


Jai Kisan? How farmers went from being 'back bone of India' to mere backdrop on postage stamps

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From backbone to mere backdrop: How farmers disappear from stamps as priorities shift

Once a vibrant avenue for promoting farm policies, postal stamps now feature cultural motifs, sidelining the pivotal role farmers play in nation building.

One of the four commemorative postage stamps issued on the inauguration of the republic on January 26, 1950. | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement

When was the last time farmers featured in a postage stamp? In 1992, when the Department of Posts commemorated the silver jubilee of Haryana. The stamp showed a farmer and his wife in the foreground of power transmission lines, tap water supply, and a farmer driving a tractor in a field. After that farmers have featured only in the backdrop of stamps on political leaders and technocrats such as Mahatma Gandhi (1998, 2017), Panjabrao Deshmukh (1999), Jayaprakash Narayan (2001), D.R. Gadgil (2008), and C. Subramaniam (2010) and institutions such as the Indian Agricultural Research Institute (2006), the Food Corporation of India (2014), and the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics or ICRISAT (2022). Increasingly, over the past two decades, agricultural *products* have featured in postal media more often than *producers*.

Government propaganda on agriculture through the postal network peaked in the 1980s, when the sixth definitive series was issued. After liberalisation, agriculture was no longer among the priorities of the government. This is in sharp contrast with the earlier decades, especially the period between the mid-1960s and early 1980s that witnessed a whole-of-government approach to agriculture, with the postal department playing a role in building awareness at multiple levels and providing access to banking services in rural areas that was key to the success of the Green Revolution.

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'Halayantra'

The story of the postal department's role in the agriculture sector goes back to the late 19th century when the expansion of the network of post offices contributed to the convergence of grain prices across regions. However, a conscious use of the postal system to promote the government's agricultural policies began only after Independence. A set of four commemorative stamps, including one featuring a farmer couple, was issued on the occasion of the inauguration of the Republic on January 26, 1950.



Stamp on agriculture issued under the second definitive series released on January 26, 1955. Here, a tractor in operation (*Halayantra*). | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement



Stamp released on January 26, 1955. Here, Dam (Tillaya, Damodar Valley). | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement

The sustained campaign to harness the postal system to promote government policies began on January 26, 1955, when the government issued the second definitive series comprising 18 stamps on industry, rare earths, agriculture and multipurpose projects, health, cottage industry, and transport and communication. This series was meant to canvass support for the Second Five-Year Plan (1956-61) a year ahead of its launch. It included five stamps on agriculture featuring a tractor, water-lifting, a dam, a pair of bullocks, and a fertilizer factory. The tractor was memorably called *Halayantra* in this series. *Halayantras* remained a distant dream, though, as tractors were not common until two or three decades later. The farmer continued to depend on bullocks in the meantime and stamps continued to feature bullocks rather than tractors.



Stamp released on January 26, 1955. Here, a pair of bullocks (Kankrej). | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement



Stamp released on January 26, 1955. Here, waterlifting (Persian wheel). | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement



Stamp released on January 26, 1955. Here, Fertilizer Plant (Sindhri). | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement

‘Jai Kisan’

The food shortages of the mid-1960s seriously challenged the sense of security of the nation that was still coming to terms with the death of the first Prime Minister (Jawaharlal Nehru died in 1964) and a war imposed by a neighbour (the India-Pakistan war of 1965). The government was forced to reconsider the dependence on imports that threatened to constrain the country’s international strategic autonomy. Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri gave the slogan of *Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan* (salute the soldiers and farmers) and exhorted farmers “to grow two grains where one grew before” because to be “self-respecting and strong nation, India has to be self-reliant” in food production. Thus began the pursuit of import substitution in the field of agriculture and the postal department’s campaign to support the government’s new agricultural policy.



