

MAHATMA GANDHI: A LIFE IN THE SERVICE OF HUMANITY: PART 2

By Pradip Jain FRPSL

Pradip Jain continues his look at the life and legacy of the man who led India into independence and became one of the most important and recognisable figures of the 20th century, Mahatma Gandhi.

This year will see many postal administrations from all over the world honouring Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948), by issuing commemorative postage stamps to celebrate his 150th birth anniversary. These issues join a large number of existing stamps and postal history which celebrate the life of Gandhi and his ideology of non-violent protest.

Last month in *GSM*, I wrote about Gandhi's early life and his effective fight against injustice in Africa. I will continue here with Gandhi's protests in his home country, which would ultimately lead to independence for India.

The Champaran *satyagraha*

In the 1916 session of Congress, Gandhi met with Raj Kumar Shukla (*Fig 1*), a representative of farmers from Champaran in Bihar. Shukla asked Gandhi to visit the region to see the plight of the indigo planters there.

On arrival, Gandhi witnessed the misery of the local indigo planters who were forced to cultivate the poisonous crop with little or no payment – effectively being forced into suicide. He immediately began to gather people to fight against the horrid conditions he witnessed. However, in an attempt to put an end to his interference, Gandhi was served with a notice from the British district magistrate ordering him to leave the town by the first available train. Gandhi refused and was arrested. However, he was released and the case was withdrawn two days later. This was the first small victory, but much more had to be done.

Realising that a lack of education was one of the main reasons why the landowners were able to repress the farmers, Gandhi decided to stay in Champaran and, along with his wife, set up the region's first free schools. Using the same practice of *satyagraha*, which had been successful in South Africa, Gandhi organised protests and



Fig 1 The 3r. Indian stamp issued in 2000 depicting social reformer Raj Kumar Shukla



Fig 2 An Indian miniature sheet from 2017 celebrating the centenary of the Champaran *satyagraha*, the first civil disobedience movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi in India (Reduced)



Fig 3 The *Harijan* newspaper launched by Gandhi in 1933



Fig 4 A 2015 miniature sheet depicting Gandhi and the *charkha* spinning wheel. The *charkha* became a symbol of the independence movement

strikes against the landlords, who, with the guidance of the British government, signed an agreement granting more compensation and control for the farmers. The Champaran *satyagraha* was the first civil disobedience movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi in India and is considered to be a vital event in the history of India's freedom struggle (Fig 2). Gandhi's victory in Champaran made him popular all across India.

By 1920 Gandhi's faith in the British colonial government was diminishing and he was swept to the forefront of Indian politics. He became president of the Indian National Congress and transformed it into a powerful political tool in the struggle for independence. His vision of an India free from British imperial rule caught the imagination of the people.

Gandhi and the spinning wheel

Gandhi strictly opposed any form of violence against the British, even when severely opposed. He regularly wrote articles and messages about social change in his famous newspapers *Young India*, which he started in 1919, and the *Harijan*, which he first published in 1933 (Fig 3).

In his articles, Mahatma Gandhi often used the *charkha* (spinning wheel) as a symbol of non-violence and self-reliance: 'I would make the spinning wheel the foundation on which to build a sound village life. I would make the wheel the centre round which all other activities will revolve,' he said. The *charkha* was to become synonymous with Gandhi and a symbol of India's independence movement (Fig 4).

The Great Soul

By now Gandhi had been transformed into Mahatma (Great Soul), a title conferred upon him by Indian noble laureate Rabindranath Tagore (Fig 5). Tagore later wrote of the occasion, 'At Gandhi's call, India blossomed forth to new greatness and he will always be remembered as one who made his life a lesson for all ages to come'.



Fig 5 Rabindranath Tagore depicted on a 1961 issue from India

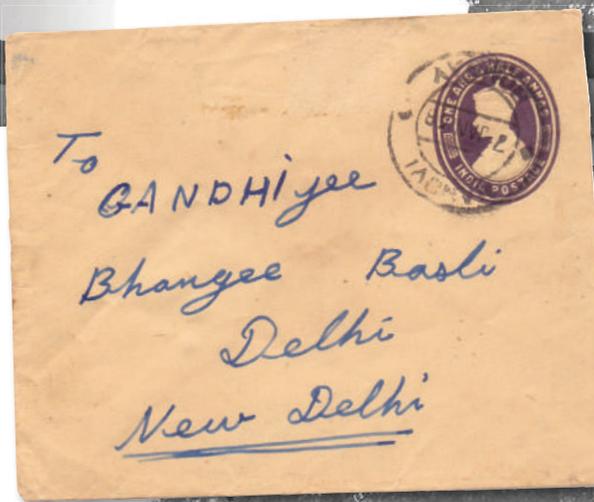


Fig 6 A letter to Gandhi dated 8 January 1948 addressed to 'Bhangee Basty', a sweeper's colony in New Delhi. Gandhi was so well known that this simple address was enough for mail to reach him (Reduced)

