

Semiotic Analysis on The Visual Representation of Indigenous Dance Forms in Joint Issue Postage Stamps

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Abstract—Postage stamps, as state-produced visual artifacts, function as powerful mediums for communicating national identity, cultural heritage, and ideological narratives [8]. This study examines the representation of cultural dance in joint issue postage stamps through the semiotic framework of Ferdinand de Saussure, focusing on the relationship between signifier and signified. Employing a qualitative research design grounded in visual semiotic analysis, the study analyzes a purposive sample of joint issue stamps featuring dance forms from India and other nations. The findings reveal that visual elements such as costume, posture, gesture, and symbolic motifs operate as structured signifiers that encode culturally specific meanings related to tradition, identity, and heritage. At the same time, the juxtaposition of diverse cultural forms within a shared visual space generates signified meanings associated with transnational dialogue, diplomatic engagement, and cultural exchange. The study demonstrates that joint issue stamps function not merely as commemorative artifacts but as active sites of meaning-making, where national and transnational narratives intersect. By translating dynamic cultural performances into static visual forms, these stamps mediate complex cultural expressions for global audiences. The research contributes to the fields of visual culture and media studies by extending semiotic analysis to philately and highlighting its role in representing indigenous cultural practices within global visual discourse.

Index Terms—Cultural Diplomacy, Cultural Representation, Philately, Postage Stamps, Visual Semiotics

I. INTRODUCTION

Postage stamps constitute a significant category of state-produced visual documents that function beyond their utilitarian role in facilitating postal

communication [5]. As officially sanctioned representations, stamps encapsulate and disseminate carefully constructed images of national identity, cultural heritage, and historical consciousness [4]. Their circulation across geographical boundaries positions them as instruments of visual communication that engage both domestic and international audiences [5]. In this regard, postage stamps may be understood as symbolic forms through which meaning is encoded and transmitted within culturally specific sign systems [2].

Philately, the study and collection of postage stamps, functions as a significant medium through which states construct and communicate sociopolitical narratives. As noted by [3], stamps are not merely utilitarian objects but cultural artefacts that reflect national identity and ideology. Indian philatelic imagery has historically mediated both “Orientalist” and nationalist perspectives, often presenting a curated and harmonious image of Indian religiosity that aligns with the state’s narrative of unity in diversity. In this sense, postage stamps operate as “cultural micro-monuments” [1], visually encoding collective memory, heritage, and ideological positions. From a broader visual culture perspective, scholar like [5] highlight that stamps functions as a form of visual theology, communicating systems of symbolic representation. When such imagery is appropriated by state institutions like India Post, it demonstrates the intersection of religion and nationalism within formal bureaucratic frameworks. Consequently, postage stamps should be understood not as passive reflections of culture, but as active instruments in constructing and disseminating a state-sanctioned vision of national spirituality.

Since its establishment in 1947, India Post has issued over 5,000 commemorative stamps, covering a wide spectrum of themes [4]. The postage stamp acts as a notion of “philatelic secularism,” wherein the state’s visual output attempts to harmonize diverse religious traditions as part of a collective national heritage. [4] interprets such Postage stamps through the lens of “banal nationalism,” where different cultural symbols become normalized markers of national identity through their routine presence in everyday objects like stamps. This transformation suggests a broader cultural reorientation.

Postage stamps can be broadly classified into three primary categories based on their purpose and mode of circulation. Definitive stamps are produced in large quantities for everyday postal use and remain in circulation over extended periods. In contrast, commemorative stamps are issued for limited durations and are designed to mark significant anniversaries, major national events, notable personalities, or important landmarks. A third category, known as joint issues, involves the simultaneous release of stamps by the postal authorities of two different countries, typically centered on a shared theme or historical connection. These are often presented as miniature sheets, featuring one or more stamps on a single sheet to commemorate mutual achievements or events [9]. Such joint issues symbolically represent international cooperation, diplomatic goodwill, and cultural exchange between nations.