Jai Kisan Commemorative stamp (January 11, 1967). | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement



Family Planning Definitive stamp, 4th series (October 16, 1967). | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement



Wheat Revolution Commemorative stamp (July 17, 1968). | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement

The government set a target of raising foodgrain output by 30 million tonnes between 1967 and 1971 to ease supply-side pressure. At the same time, it also promoted family planning to address the demand side of the problem. This marked the beginning of a sustained campaign to promote the expansion of agricultural output and population control that lasted over three decades. In the early 1970s, these twin campaigns intertwined with the much older campaign to promote small savings that addressed the problem of resource mobilisation necessary for investments in the agricultural sector. The postal system not only advocated savings but also provided the avenue to save through the Post Office Savings Bank with more than one lakh branches that played “a vital role, in mopping up the surplus money for nation-building activities”. In the late 1980s, India Post also launched a saving instrument called *Kisan Vikas Patra*.



Commemorative stamp on Post Office Savings Bank Centenary (1982). | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement

The postal department was alert to the government's response to the evolving and multi-dimensional nature of challenges facing the agricultural sector. It issued stamps highlighting the importance of raising productivity (1970), dairy (1974), weather services (1975), appropriate drainage amidst expansion of irrigation (1975), and crop research and development (1978). The Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) that began with "community TV receivers in about 2,400 villages in Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Rajasthan" to build awareness about issues related to agriculture, education, family planning, and health, was the subject of an elegant stamp in 1975.



Commemorative stamp on Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) (1975). The second coloured band from the left signifies agriculture. | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement

Agricultural expositions and fairs (1959, 1977) featured on postage stamps, while several agricultural exhibitions were the subject of special covers and, more importantly, postmarks.



A special cover issued on January 27, 1978, during Rural Stamp Exhibition at Melur, Kolar, Karnataka. The cachet of the cover features a sketch of farmer with the caption “Farmer is back bone of India”. The special postmark features a bilingual slogan “GROW MORE SILK”. | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement

New temples of India

Dams featured on several stamps over the years including Damodar Valley (1955), Bhakra Nangal (1967, 1976, 1988, and 2013), and Hirakud dam (1979). Bhakra Nangal was first among equals, though, partly because it contributed to the success of the Green Revolution. The first stamp on Bhakra Nangal was released in 1967, the year of issue of the stamp on *Jai Kisan*.



Bhakra Nangal Dam on stamps. First day cover of commemorative stamp (1988). | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement

Bhakra Nangal Dam on stamps. Definitive stamp (1967). | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement



Bhakra Nangal Dam on stamps. Definitive stamp (1976). | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement

Bhakra Nangal Dam on stamps. Commemorative stamp (2013). | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement



Introducing Bhakra dam, a “landmark of Independent India”, the brochure of the 1988 stamp on the dam quoted Nehru on its importance: “...these days the biggest temple and mosque and gurudwara is the place where man works for the good of mankind. Which place can be greater than this, this Bhakra-Nangal...”



Agriculture for rural development

The sixth definitive series titled “Agriculture and Rural Development” (1979-85) offered the most expansive statement of the government’s agricultural policy during the planning era. The themes featured in this series suggest that the government was alert to, among other things, the need to diversify the food basket and shift to high value products.

In addition to food grains, stamps of this series featured dairy farming, pisciculture, poultry, horticulture (cashew, apple, and orange), and non-food crops (hybrid cotton and rubber). But the new approach to agriculture required literate farmers, who had access to irrigation and new technology. The series, therefore, included stamps on Adult education, Minor irrigation, and Transfer of Technology (from lab to farms), respectively. The government was also alert to deforestation caused by the expansion of agriculture and, therefore, this series included a stamp on afforestation.