Fig 7 The reverse of a George V 1a. stationery envelope sent from Bombay to Beawar on 6 August 1930 (Reduced). It bears a circular handstamp in Gujarati reading 'British Mall No Bahiskar Karo' (Boycott British Goods) and two strikes of a shield type handstamp with the same message in English. The sender had added in manuscript '& English' after 'British' in both strikes



Fig 8 'Boycott British Goods' labels depicting Mahatma Gandhi

POSTAL NOTICE.

Prohibited articles.
No article will be transmitted by post bearing thereon labels or stamped impressions, or photographs, or writings—
(i) conveying any exhortation to "Boycott British Goods" or any other class of goods, or to carry out any other form of boycott,
(ii) embodying portraits of Mr. Gandhi or any other prominent leader of the Civil Disobedience Movement, or containing the words "Swadesha Bharat" (separate India) or similar words in furtherance of the Civil Disobedience Movement,
(iii) containing other matter manifestly and specifically intended to further civil disobedience movement.
2. Any such article found in the course of transmission by post will be sent to the Dead Letter Office for disposal.
3. These orders do not apply to articles bearing "slogans" of an unobjectionable character such as "Buy Swadeshi goods" or "Support home industries" or similar devices adopted for business purposes.
H. A. SAMS,
Director-General of Posts and Telegraphs.

Fig 9 A postal notice dated 16 August 1930 which declared that any item bearing the Boycott British Goods labels, or showing the portrait of Gandhi or any other prominent leader of the Civil Disobedience Movement, would not be transmitted. If found, any such letters would be sent to Dead Letter Office for disposal

Gandhi and the untouchables

Gandhi fought for the rights of all people and had great sympathy with the untouchables – people considered to be at the bottom of the discriminatory caste system that was prevalent at the time. Gandhi would often stay in the untouchables colony in Delhi, looking after their welfare and education (Fig 6). According to Gandhi, 'Untouchability and division of society on the basis of caste and creed is tantamount to moral violence'.

Boycott British Goods

In 1921, Gandhi, now on the forefront of the Indian Independence movement, launched a campaign calling for the boycott of all British goods. The campaign aimed to curb the economic control and exploitation of Indian masses and artisans at the hands of the British. Various patriotic labels and handstamps reading, 'Boycott British Goods' or 'Boycott Foreign Goods' were produced to publicise the civil disobedience movement (Fig 7 and Fig 8).

The protests quickly extended beyond a simple boycott and British goods were set on fire by the masses in support of the campaign. This caused panic amongst the officials in the British Government due to huge economic losses, which led to the issue of an ordinance that prohibited the use of the labels on mails and the spreading of propaganda (Fig 9). As a result of the ban, the labels are rarely found on Indian mail.

In 1930 Gandhi embarked on his historic Salt March – a 240-mile march from Sabarmati to the town of Dandi in protest of the salt tax imposed on Indian people. Thousands of people joined the *satyagraha* and mass civil disobedience spread throughout India as millions broke the salt laws by making salt or buying illegal salt. The march was one of the most significant events in the annals of the civil disobedient movement (Fig 10). In reaction, the British government arrested over 60,000 people, including Gandhi, who was sent to Yerwada prison in Poona (Fig 11)

Negotiation for freedom

After the Salt March, the British government started to negotiate with the Indian National Congress. Gandhi was released from prison and invited to attend the second Round Table Conferences held in London in 1931. However, the two sides failed to reach an agreement on independence (Fig 12).

In 1942, at the height of World War II, Gandhi and the Indian Congress launched the, with its slogan ‘Do or Die’ (Fig 13). This was a mass civil disobedience movement designed to force the British to grant independence.

At the end of the war, the British Government, realising that India was now ungovernable, finally accepted its independence. India became free at the stroke of midnight on 15 August 1947 and Britain prepared to leave India. Figure 14 shows a famous letter written by Lord Mountbatten asking British forces to disband.

