Within two decades of its discovery, AIDS has attained a status akin to that of plague in the Middle Ages. As of December 2002, there were 42 million people living with HIV/AIDS in the world. It is estimated that at least 45 million new infections will occur between 2002 and 2010 and 95% of these will occur in developing countries. The disease infects 14000 people every day. India woke up to the AIDS epidemic in 1986 when the first case was reported from Tamilnadu. The HIV prevalence in India as on 31 Dec. 2002 is four million.

AIDS was recognised for the first time in 1981 in United States, when CDC (Centres for Disease Control), Atlanta reported an unusually high incidence of Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia and Kaposi’s sarcoma in homosexual men in Los Angeles and New York. Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) was isolated in Institute Pasteur in Paris in 1983. Robert Gallo, working in the National Cancer Institute in USA first demonstrated this retrovirus to be the causative agent of AIDS in 1984. The first drug to be approved by FDA for treatment of HIV infection was Zidovudine in 1987. Many powerful drugs have been licensed since then which unfortunately do not eradicate the infection. In the words of President WJ Clinton, “antiviral medication has turned AIDS from a death sentence into a chronic illness.” The best preventive measure will be an effective vaccine against this disease. However, such a vaccine is still only a distant dream. At present the practice of safe sex remains the only way to halt the spread of the epidemic.

The disease mainly affects young people who form the major working force of a nation. Majority of persons dying from AIDS are between 20 and 50 yrs of age. Thus, societies are left with the young and the old, with few of support them. The disease devastates political, social and economic structure of entire nation, besides giving a crushing blow to families of those who are infected.

Stamps are not mere pieces of colourful paper. They tell us about the thinking of the society and, in a way, reflect the social history of a nation. The first few stamps on HIV/AIDS were released in 1988, a mere seven years after the first case of AIDS. Thereafter, many other countries have released stamps on HIV to increase social awareness. India has yet to fulfil its philatelic obligation on HIV. Two beautiful stamps of Cuba on HIV/AIDS released in 2000 are shown in the above photograph. The red ribbon depicted in the stamps is the international symbol of AIDS awareness that was adopted in 1991.