A First Day Cover (FDC) issued in 1981 for three stamps of the sixth definitive series featuring apples, cashew, and infant nutrition. The FDC also features earlier stamps of this series on adult education, pisciculture, and agricultural technology. | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement

Transformation of rural India was the ultimate objective of these initiatives, which featured in “Agriculture and Rural Development”, the last stamp of the sixth definitive series. The stamp showed a planned village with roads, tap water supply, television, sports arena, and mechanised agriculture symbolised by a man ploughing a field using a tractor. Child nutrition, education, and housing for planned family were other developmental themes highlighted in earlier issues of this definitive series. The forward linkages of the agricultural sector with the industry were not clearly imagined, though, which perhaps explains why there was only one stamp in this series on the use of non-food crops as raw materials (handloom weaving).



A definitive stamp on the theme “Agriculture and Rural Development” issued in 1985 as part of the sixth definitive series. | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement

In addition to definitive stamps, commemorative stamps of this period too covered several themes related to agriculture such as agricultural expositions (1977), conferences on wheat (1978) and apiculture (1980), World Food Day (1981), soil science (1982), and the golden jubilee of potato research (1985).

Agriculture and industry

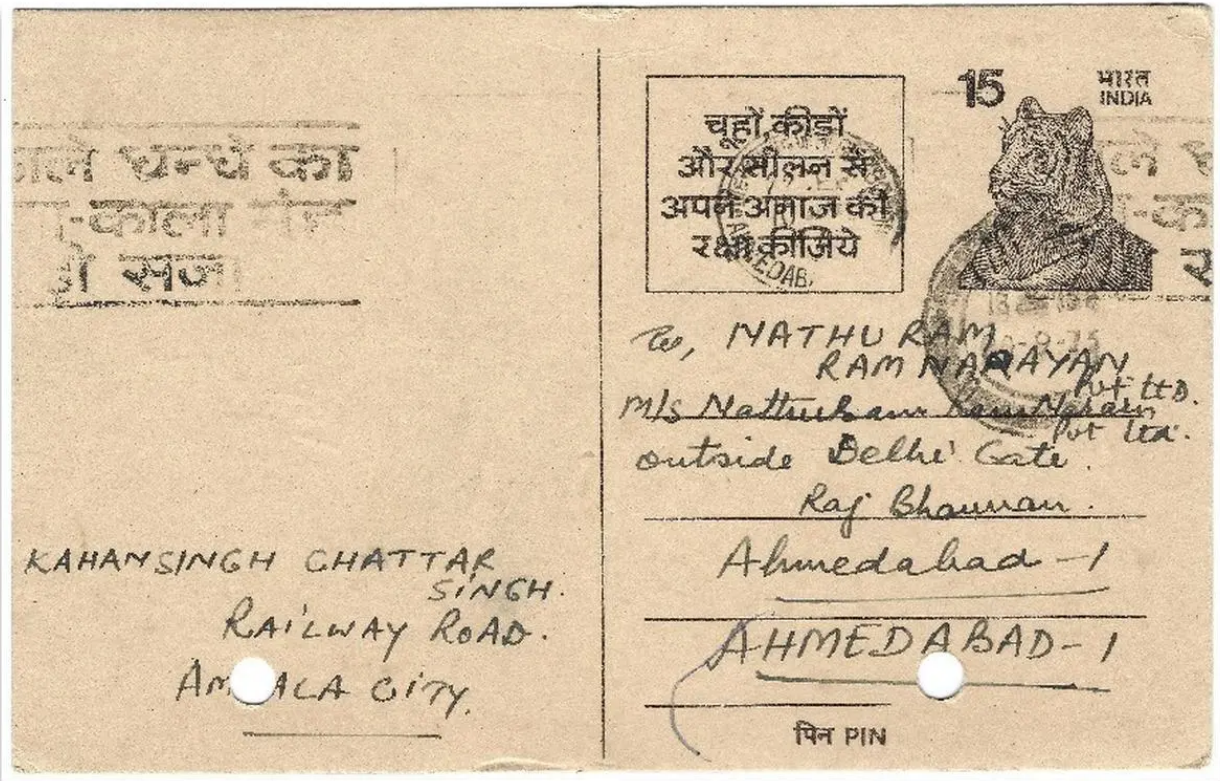
Not only departments of the government but even the private sector industry, too, attached high priority to the agricultural sector, whose modernisation had emerged as a major source of industrial demand within the country. The stamp on Laxmanrao Kirloskar (1969) featured agricultural equipment in the background and nearly half of the information brochure of this stamp talks about how Kirloskar Industries has contributed to revolutionising the agricultural sector through both social and technological interventions. Later, the brochure of the stamp on the centenary of the Kirloskar Group (1989), too, emphasised its engagement with agriculture.