Gandhi succeeded in laying the foundation of modern independent India through his ideology and preachings of non-violence, equality and liberty for all which became the bedrock of the Indian Constitution and guiding light for the largest democracy of the world. From this moment, Gandhi became known as *Bapu* – the Father of the Nation (Fig 15).

However, the resulting partition of India and the formation of Pakistan divided the 5000-year-old civilisation on a scale never thought possible by Gandhi, who always advocated for secularism and harmony. Communal violence spread between Hindus and Muslims, Sikhs and Muslims. In an attempt to stop the violence, Gandhi

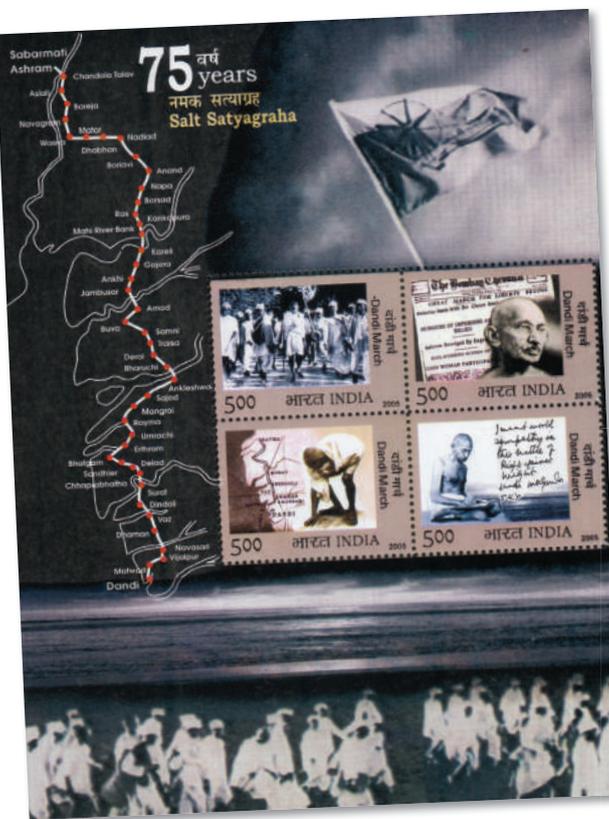


Fig 10 A miniature sheet issued in 2005 for the 75th anniversary of the Salt March (Reduced)

Fig 11 A King George V postcard written by Gandhi from Yerwada Jail, Poona, in September 1930 following his imprisonment for his part in the Salt March

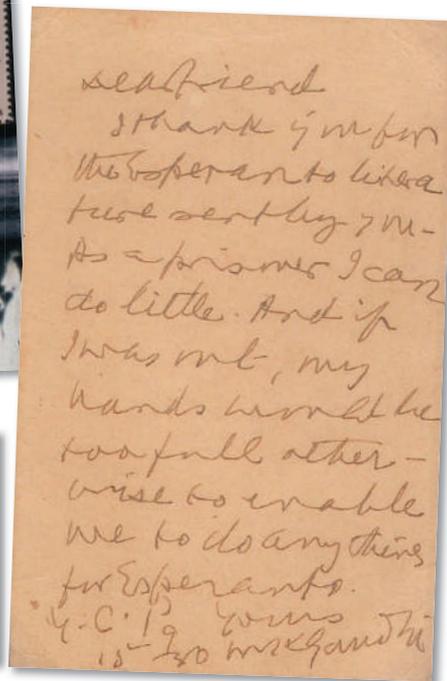


Fig 12 A British cover sent on 2 October 1931 (Gandhi’s 62nd birthday) featuring a commemorative postmark for the Indian Round Table Conference held in London which Gandhi attended. Unfortunately, Gandhi and the other Indian delegates at the conference were unsuccessful in negotiating India’s independence with the British government (Reduced)

began to fast, which weakened him almost to the point of death. The postal department issued a slogan cancellation asking people for ‘Communal Harmony’ in order to save Gandhi (Fig 16).

Assassination

On 30 January 1948, as he was making his way to evening prayer, Gandhi was assassinated. His last words were ‘Hey, Ram’ (Oh, God). To commemorate the first death anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, on 30 January 1949 all postal items sent in India were impressed with a postmark bearing the slogan ‘May God Grant sense to everyone’ (Fig 17).