Significance of Joint-Issue Postage stamps:

Within the thematic repertoire of postage stamp imagery, representations of cultural practices, particularly those associated with traditional and indigenous art forms that occupy a distinctive position. Among these, dance emerges as a culturally dense form of expression that embodies historical continuity, social values, and collective identity. As a performative practice, dance is inherently dynamic, relying on movement, temporality, and embodied knowledge. However, its representation within the static visual format of postage stamps necessitates a process of transformation whereby kinetic expression is rendered into fixed imagery. This transformation raises critical analytical questions concerning the

mechanisms through which meaning is constructed, stabilized, and communicated in visual form.

The complexity of such representation is further intensified in the context of joint issue postage stamps, which are collaboratively produced by two or more nations. These stamps are typically issued to commemorate shared themes, diplomatic relations, or cultural affinities, thereby functioning as instruments of transnational cultural exchange. In this capacity, joint issue stamps not only articulate national identity but also participate in the construction of a shared visual discourse that operates across cultural boundaries. The inclusion of dance forms within such issues introduces an additional layer of significance, as it entails the representation of culturally specific practices within a framework intended for global reception.

The visual representation of dance in joint issue stamps may be productively examined through the theoretical lens of semiotics, particularly as articulated by Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure’s conceptualization of the sign as a relational entity composed of the signifier and the signified provides a foundational framework for analyzing processes of meaning-making in visual media [6]. The signifier refers to the material or perceptible form of the sign, while the signified denotes the conceptual meaning that these elements evoke. The relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary yet socially constituted, relying on shared cultural codes and conventions for its intelligibility.

Applied to the analysis of postage stamps, this framework facilitates a systematic examination of how visual elements function as signifiers that generate culturally specific meanings. In representations of dance, signifiers may include aspects such as bodily posture, gesture, costume, ornamentation, and spatial composition. These elements are not merely descriptive but operate within culturally embedded systems of signification that inform their interpretation. The corresponding signifieds encompass a range of conceptual associations, including notions of tradition, heritage, identity, and cultural continuity. The process through which these associations are established is contingent upon the viewer’s familiarity with the relevant

cultural codes, thereby underscoring the contextual nature of meaning-making.

In the case of joint issue stamps, the interplay between signifier and signified acquires additional complexity due to the transnational context in which these images circulate. The visual representation must negotiate between specificity and universality, conveying culturally grounded meanings while remaining accessible to diverse audiences. This necessitates a selective process in which particular elements of cultural expression are foregrounded, while others may be simplified or omitted. Such choices are indicative of broader representational strategies that shape how cultural practices are constructed and communicated within global visual discourse.

Despite the analytical potential of this perspective, existing scholarship on postage stamps has predominantly concentrated on their role in articulating national identity, political ideology, and historical commemoration [7], [2]. While these studies have contributed to an understanding of stamps as instruments of state representation, relatively limited attention has been directed toward the depiction of performing arts, and particularly dance, within this medium. Moreover, the specific dynamics of joint issue stamps as sites of cross-cultural representation remain insufficiently examined. This lacuna is particularly significant in light of contemporary concerns regarding the preservation, representation, and dissemination of indigenous cultural practices in an increasingly globalized context.

The present study seeks to address this gap by undertaking a semiotic analysis of selected joint issue postage stamps that depict cultural dance forms. Employing Saussure's model of the sign, the study examines the relationship between visual signifiers and their associated signified in order to elucidate the processes through which cultural meaning is constructed and communicated. This approach enables a detailed analysis of how specific visual elements contribute to the representation of indigenous cultural practices, and how these representations are situated within broader frameworks of cultural exchange.

In addition, the study adopts a comparative perspective to investigate variations and correspondences in the representation of dance across different national contexts. By analyzing similarities and differences in visual signifiers such as costume, posture, and symbolic motifs. The study aims to identify patterns in the construction of cultural meaning. This comparative dimension provides insight into how distinct cultural traditions are articulated within a shared visual format, and how meaning is negotiated in the context of transnational representation.