Commemorative stamp on Laxmanrao Kirloskar (June 20, 1969). | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement

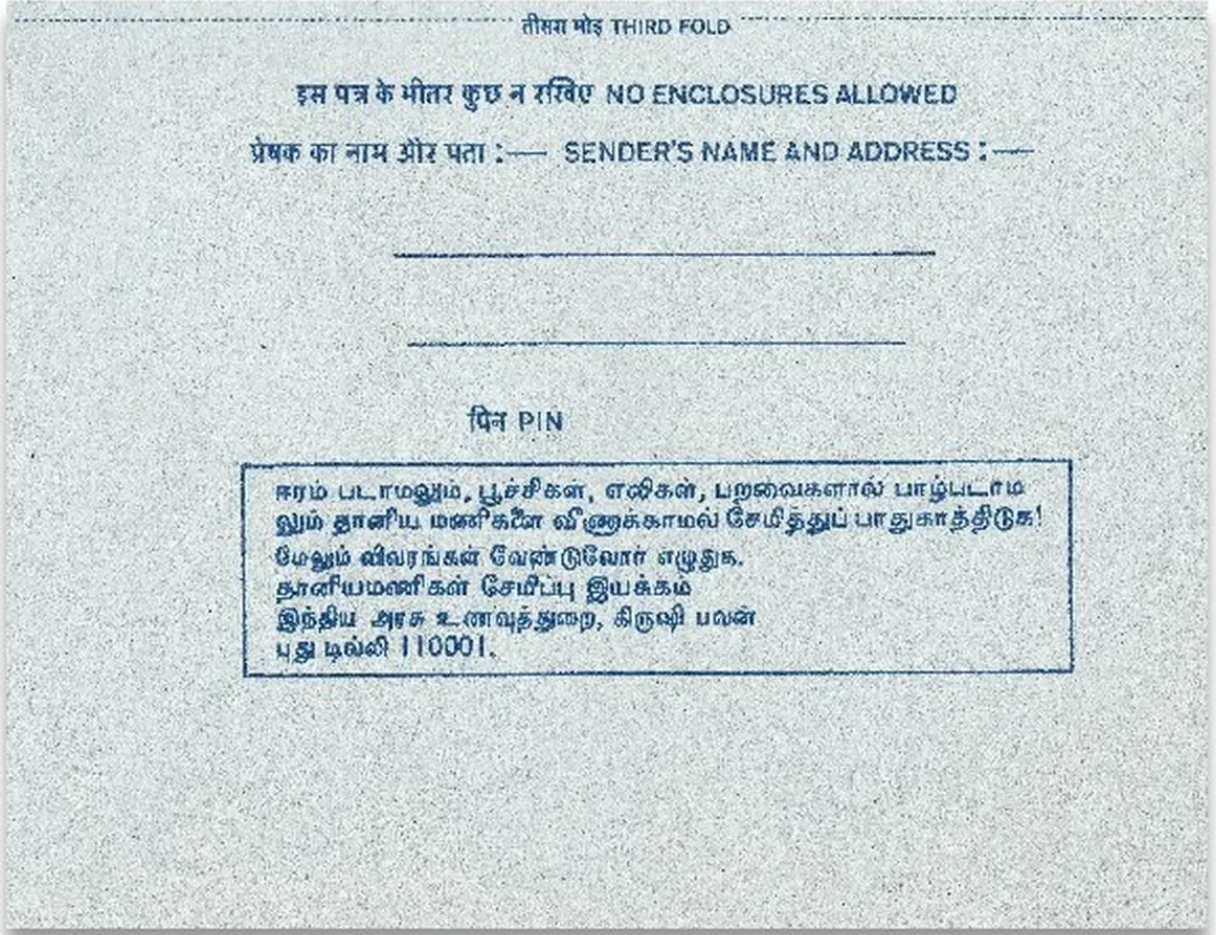
The reach of stamps is limited compared to postcards and inland letter cards, which are cheaper and account for a much larger part of postal transactions. So, in 1975, the government began to use postal stationery to promote awareness about protecting grains from rats, insects, and moisture and the importance of compost fertilizer. Public sector undertakings and private companies followed up and promoted their products on postcards.

