat Surdas of Guru Granth Sahib). They did not consider Guru Nanak, the saint-prophet worthy?

"Shahid Bhagat Singh's photos are available with Turban. But the Government depicted him on a stamp in 1968 with a Bowler hat in jail before he was martyred, to identify him as a Hindu! Bhagwad Geeta and Ram Charitra Manas were commemorated on postage stamps, but similar honour was denied to Sri Guru Granth Sahib and the Koran. Lesser known Dogra general Zorawar Singh had been depicted on a special stamp. But the great General Hari Singh Nalwa, who won the distinction of permanently stopping the North-Western and Central Asian marauders and invaders is yet to be honoured in the philatelic gallery. There are many, who have been commemorated in stamps repeatedly, i.e. twice, thrice or five to six times. But historic events relating to Sikhism have been simply ignored.

Saragarhi: My son joined the UK stamp bug club (later christened Royal Mail Collectors club) in 1987-88. During this period, the club issued an advertisement inviting suggestion from members to break new ground in "stamp issue" programme. In so far as our postal department had failed to commemorate centenary of the Saragarhi Legend 4 Bn of Sikh Regt (then 36 Sikh) on postage stamp in 1987, we prepared a strong case of epic battle of

“Saragarhi” centenary in 1997 to be commemorated on a set of five stamps by the British Post Office. **The Battle of Saragarhi is one of eight stories of collective bravery published by the UNESCO. It has been mentioned as one of the five most significant events of its kind in the world. All the 21 soldiers of the 4 Bn Sikh were awarded Indian Orders of Merit (Posthumously), highest award then Indians were entitled.** It was also a record that 21 IOM were awarded in a single operation. The British Parliament had, on hearing the news of their heroism, accorded a standing ovation. Queen Victoria herself gave 250 Guineas from her purse for their memorial.

It was, therefore, a matter of great satisfaction that our case had been included in the possible subjects for 1997 in UK. Accordingly, we have informed the Sikh Regt. of the development achieved and initiate action for issue of “Saragarhi” commemorative postage stamps on its centenary by the Postal department of India. Unfortunately, again, lack of support from the Sikh Regt. and others and the fact Indian Postal Department had failed to issue a stamp on “Saragarhi”, our case became weak. As such, it was not included in the seven sets finally chosen for 1997 by the Royal Mail.

However, 1st, 2nd (combined as Sikh Regt.) and 3rd Bn. of Sikh Regt. has already been commemorated on postage stamps by India. We were disappointed, but did not lose heart. Mr. Vikramjit Singh Sahney (of Maharaja Ranjit Singh Trust and World Punjabi Society) holds a function every year. The Chief Guest for a few years used to be Mr. Michael Arthur, the British High Commissioner in India. In the 2004, function he stated that the Regt. won 14 Victoria Crosses. On September 2005 function there was a demand for a memorial for the Saragarhi heroes in U.K. I took the opportunity to revive our case, sought details of 14 Sikh Regt. Victoria Cross holders from the British High Commissioner. According to my record/knowledge, Sikh Regt. won Ten Victoria Crosses, a recipient also being an Englishman, Brig. Sir John Smyth. As per Indian Army convention, those serving in the Sikh Regt. are also given the title of “Sikh”.

In his reply, Mr. Michael Arthur could supply the name of only six Sikh V.C. holders. No mention was made of the Battle of Saragarhi stamp. Now something may be to your readers’ interest. On September 21, 2006, the UK Royal Mail released a set of six stamps on 150 year of Victoria Cross. The selection committee apparently overlooked the claim of **Naik Nand Singh, 1/11 Sikh who won V.C. in 1944 on the Burma operation. Naik Nand Singh, also won Maha Vir Chakra for gallantry in the 1948 J&K operation. His case is a rare one as he is the only soldier in British and Indian Army, as well as in entire Commonwealth Army, who has been decorated by two Governments.**



Appendix

Letter from UK Department of Trade and Industries, Shareholder Executive, Bay 666, 1 Victoria Street, London SW1H 0ET :

Dear Mr. Bhagwant Singh,

Thank for your letter of 24 April to the Prime Minister. I have been asked to reply to your comments regarding the matter as my directorate has responsibility for UK postal Services policy.

Under the Postal Services Act 2000, Government has given Royal Mail the freedom to run its business as it sees fit, to meet the changing needs and demands of the UK market and its customers. Decisions relating to operational matters, **which includes matters relating to the company’s special stamps**, are the direct responsibility of the company’s management. The issue you have raised therefore is something that you will need to pursue direct with the company. It is not a matter of Government policy and is not therefore a matter for Government

intervention.

The company receives around 2000 suggestions for themes for its special stamps every year. It is therefore faced with a very daunting and difficult task in selecting themes and images for an annual programme of around 12 special issues. Not surprisingly, many people will be disappointed, that their suggestions have not been taken up. Within the selected themes, the company has an equally difficult task of choosing a selection of images. **However, the company does make every effort to ensure balance and diversity within themes and within annual programmes and will consult experts in the field. In the case of a set of stamps commemorating the Victoria Cross the reality is that all cases of honoured bravery are equally deserving but the practicality is that the company can not produce stamps for all.** The final selection does not take anything away from any of the other recipients, it merely provides a selection of examples of the sort of bravery and courage meriting the Victoria Cross and as such commemorates and celebrates the achievement of all of those awarded the Victoria Cross.

I hope this is helpful.

Yours sincerely,
Steve Guilbert