The significance of this inquiry extends beyond the domain of philatelic studies to encompass broader considerations related to visual culture and indigenous arts. In an era characterized by intensified global interconnectivity, traditional cultural practices are increasingly mediated through visual forms that circulate across diverse contexts. Postage stamps, as widely disseminated visual artifacts, play a role in shaping perceptions of cultural identity and heritage. Their analysis thus offers a means of understanding how indigenous cultural expressions are represented, interpreted, and recontextualized within global visual discourse.

Thus, this study positions joint issue postage stamps as analytically significant sites for examining the visual representation of cultural dance. Through the application of Saussure's semiotic framework, it seeks to provide a rigorous and systematic account of how meaning is constructed through the interaction of signifier and signified. By focusing on the depiction of dance as a culturally embedded practice, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the role of visual media in the representation of indigenous arts. Furthermore, it underscores the importance of critically engaging with visual forms as carriers of cultural meaning within an increasingly interconnected world.

II. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in visual semiotic analysis to examine the representation of cultural dance forms in joint issue postage stamps. The qualitative approach is

appropriate for this inquiry as it facilitates an in-depth interpretation of visual elements and their associated meanings within specific cultural contexts. The study is interpretive in nature, focusing on the processes through which meaning is constructed and communicated through visual signs.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis is informed by the semiotic model proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure, which conceptualizes the sign as comprising two interrelated components: the signifier and the signified [6]. The signifier refers to the perceptible form of the sign, while the signified denotes the conceptual meaning associated with that form. Meaning arises through the relational interplay between these components within culturally constituted systems of signification.

In the context of visual analysis, this framework enables the systematic examination of how specific visual elements function as signifiers that evoke culturally embedded meanings. The study employs this model to analyze the extent to which representations of dance in postage stamps construct and communicate notions of cultural identity, tradition, and indigenous heritage.

IV. DATA SELECTION AND SAMPLING

The study utilizes a purposive sampling technique to select relevant postage stamps for analysis. The sampling criteria are as follows:

1. The stamps must be joint issue releases involving India and at least one other country.
2. The stamps must depict cultural dance forms, including classical, folk, or indigenous traditions.
3. The selected stamps must contain sufficient visual detail to enable semiotic interpretation.

A sample size of 1 to 5 stamps is considered adequate to ensure analytical depth while maintaining coherence in comparative analysis. The selected samples are intended to represent a range of cultural contexts and visual styles, thereby enabling a comprehensive examination of representational patterns.

V. DATA SOURCES

The primary data for the study are obtained from authenticated philatelic sources, including:

- India Post official archives
- Published philatelic catalogues
- Reputable online stamp databases and digital repositories

These sources provide access to high-quality visual reproductions and contextual information necessary for accurate analysis.

VI. ANALYTICAL PROCEDURE

The analysis is conducted through a structured semiotic process based on Saussure's sign model. Each selected stamp is examined in terms of the relationship between its signifiers and signified.

Identification of Signifiers

The first stage involves the systematic identification of visual elements present in each stamp. These elements include, but are not limited to:

- Bodily posture and movement of the dancer
- Costume and ornamentation
- Facial expression and gesture
- Background imagery and spatial composition
- Accompanying symbols or motifs

These elements are treated as signifiers, constituting the observable components of the visual sign.

Interpretation of Signifieds

The second stage involves the interpretation of the conceptual meanings associated with the identified signifiers. This process entails examining how visual elements evoke culturally specific associations, such as:

- Tradition and continuity
- Cultural identity and heritage
- Spiritual or ritual significance
- Indigenous knowledge systems

The interpretation is informed by relevant cultural and contextual knowledge, recognizing that the relationship between signifier and signified is mediated by shared conventions and interpretive frameworks.

Construction of the Sign

In the final stage, the interaction between signifier and signified is analyzed to understand how meaning is constructed within the visual representation. This involves examining how multiple signifiers operate in combination to produce coherent cultural narratives. The analysis considers the extent to which these narratives align with or depart from established representations of cultural dance forms.

In addition to individual analysis, a comparative approach is employed to examine similarities and differences across the selected stamps. This involves comparing visual signifiers and their corresponding signifieds across different national contexts. The comparative analysis focuses on:

- Variations in the depiction of dance forms
- Differences in symbolic emphasis and visual composition

Patterns in the representation of cultural identity
This approach enables the identification of broader trends in how cultural dance is represented in joint issue stamps and how meaning is negotiated within a transnational framework.