In 1976, Dena Bank sponsored an advertisement on postcards offering loans: *Dena Bank ki madad se adhik anna upajaiye* (Grow more food with the help of Dena Bank). The following year, Kirloskar Industries advertised their pump sets on postcards in both Hindi and Marathi: *Badhiya phasal ke lie Kirloskar engine pump set* (Kirloskar engine pump set for good crop). In 1977, Gujarat State Fertilizers & Chemicals Limited (GSFC) began the trend of advertising fertilizers. Pioneer brand seeds were advertised on postcards in 1983. This series of advertisements on postcards concluded in the late 1990s with the Indian Farmers Fertiliser Cooperative Limited's (IFFCO) promotion of balanced fertilizers (1994-99) and the government's advocacy of land conservation (1998), wasteland development (1999), and solar water pumps (2000).



A postcard with a message in Hindi mailed from Ambala to Ahmedabad in September 1975 (originally issued on July 21, 1975): *Chooon, keedon aur seelan se apane anaaj ki raksha kijiye* (Protect your grains from rats, insects and moisture). The postcard also features an Emergency-era anti-corruption slogan cancellation: *kaale dhandhe ka maja - kaala munh aur kadee saja* (Corrupt dealings lead to loss of reputation and severe punishment). | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement

The highlight of government-sponsored advertisements in inland letter cards was the message "Save Grain from Waste: Protect it From Rodents, Insects, Birds and Moisture" which appeared in 1978 in six languages – English, Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, Tamil, and Telugu. This message was repeated in inland letter cards in 1979, 1981, and 1984. Over the years, companies advertised fertilizers (NLC in 1977, GSFC in 1978, SPIC in 1991, and Vijay Fertilisers in 2001), farm equipment (Tractors and Farm Equipment Limited, 1999) and solar pumps (IREDA, 1999). Towards the end of 1990s, the government sponsored messages on water harvesting (2000).

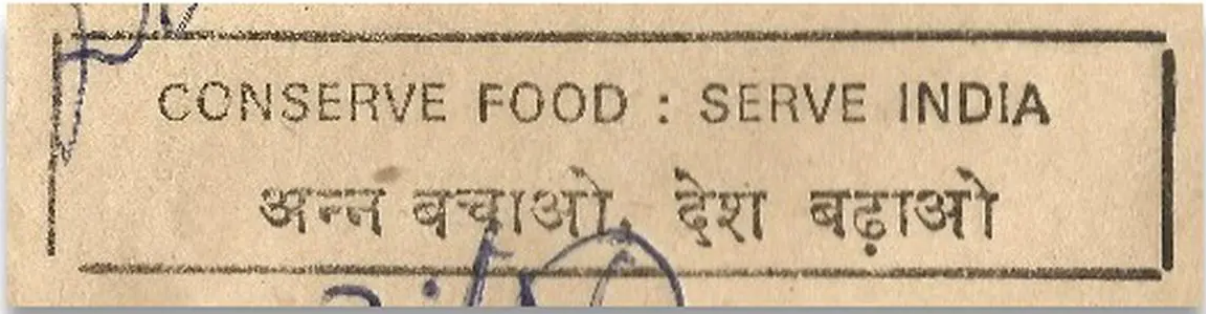


Lower half of an inland letter card issued on July 18, 1978, featuring a message in Tamil: "Save Grain from Waste - Protect it From Rodents, Insects, Birds and Moisture." | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement

