

First Hexagonal Postage Stamps on Aldabra Giant Tortoise

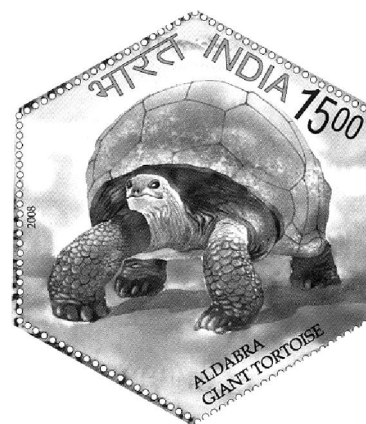
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Generally we see the postage stamps of India in quadrilateral shapes. In the post-Independence era Indian Postal Department had issued only two commemorative postage stamps in trigonal shape on different occasions. But later India post has issued for the first time a hexagonal (odd shaped) postage stamps on August 2nd, 2008, to commemorate the Alipore zoo's Aldabra giant tortoise called Adwaita. There are several stamp designs issued by Department of Post in different countries and on different occasions in different shapes viz. round shape, quadrilateral shape, rectangular

shape, trigonal shape and hexagonal shape.

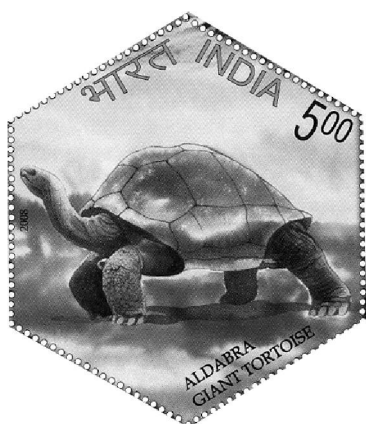
Here we shall discuss the story of a tortoise named Adwaita. We all know about the folk tales of tortoise who defeated the hare and won the race. Well, Adwaita was also a winner. Before it died in the year 2006 in Alipore Zoological Garden, Kolkata, Adwaita was perhaps the longest living animal in the world having lived for more than 250 years.

Nothing specific can be told about its early life. It is said that British sailors coming to India picked up some tortoises from the Aldabra Islands in the Indian ocean on way to India. Legend has it that these were presented to Robert Clive (Governor General of India) who was instrumental in firmly establishing the rule of the British East India Company in India especially after the Battle of Plassey (1757). Four such tortoises were brought to Alipore Zoo at the time of its establishment in 1857 from the menagerie at Latbagan, Barrackpore, established by Wellesley in 1800. Three of them eventually died in the last 130 years at different times. To save Adwaita the last surviving specimen from being teased by unruly visitors, it was kept in a secluded enclosure. Subsequently on 30th November, 1994 it was shifted to a



centrally located octagonal enclosure so that visitors could see this living wonder from a safe distance.

People lovingly called it Adwaita meaning the matchless or the unique one as it was a living example of nature's mystery. It is supposed to have been born in 1750. It was fed wheat bran, grams soaked in water, small pieces of carrots, sweet potatoes, beans, leafy vegetables, diced banana and rice mixed with gram powder. The Aldabra Giant Tortoise (*Geochelone Gigantea*) is a native of Aldabra atoll, part of the Seychelles Islands in the Indian Ocean. The Aldabra atoll has been protected from human influence since late 19th century and is home to a large number of giant tortoises, perhaps having the world's largest population of the specie. The size of an Aldabra Giant Tortoise can be upto 4ft in length and the weight can be about 550 lbs. They are



normally darkgray to black in colour, have small pointed head covered with scales, a long neck, a highly domed carapace and thick, bony scales on forelegs. Aldabra Giant Tortoise differs from the other Giant Tortoises found in Galapagos Island in Pacific Ocean by having a small neck plate on the carapace which seems to be absent in the Galapagos Giant Tortoise. Breeding season of Aldabra Giant Tortoise extends from February to May. The female tortoise usually lays 4 to 25 eggs and incubation period is about 4 months.

Giant Tortoises have been subject of scientific research for conservation and breeding. It is said that they can survive upto six months without food and water. Indiscriminate hunting has threatened the survival of Giant Tortoises in Galapagos as well as in the Indian Ocean Islands.

Adwaita already had eighty years behind him by the time Charles Darwin (father of evolution) arrived at Galapagos. India's First War of Independence in 1857, Partition of Bengal in 1905, the two World Wars, strides in the field of Science and Technology, the theory of relativity, conquest of the space, the Moon and the Everest, the making and later breaking of the Wall of Berlin events passed on the world stage, but unconcerned and unaffected, Adwaita, the matchless kept growing and gathering layers of time, more like an unmindful rock sitting by the riverside. How many generations of zoo visitors must have looked at Adwaita with amazement and marvelled at his longevity.

Adwaita became ill several months before his death after a crack developed around a wound on its chest, and ultimately succumbed to death on 22nd March, 2006.

Adwaita could have been an interesting study on how he coped with such a prolonged human captivity. Did it resent it ? Did its pine for his native Aldabra or, did he ultimately get tired and went with the unfulfilled dream of one day seeing his homeland ?

India Post had issued a set of two commemorative postage stamps on 2nd August, 2008 based on Aldabra Giant Tortoise Adwaita to make it memorable for our generations to come. The specially designed colourful stamps were printed in India Security Press, Nasik which cost in different denominations i.e. Rs.5/- and Rs.15/-. These type of hexagonal postage stamps issued by the India Post were unique really in the sense that no such stamp has ever been published by the Department of Post. Perforation has been arranged in such a manner that one can easily tear off one stamp from another from the sheetlet. The total number of stamps on a sheetlet was 13. Four types of sheetlet were released and 30 lakh stamps were printed. Adwaita was really an amazing creature on the earth by the Almighty Lord. Wah ! Adwaita Wah ! Really you are a greatest creature of Almighty.

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