Analytical Framework (Coding Structure)

To ensure consistency and clarity, the analysis is organized using a structured coding framework comprising the following categories:

- Type of dance (classical, folk, indigenous)
- Costume and ornaments
- Body posture and gesture
- Cultural symbols and motifs
- Elements of national or cultural identity

These categories facilitate systematic comparison and enhance the transparency of the analytical process.

Validity and Reliability

The study ensures analytical rigor through the consistent application of the semiotic framework across all selected samples. The use of clearly defined categories and a structured analytical procedure enhance the reliability of the findings. Furthermore, the interpretation of signified meanings is grounded in established cultural knowledge and supported by relevant contextual references, thereby strengthening the validity of the analysis.

Ethical Considerations

The study is based on publicly available visual materials and does not involve human participants. All sources of data are appropriately acknowledged, and due care is taken to ensure accurate representation and interpretation of cultural elements.

VII. ANALYSIS



Fig 1



Fig 2

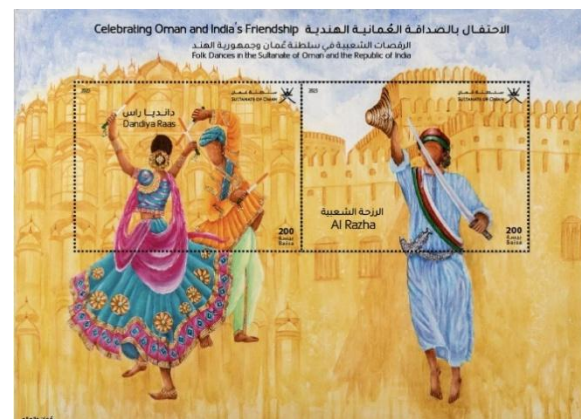


Fig 3



Fig 4



Fig 5

Figure No.	Stamp (Joint Issue / Theme)	Signifier (Visual Elements)	Signified (Conceptual Meaning)	Interpretation
Fig. 1	India–Portugal Joint Issue (50 Years Diplomatic Relations)	Two female dancers in distinct traditional costumes; symmetrical composition; decorative background motifs	Cultural diversity; bilateral identity; heritage continuity	The juxtaposition of Indian and Portuguese dancers signifies mutual cultural recognition and the preservation of distinct yet parallel folk traditions
Fig. 2	India–Russia Joint Issue (2017)	Russian dancers in coordinated red costumes; Indian Bhavai performers balancing pots; architectural backdrops (Russian domes, Indian palace)	Cultural exchange; performative skill; national identity	The contrasting dance forms function as signifiers of distinct cultural practices, while the shared frame signifies diplomatic and artistic dialogue
Fig. 3	India–Oman Joint Issue (2023)	Indian Dandiya Ras dancers with sticks; Omani Al Razha performer	Ritual practice; cultural symbolism; tradition and identity	The visual pairing signifies the coexistence of festive and martial dance traditions, emphasizing cultural specificity within a shared diplomatic context

		holding weapon; traditional attire; heritage architecture		
Fig. 4	India–Japan Joint Issue (Kabuki–Kathakali Sheet)	Kabuki performer with dramatic makeup and weapon; Kathakali dancer with elaborate facial design; stylized masks in background	Theatrical tradition; symbolic performance; codified aesthetics	The visual elements signify highly structured performance systems, highlighting parallels between Indian and Japanese classical theatre traditions
Fig. 5	India–Mongolia Joint Issue Sheet (Dance & Performance)	Multiple dancers in varied costumes; musicians with instruments; national flags; composite cultural layout	Transnational identity; cultural plurality; diplomatic harmony	The multiplicity of figures signifies a collective cultural narrative, emphasizing shared artistic heritage and international collaboration

VIII. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The semiotic analysis of the selected joint issue postage stamps (Figs. 1-5) demonstrates that visual representations of cultural dance function as structured sign systems in which meaning is generated through the relational interaction between signifier and signified. Across the dataset, visual elements such as costume, posture, gesture, spatial composition, and symbolic motifs operate as primary signifiers that encode culturally specific meanings associated with identity, tradition, and transnational exchange.