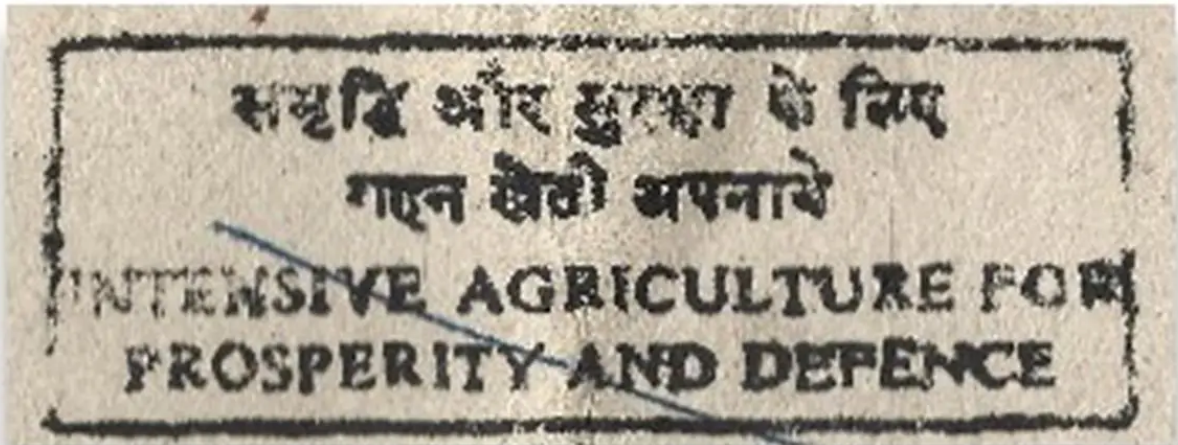
The postal stationery of several government departments, public sector undertakings and, even, private companies included messages and slogans promoting chemical fertilizers, crop diversification, and improved seeds and presented agriculture as essential for national defence echoing Shastri's slogan *Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan*.



Fragments of envelopes of various government departments (1969). | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement



Fragments of envelopes of various government departments (1977). | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement



Fragments of envelopes of various government departments (1991). | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement



Fragments of envelopes of various government departments (1995). | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement

Two anniversaries

By the late 1990s, the postal campaign to promote the government's agricultural policy—a campaign that ran for over three decades—came to an end. Around this time, the parallel campaigns to promote small families and small savings also lost momentum.

The retreat of the state, considerable improvements in foodgrain output and foreign exchange reserves, and a drop in fertility partly explain the simultaneous end of these three longstanding campaigns. Moreover, the growth of mass media offered alternative platforms for advertising policies. But there is another factor that elbowed out major policy concerns from the postal space.



Silver Jubilee of Haryana (1992). | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement



Golden Jubilee of Haryana (2016). | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement

The Nehru government used the postal media to build awareness about its development policies. This changed under Indira Gandhi with personalities and identity politics increasingly crowding out public policy in the postal media. This process accelerated during the period 2000-10 and further marginalised policy concerns. The philatelic commemoration of the two statehood anniversaries of Haryana aptly captures this shift.

Also Read | What one can tell from the topics the Central government chose to showcase on stamps over the years

The stamp on the silver jubilee of the formation of Haryana (1992) showed a happy farmer couple in the foreground of a developed village, whereas the first-day cover featured a scene from the Mahabharata. There was a balance between cultural pride and economic aspirations. In contrast, both the stamp and its first-day cover issued on the golden jubilee (2016) depicted a scene from the Mahabharata, with culture eclipsing economics and marginalising the “back bone of India”.

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