

Delhi

History's Square Inch

This philatelist pushes the envelope with her unique collection



NARENDRA BISHT

STAMP OF PERFECTION: Rehman with her theme-based collection

by Shefalee VASUDEV

SAHIBA REHMAN SAYS SHE IS 100 YEARS OLD. Going by the thousands of unusual postal stamps she has collected over the past 44 years, the hundreds of antiques she has painstakingly gathered and the 250 press clippings she fondly keeps to revive memories of a 13-year-old modelling career and her sporting days—Rehman has won 11 gold medals in national shooting championships—that seems like fair arithmetic. Rehman is a talented dabbler. She has been a student of anthropology, a television newscaster in Mumbai and an earnest homemaker.

It is, however, her passion for philately that strikes you. Enormous in number and mindboggling in variety, these postal stamps belong to every part of the world with a few each on just about every person, theme or idea ever put on a stamp. Rehman was eight when her father, an enthusiastic philatelist himself, passed his collection to her, initiating her into this riveting hobby. From then on, wherever she went, whenever she could, she added to this treasure. Buying them from collectors, ripping them off envelopes, looking for them in curio shops around the world, till the stack of stamps became a mountain ready to topple.

So what separates Rehman from other passionate philatelists? "I used to wonder what I'd do with so many stamps when the idea of putting them to creative use struck me," says Rehman. That "creative idea" made her walk down a side street of philately, a road seldom chosen by other stamp collectors. She began categorising them into themes: Renaissance painters, Olympics, images of womanhood, astronomy, the Partition, the Buddha, Mahatma Gandhi, the Second World War, Hitler, the East India Company, Egyptology, books, filmstars and so on.

After packing over 10 hours of work and research every day for about two and a half years now, Rehman has created thematic stamp collages, juxtaposed with history, informative notes, photographs, images, maps and newspaper clippings, some original ones cut and filed by her father during World War II. Framed slickly in dark and pale shades of wood, Rehman now has 70 such panels, each on a different subject, each made from stamps. But not just stamps.

For instance, her panel on the Olympic Games has the 100-year history of the sporting event from 1886 to 1996 with small representative flags of all participating countries. Her Coat of Arms panel has a real shield at the centre, a collector's item by itself. The Buddha panel, besides having stamps from all countries which follow the religion, has a wooden Buddha head interestingly stuck in one corner. The Egyptology one has an enticing silver snake with red eyes made of real rubies that adds to the mystery of Pharaonic history.

The series of panels on World War II trace the progression of the entire war. The East India Company panel has on it a rare real map of the Company dating back to 1776, besides postcards dated 1879 and 1910. The Hitler panel has the highest currency denominator stamp ever issued in world history: 500 million Marks, printed in Germany after the First World War.

Soft spoken and halting in her tone, Rehman rolls up her eyes when queried about the research that culminated in this amazing collection. Encyclopaedias, anthropology books, Internet—she has tapped every available source for information. "I worked the hardest on the geopolitical ones," she says pointing to panels on Afghanistan, Korea, Israel, Kashmir and Iraq. The panels are supported by colourful notes, maps and diagrams on each country's history.

Have all her stamps found a place on the panels? "No, not yet," says Rehman smiling. "I am working on some more themes." There are also plans to hold exhibitions in India and abroad. She is reluctant to disclose the price for parting with the objects of her childhood passion. Upon much prodding, she murmurs that the cheapest panel is worth Rs 35,000. Quick to go on the defensive, she says that before finalising the price tags she sat with experts, putting into perspective the history of the stamps, the country that produced them, the story they tell and their rarity or conversely, their availability.

"How can a mother decide who is the best among her children?" asks Rehman philosophically when asked which one panel she would choose to keep for herself. Sahiba Rehman is 52 years old, you cannot blame her if a maternal folksiness takes over when she talks about her stamps. They are this collector's issues too. ■