In Fig. 1 (India–Portugal joint issue), the symmetrical depiction of two female dancers in distinct traditional

costumes functions as a prominent signifier of cultural duality. The visual contrast between the two attires, combined with their balanced placement within the frame, produces a signified associated with bilateral cultural identity and mutual recognition. The composition does not privilege one cultural form over the other; rather, it constructs a parallel visual narrative in which both traditions coexist as equally significant representations of heritage. This suggests that the signifier–signified relationship is structured to emphasize equivalence and reciprocity within a diplomatic context.

A similar dynamic is evident in Fig. 2 (India–Russia joint issue), where contrasting dance traditions are presented alongside architectural backdrops

characteristic of each nation. The coordinated red costumes of the Russian dancers and the pot-balancing Bhavai performers of India function as distinct signifiers of culturally specific practices. These are further reinforced by the inclusion of iconic architectural elements, which anchor the representation within recognizable national contexts. However, the integration of these elements within a single compositional frame produces a signified that extends beyond cultural difference, emphasizing dialogue and exchange. The stamp thus operates as a semiotic structure in which difference is not isolated but relationally configured to signify intercultural engagement.

In Fig. 3 (India–Oman joint issue), the juxtaposition of Dandiya Ras dancers and an Al Razha performer introduces differentiated signifiers associated with festive and martial traditions. The use of sticks in Dandiya Ras and the weapon held by the Al Razha performer function as culturally specific visual cues that signify distinct ritual practices. At the level of the signified, these elements construct meanings related to cultural specificity, embodied tradition, and performative identity. At the same time, their coexistence within a shared visual field signifies a broader narrative of diplomatic association, in which diverse cultural practices are brought into a unified representational framework.

The India–Japan joint issue (Fig. 4) foregrounds a different configuration of signifiers, characterized by high degrees of stylization and codification. The elaborate facial makeup, exaggerated expressions, and structured costumes associated with Kabuki and Kathakali function as signifiers of formalized theatrical systems. These elements signify not only performance but also discipline, tradition, and aesthetic regulation. The juxtaposition of these two forms within a single visual composition produces a signified that highlights cross-cultural parallels in classical performance traditions. Unlike the folk-oriented representations in other stamps, the emphasis here is on codified artistic systems, suggesting a different mode of cultural representation grounded in institutionalized knowledge.

In Fig. 5 (India–Mongolia joint issue sheet), the multiplicity of dancers, musicians, and national symbols arranged within a composite layout function as a complex signifier of cultural plurality. The presence of diverse costumes, instruments, and

performance styles creates a layered visual structure in which multiple signifiers operate simultaneously. The resulting signified is one of transnational cultural identity and diplomatic harmony, where individual cultural elements are integrated into a collective narrative. The inclusion of national flags further reinforces this interpretation, anchoring the visual representation within a framework of international relations.

A comparative analysis of Figs. 1-5 indicates that the relationship between signifier and signified is shaped by both cultural specificity and the communicative demands of a global audience. While the visual elements employed as signifiers are rooted in distinct cultural traditions, their selection and arrangement reflect a degree of standardization aimed at enhancing visual legibility across contexts. This suggests that the construction of signified meanings involves a process of mediation, in which complex cultural practices are translated into recognizable visual forms. As a result, the stamps function as semiotic artifacts that negotiate between authenticity and representation.

Furthermore, the analysis reveals that joint issue stamps operate as sites of relational meaning-making, where signifiers from different cultural systems are brought into interaction. The resulting signified meanings are not confined to individual cultural identities but extend to encompass broader themes of exchange, dialogue, and coexistence. This reinforces the understanding of postage stamps as visual media that participate in the construction of transnational cultural narratives.