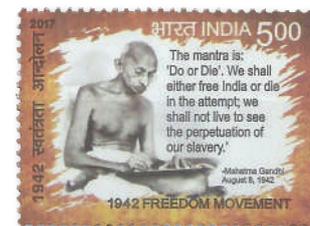
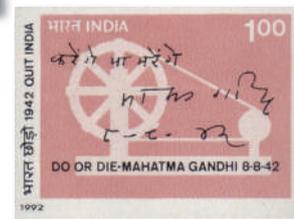


Fig 13 Indian stamps commemorating the 1942 Quit India Movement and its ‘Do or Die’ slogan

Gandhi on stamps

Mahatma Gandhi has been depicted on a vast number of stamps from a huge number of countries. India was the first country to pay tribute to him with a stamp issue. In 1948, on the first anniversary of independence, it issued a set of four stamps using the word 'BAPU' in Urdu script (Fig 18).

In 1961, the US was the first foreign country to issue a commemorative stamp for Mahatma, honoured him with the title 'Champion of Liberty'. Later, Mahatma Gandhi became the first foreign personality to be featured on a British commemorative stamp. This was a 1s.6d. value issued in 1969 marking his birth centenary and honoured Gandhi's dedication to bringing about India's independence through non-violence. The honour of designing this stamp was bestowed upon an Indian designer, Biman Mallick (Fig 19).

Following in his footsteps

Mahatma Gandhi set an example of non-violent protest as a means to achieve freedom from oppression and unjust rule. Walking on his footsteps were Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa, etc. who worked tirelessly for civil liberty, equality and rights of the deprived. A collective effort by these individuals have set a benchmark for others to follow.

For his lifelong work, Mahatma Gandhi was adjudged to be India's Man of the Millennium in 2001 (Fig 20). In true sense, 'His life was his Message'.

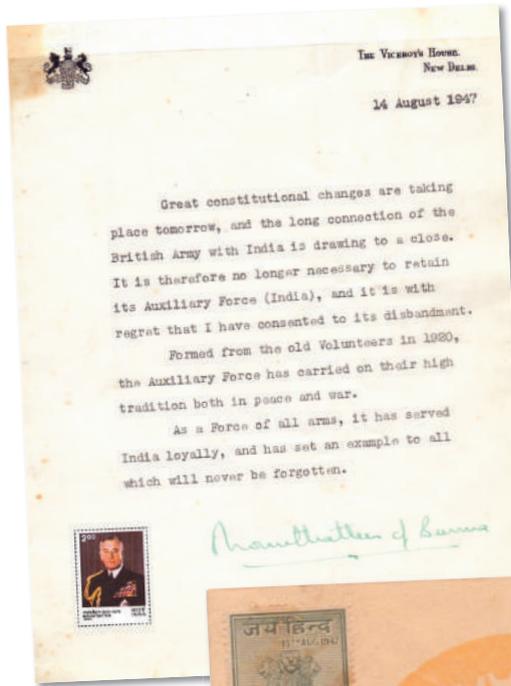


Fig 14 The letter written by Lord Mountbatten in August 1947 asking British forces in India to disband



Below: Fig 15 A first day cover featuring India's first independent stamps, which were issued between 12 November and 15 December 1947 (Reduced)



Fig 16 A postal department 'Communal Harmony' cachet calling for an end to the violence which had erupted between religious groups following India's independence. In an attempt to bring peace to his country, Gandhi went on hunger strike, which brought him close to death (Reduced)

Right: Fig 17 To commemorate the first anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi's death, on 30 January 1949 all postal items sent in India were given a postmark bearing the slogan 'May God Grant sense to everyone' (Reduced)

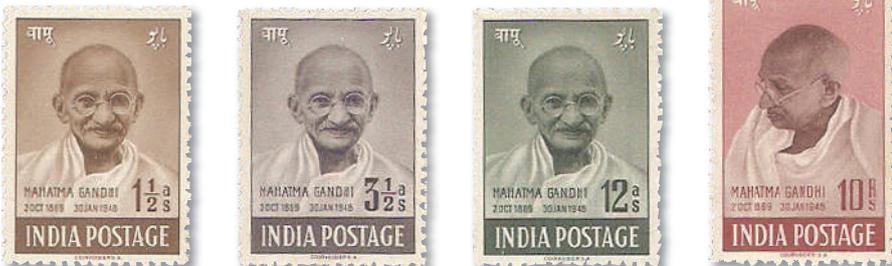


Fig 18 The first stamps to depict Gandhi was a set of four values issued by India on the first anniversary of independence in 1948



Fig 19 An imperforate imprimatur of Britain's Gandhi Centenary issue of 1969



Fig 20 India's 2001 issue which named Mahatma Gandhi as 'Man of the Millennium'