



# Postage stamps and digital philately: Worldwide and Indian scenario

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## KEYWORDS

Stamps;  
Postage stamps;  
Philately;  
Digital philately;  
Virtual philately;  
WADP numbering system;  
WNS;  
Indian university stamps

**Abstract** 'Postage stamps', basically as a token for payment of postal taxes, are now being recognized as an information source and historical document in recording national achievements that visually convey four core elements: *denomination, country name, graphical design, and the textual element*. They are a valuable means of communication easily available anywhere to anybody. Realizing them as source of extra revenue, commemorative stamps are made available over time. The information technology (IT) wave changed the hobby of stamp collection to Digital Philately, while information and communication technology (ICT) developments accelerated the hobby further to Virtual Philately.

This paper focuses on the aspects of digital and virtual philately. This study aims to evaluate *The World Association for the Development of Philately (WADP) Numbering System (WNS)* database, which provides free access to authentic postage stamps issued by Universal Postal Union (UPU) member countries and territories. A total of 48,159 stamps with 48 themes were found registered by 184 countries at the time of study. Indian stamps totaled 554 entries with the highest number of entries, 1258, from France, and followed by 1006 from Japan. A ranking was done using themes whereas "Fauna" was observed to be the most popular theme at 14.1% or 6800 stamps under study. For Indian stamps, politics and government, architecture and literature, press and comics are the most prevalent themes with 14.3, 9.8 and 9.8% respectively of the national contribution. The paper also presents a detailed analysis of the 15 Indian stamps commemorating the 14 Indian traditional universities issued over the 50 years of India's independence.

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## Introduction

Postage stamps, which are the small pieces of colorful paper issued by the government of a nation or country, are

issued with both an investment of time and care. They depict national and international achievements; commemorate institutions and personalities of national and international importance; and are used to announce both

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national and international events. Primarily, they are used as a token for payment of postal taxes and support delivery of the mail and sending a message (Greenwald, 1996) due to their illustrated nature. The little piece of paper is actually an ambassador representing its country through the people, places, and history depicted on it. They are a valuable means of communication.

The name stamp itself has a stamping impression on the society and is readily available anywhere to anybody. The illustration on stamps triggers a joy of understanding and a deeper understanding that can be shared by all humans without depending on a revelation.

The first stamp was printed in Britain on May 06, 1840 and was used for mail; subsequently, authorities could disseminate message (information) through stamps as a medium that resulted in a source of extra revenue, thus, the first commemorative stamp was released in 1871 (Alrich & Frank, 2002). The introduction of postage stamps meant that the receipt of letters was now free of charge, whereas before stamps, it was normal for postal charges to be paid by the recipient of a letter.

Over time, due to the issue of large numbers of stamps, collection activity faced a preservation problem. The information technology (IT) wave encouraged curators to think of digitization, which is resulting in Digital Philately, while accelerated information and communication technology (ICT) developments moved curators further into Virtual Philately.

## Review of literature

### Stamps as an information source

"All science is either physics or stamp collecting" Lord Rutherford stated (Wilson, 2000) at Manchester in 1962; stamp records historical facts like commemoration of events, honors individuals and institutes, and recognizes achievements. Stamps sometimes record obscure historical facts (Habashi, 2008). The records on these postal issues can be useful in overcoming the national imbalance. The history of a country, thus, can be traced with the readily available stamps. Stamps are often overlooked and read rarely and rather unusually referred to for organized knowledge; yet, stamps are still recognized worldwide for their reference value. An article, in the *Journal of Recreational Mathematics* (Nawlakhe, 2006) predicts the possible use of these stamps as a demonstration tool for carrying out science communication.

Like any other non-book source for information such as banknotes, coins, and maps, stamps also illustrate the social, commercial, political, cultural, historical, and artistic aspects of a society in its own unique style. They use short and abstract text, color graphics and symbols on a limited surface area. Its content is the key attribute that differentiates stamps from other non-book materials. For this unique attribute, the stamp can be deemed both as a communication tool and a work of art (Hakan, 2006). Although, stamps are largely regarded as *collection materials*, they are a source for information. Additionally, they can be regarded as an information-recording medium and provide knowledge about the past and present efforts of

a nation in a variety of fields like social science, culture, politics, arts, education, tourism, sports, and economics.

### Visual elements of stamp

Stamps bear certain visual elements. The four core elements include denomination, country name, graphical design, and textual elements (Hakan, 2006). Moreover, stamps may also contain some sort of unique and non-standard concealed insignia.

**Denomination:** is located at the corner of the stamp and shown in figures or Arabic numbers. Still, as the most important element, the denomination shows the commercial value of the stamp.

**Country name:** The 'first stamp' carried no country name, which led to some complications, UPU acted to include the country name of the issuing country on all stamps to be printed. All Universal Postal Union (UPU) member countries and nations are required to include their names on the stamps they issue except the United Kingdom.

**Graphical design:** The graphical design along with drawings, shapes, symbols, insignia, and numbers make up the design.

**Textual element:** The textual element is included to elucidate the stamp theme and enhance its communication as well as to display the name of the issuing country.

In addition to these required elements, invisible insignia or symbols, watermarks or holograms may be present to prevent counterfeits.

Denomination on a stamp shown in numbers and/or letters may also give some information on the economy of the issuing nation. Stamp prices can change as the currency of the issuing nation changes, e.g. Old Ana system to new Paisa system in India. That marked the start of use of the new currency and stamps were reprinted according to their new value.

Countries, which did not use the Latin script or only started using the Latin script at a certain point, printed their names using their original Cyrillic, Hebrew, Arabic, Ottoman, or Greek script. Identification of these stamps and finding the issuing country is a demanding work that requires expertise. Country names are the most important source for information on stamps. They give details on the country, region, state, city, or time period to which the stamps relate. For example, Turkish stamps since 1863 carried different textual elements based on the specific period when they were issued. They were printed in Ottoman Turkish using Arabic script during 1863–1928 and from 1928 onward they were issued in Turkish using the New Turkish Alphabet based on the Latin script. On Indian stamps one can see, Indian Postage, Republic India, India and Bharat in Devnagari Script.

Graphical design on a stamp comes in four main styles. The first one is the portrait/bust illustration of the statesmen, scientists, and other leading individuals usually from the nation. For example, British stamps during 1840–1900 showed a portrait of Queen Victoria. The second style is to use the insignia comprised of flags, national symbols, the post horn, and other figures. The third is the ornament and arrangement framing the denomination. The fourth style is to illustrate anniversaries, important meetings, sports events, artworks, important days, social events, and institutions. Graphical design elements on a stamp helps to

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