Thus, the semiotic examination of Figs. 1-5 demonstrates that the representation of cultural dance in joint issue postage stamps is not merely descriptive but constitutive of complex cultural meanings. Through the structured interaction of signifier and signified, these visual artifacts encode narratives of identity, tradition, and diplomatic engagement, thereby functioning as significant instruments of cultural communication in a global context.

IX. CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the visual representation of cultural dance in joint issue postage stamps through the semiotic framework of signifier and signified. The analysis of selected stamps (Figs.

1–5) demonstrates that postage stamps function as structured visual sign systems in which meaning is produced through the relational interaction of perceptible elements and culturally embedded concepts. The findings indicate that visual components such as costume, gesture, posture, spatial composition, and symbolic motifs operate as signifiers that encode layered meanings associated with cultural identity, tradition, and transnational exchange.

The study reveals that joint issue stamps do not merely depict cultural practices but actively construct narratives of bilateral and multilateral relationships. The juxtaposition of distinct cultural forms within a shared visual frame produces signified meanings that extend beyond individual traditions, emphasizing themes of mutual recognition, cultural dialogue, and diplomatic engagement. In particular, the comparative analysis highlights how culturally specific signifiers are selectively organized to produce meanings that are both locally grounded and globally interpretable. This dual orientation underscores the role of postage stamps as mediating artifacts that translate complex cultural expressions into accessible visual forms.

Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that the relationship between signifier and signified is inherently contextual and relational. The same visual element may generate different meanings depending on its compositional context and interaction with other signifiers. This reinforces the relevance of Saussure's semiotic model in understanding how meaning is not fixed but produced within systems of cultural coding. By applying this framework, the study contributes to a more systematic and theoretically grounded understanding of how visual representations operate within the domain of philately.

Overall, the study establishes that joint issue postage stamps serve as significant instruments of cultural communication, where visual representations of dance function not only as markers of heritage but also as tools for constructing transnational cultural narratives. Through the structured interplay of signifier and signified, these stamps articulate a visual discourse that connects local cultural practices with broader global contexts.

X. IMPLICATIONS

This study contributes to the field of visual culture and media studies by demonstrating the applicability of Saussurean semiotics to the analysis of postage stamps as visual texts. By focusing on the signifier–signified relationship, the study provides a clear and systematic methodological framework for examining how meaning is constructed in visual representations of cultural practices. It extends semiotic inquiry into the domain of philately, which remains relatively underexplored, thereby opening new avenues for interdisciplinary research at the intersection of communication studies, cultural studies, and visual anthropology.

The findings highlight the role of postage stamps in representing and circulating cultural knowledge, particularly in relation to traditional and indigenous dance forms. By transforming performative practices into visual signs, stamps contribute to the preservation and dissemination of cultural heritage. At the same time, the selective nature of representation raises important considerations regarding authenticity, simplification, and cultural framing. The study underscores the need for critical engagement with visual representations to ensure that cultural diversity is communicated in a manner that is both respectful and contextually grounded.

Joint issue postage stamps emerge as significant instruments of cultural diplomacy, facilitating the visual articulation of relationships between nations. The integration of multiple cultural signifiers within a single compositional frame reflects a deliberate effort to construct narratives of cooperation, mutual respect, and shared heritage. This suggests that visual media play an important role in shaping perceptions of international relations, contributing to soft power strategies and cross-cultural understanding. The study thus positions postage stamps as active participants in the construction of global cultural discourse.

The study demonstrates the effectiveness of a structured semiotic approach in analyzing visual artifacts. The use of clearly defined categories for identifying signifiers and interpreting signified meanings enhances analytical rigor and reproducibility. This methodological framework can be applied to other forms of visual media, including posters, digital images, and cultural artifacts, thereby offering a scalable approach for future research.

XI. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

While the present study focuses on a selected set of joint issue stamps, future research may expand the scope to include a larger dataset across different time periods and regions. Comparative studies could further explore variations in representation across cultural and political contexts. Additionally, the integration of audience reception studies may provide insights into how different viewers interpret the signifier–signified relationship in visual representations. The increasing digitization of philatelic archives also presents opportunities for examining how digital circulation influences the production and interpretation of visual signs.

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