There were many reasons for the appearance of the picture postcard in the 1890s. These included the invention of photography—photographs were common by the 1870s, and the mass-produced Kodak camera came out in the 1880s and greatly democratized the form. There were more liberal international postal regulations, and printing technologies like rapid press lithography were being exploited by small workshops and artisans in European and Indian cities. The growth of shipping and railway lines exemplified by cards like City Line To & From India (Figure 1) contributed to a fertile tourist market. Postcards as a messaging system were literally built on an iron communications network. At the same time, the spark that proved the concept came from advertising. It was business and marketing that helped underwrite the initially rather high costs for printing postcards.

The very first postcards of the subcontinent are, as far as I can tell, the three India (Figures 2, 3, 4) and Ceylon (Figure 5) postcards published by the Singer Manufacturing Co. in 1892. Strictly speaking, they were advertising cards, made for the World Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. Nusserwanji Merwanji Patel, the Singer country agent in India, Burmah and Ceylon for 35 years and his employees wearing traditional Parsi green and purple hats are possibly shown in these cards. The World Columbian Exposition marked the first official exposure of America to India in other ways too: Swami Vivekananda explained Hinduism in a series of historic lectures, and the painter Raja Ravi Varma won a Gold Medal (in a few years he would become its first major postcard publisher). Why do I consider them postcards? They are the right size, call themselves postcards, and are sold as such today; what they exemplified was the art of putting an image on the front of a paper card the thickness of a few sheets of paper in order to sell something.

Figure 1. City Line To & From India. City Line, c. 1904. Lithograph, Divided back, 14 x 9.15 cm, 5.51 x 3.60 in.
Verso: "An Extensive Empire of the British Crown, consisting of the Great Southern Peninsula of southern Asia, and a narrow strip along the east side of the Bay of Bengal. It is bordered north by the Himalaya mountains, west by a mountain range, east by parallel offshoots from the opposite extremity of the Himalayas, and on the other side by the Indian Ocean. The surface of the country is extremely diversified. It has the highest mountain peak (Mt. Everest) in the world, the Ganges River - wonderful for its annual inundations of the Gangetic plain. There is great diversity of race and language; in Upper India the inhabitants are of the Indo-European stock, with a language and roots to the Sanscrit. The religions are Mohammedanism and Brahmanism. The Aboriginal races have no literature. The governing races are of the Arabic, Brahmanical and Persian stock. Under British rule India is making rapid strides in modern civilization. The Company have offices in all the principal cities, and sell a large number of machines."
It all began with Women Baking Bread (Figure 1). I was at my first postcard show in Concord, northern California, when the beauty of this little court-size card struck me. It carried me back to 5 Queens Road in Lahore, where my grandmother and a servant girl crouched on the veranda of a dilapidated mansion, chatting and making chapattis to be carried across the courtyard and cooked in a clay oven with straw awnings and charred wooden beams. It caught the warmth of that place. I marvelled at the tromp l’œil on the postcard of the lantern and cloth, so effortlessly did they float above the women depicted. I bought the postcard. It is one I have rarely run into again, but I have since found many signed by the same artist, Paul Gerhardt, the search for whom is one of the things that propelled this book. His career shows how creatively driven the postcard medium was in its earliest years. Women Baking Bread began a twenty-year collecting spree that is far from over.

Once upon a time, postcards were works of art. It was just before 1900, and the “infesting modern microbe, the picture postal” was spreading across the globe. The “picture-mad age” had begun. Billions of postcards exchanged hands between 1898 and 1903. Postcard production in Germany went from under 100 million to almost 1.2 billion, two postcards for everyone on earth. It involved more people more quickly than the rise of any other media form. The world was pulled together by the “poor man’s phantasm.”

Postcards are barely collected by institutions; they are in the hands of private collectors, families, and increasingly, online exchanges around the world. Postcards are being flushed out of albums and attics, and the interactions that ensue have made finding and analysing them a delightful window into history. They have been skipped by most historians, in part because they have been so inaccessible.

The story of the picture postcard in India is closely intertwined with that of Germany and Austria, where the image postcard was invented and most of them were first printed.
Notes


