

A doyen of Philately

(by G. Ram Mohan)



Madan Mohan Das

It is not often that we have had among the citizens of Chennai someone who was nationally acclaimed as an authority in his chosen field of interest and who had often served as the 'National Commissioner for India' (something like the captain of an Indian team) at international competitions held in his field in capital cities abroad. One such rare person was Madan Mohan Das, the doyen of philately in Chennai. In his passing away last month at the age of 90, philatelists in Chennai have lost their leader, who had been a source of inspiration and guidance to them for the past 50 years.

Philately (or 'stamp collection' in layman's terminology) has been often described as the 'king of hobbies and the hobby of kings'. Madan Mohan Das, or 'Madan Bhai' as he was affectionately called by his admirers, was the uncrowned king of philately in Chennai. He was from a Gujarati business family, originally from Surat, that had settled in Tamil Nadu over three centuries ago. The family was initially based in Srirangam and was known for the gifts and endowments made by the family members to the Ranganathaswami temple there. Later, they shifted to Madras and settled in Sowcarpet. Madan Bhai's father was a prosperous shipping agent. As a boy he often went to the harbour with his father. There, in the dust bins in the offices and outside, he would see used postal envelopes from all over the world, with colourful stamps affixed on them. He started collecting them, and soon it became an all-absorbing hobby. Then, quite by accident, he came across a Varadaraja Chettiar, an enthusiastic philatelist from Nellikkuppam, who had been tutored in the intricacies of philately by an Englishman then employed in the Parry's Confectionary factory in Nellikkuppam. Chettiar would visit young Madan whenever he was in Madras and would often pay for and take the stamps collected by his young friend.



Image of 1854 Lithograph which Madan Bhai was an expert on.



1873-84 cancellations.

items to serve the same purpose as printed postage stamps, before actual postage stamps came into use in 1854. Here again Madan Bhai succeeded in collecting many of the rarest of rare specimens.

Madan Bhai then took up a deep study of the lithography of early Indian stamps. Lithography is the process of printing stamps using smooth-surfaced metal plates known as dies. In the early days of printing of stamps the dies would be changed as they wore out, and there would be minute variations in stamps from one die to another. Madan Bhai's expertise in the field was such that he could detect the die of any stamp by studying the minutest details that would not be perceptible to an untrained eye. He collected specimens of various die casts reflecting different variations.

Over the decades, Madan Bhai won many gold medals for his collections of classics, postal history and lithography, at various philatelic competitions held at the State level as well as at the National level. He became the best known name among the philatelists of Chennai.

In 1956 he, along with his younger brother Balakrishna Das, gathered together a group of enthusiastic philatelists of Chennai and formed the South India Philatelists' Association (SIPA). His old friend Varadaraja Chettiar joined him in the founding of SIPA. The first meeting of the six founding members was held in a church in Broadway on December 30, 1956 with, literally, the blessings of the pastor of the church.

Madan Bhai graduated from St. Joseph's College, Trichy, and started his career in banking with the Indian Bank in Chennai in 1948. His job took him to Bombay in 1950 which was then, as now, the capital of philately in India. He made friends with the well-known philatelists of that era in Bombay, like J.N. Cooper, R.F. Shroff, R. Wadia and Dhirubhai Mehta. He learnt from them all the subtleties and refinements of 'philately' (as different from mere 'stamp collecting'). He soon developed special thematic collections of his own.

He first developed an interest in collecting stamps known as 'Indian Classics' – a term used to describe early issues of stamps and rare stamps over 150 years old. It was, obviously, very difficult to come across material for such a collection. But Madan Bhai scoured the market with such vigour and enthusiasm that he soon had a sizeable collection of Classics.

Next, he turned his attention to an even more difficult area of collection, known as 'Indian Postal History'. This is a collection of items from the pre-stamp era. They are exotic items like handstruck stamps embossed on sealing wax, wax wafers, handstruck markings applied directly on letters, embossments made on paper and so on. The East India Company, during the latter part of 18th Century and the first half of 19th Century, used such

In 1980, SIPA started publishing a bi-monthly newsletter on philately called the *SIPA Bulletin*. Madan Bhai headed SIPA and was editor of the *Bulletin* for many decades. SIPA is an active body today with nearly 650 members from all over India. It continues to actively serve the interests of philatelists. The members meet regularly on the second Sunday of every month at the exhibition hall of Anna Salai Post Office. The *SIPA Bulletin* is now published as a quarterly.

Madan Bhai served on the Philatelic Committee of the Government of India for some years. He also served on a number of occasions as a member of the jury charged with judging the entries at national level philatelic exhibitions. He was selected twice as the philatelic National Commissioner for India in which capacity he represented India and presented the Indian entries at two international philatelic exhibitions – one held in Bangkok in 1993, and the other held in Seoul in 2004.

Philatelists of Chennai owe a deep sense of gratitude to Madan Bhai for two other great services he rendered them. The first was that he was instrumental in getting a special counter established at the Anna Salai Post Office for philatelic items. The counter is housed in the old Electric Theatre hall and has facilities for philatelists to sit and browse through the materials available for sale before making their purchases. The second was that he was the force behind the allotment of a hall at the same Post Office for the display of collections of local philatelists. He could achieve both these objectives thanks to the active cooperation and assistance of many dynamic Chief Postmasters-General.