

A wedding invitation sent by 'Book Post' to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman; uprated by five paisa Refugee Relief issue of 1 December, 1971.



First Day Cover issued by the Pakistan Post Office on the First General Elections of Pakistan, 1970.

REFUGEE RELIEF

The postal tax that helped millions

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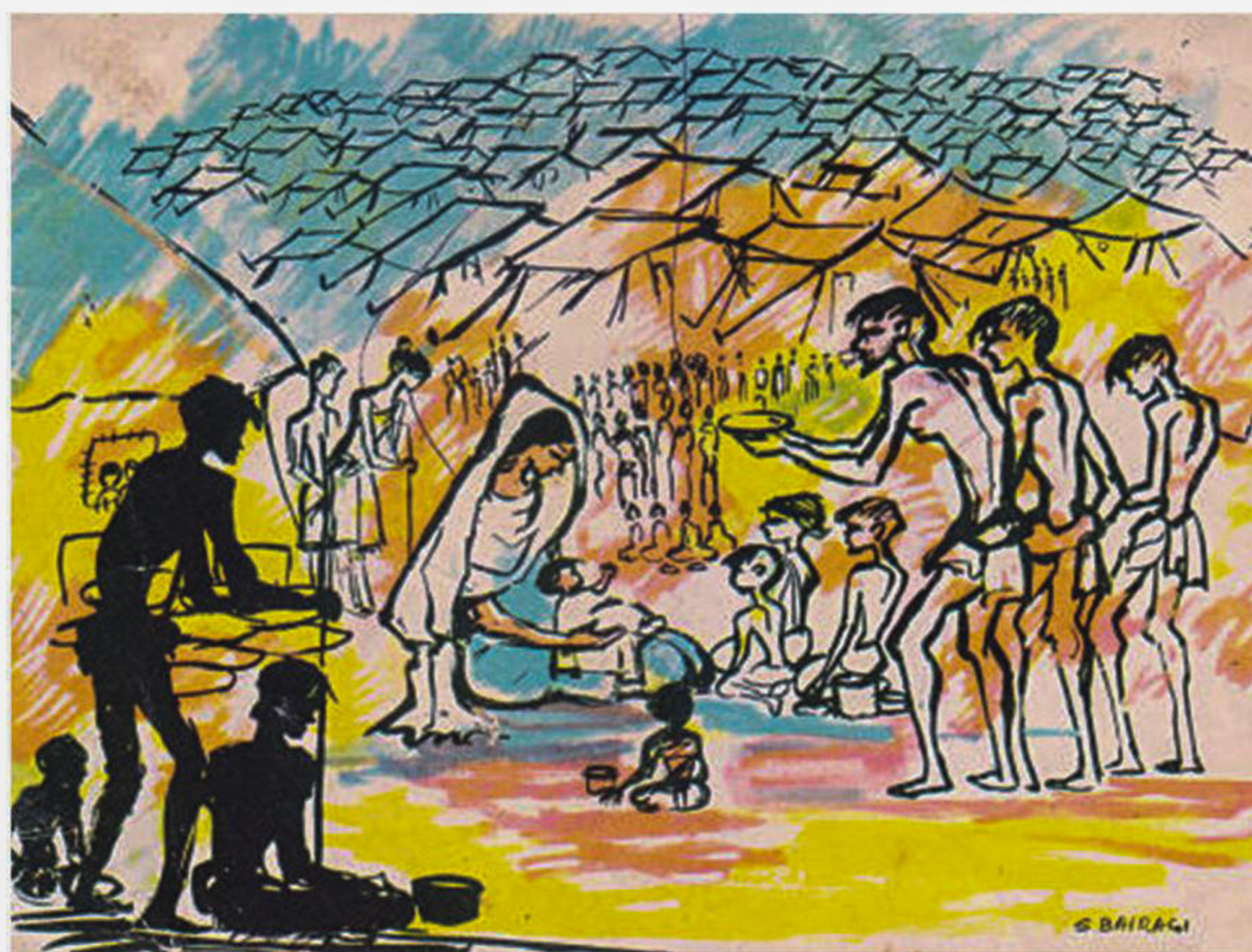
FOR netizens of the time, postage stamps are mere remnants of history. Almost every Bangladeshi, 30 and above, will recollect fond memories of this collecting pursuit and their prized stamp album, but to the younger generation philately no longer bears any special meaning.

Ever since the first stamp was issued in England on May 1840, collectors focused only on the stamp itself – their design, the printing technology of production and particularly, on errors and flaws that were inadvertently made at the press. From the late 19th century, some discerning collectors started focusing on the postmarks and the markings on envelopes the stamps are stuck to.

In those early years of development of communication, postal charges varied depending on the weight of the article and the route they were travelling. Over decades, this approach of collecting became formally known as 'postal history.' Although 'traditional' and 'postal history' approaches still dominate philately, a recent off-shoot of postal history has become trendy – tracing social and political history of a time or a nation through the activities of the post office.

Considerable attention has been given in print, and recently on the Bangladeshi electronic media, on the first set of stamps issued by the Mujibnagar government in exile. These eight stamps issued on 29 July, 1971 acted as tiny ambassadors of the country and played a major role in garnering support for the cause of Bangladesh.

Little, however, has been written on other aspects of philately that are testament to that turbulent time. The genocide, and the plight of over 10 million refugees who sought sanctuary in neighbouring India, shook world conscience. People across the globe extended their hands in assistance and initiatives like the Concert for Bangladesh further established our just claim for freedom. But considering the



Christmas Greetings Cards by United Relief Service, Calcutta.

colossal resources required to address the refugee crisis, these were insufficient.

India's assistance in our struggle for independence is well-documented. However, the important role of the Indian Post Office in generating funds for the refugees has remained unrecognised, and quite unfortunately so, even in philatelic circles! By October 1971, six months into the conflict and the Indian economy now crippled by the severity of the situation, steps were taken to reschedule prevalent taxation schemes and introduce a new levy altogether – the Refugee Relief Tax (RRT).

Between November 15, 1971 and March 31, 1973 a five paisa 'tax' payable by affixing a special stamp to postal articles – public and government – was made compulsory. A further 10 paisa tax was imposed on all contracts that normally needed stamp duty to be paid. Over a period of about 16 and half months, the taxation policy underwent several changes to meet the demands of time and gave rise

to one of the most complex puzzles of 20th century philately.

The Refugee Relief was predominantly a postal tax, which refers to using a stamp for raising revenue for a purpose, and historically they have been used to collect funds to aid war efforts. Their use is mandatory for the processing of the postal article and their non-inclusion, subject to a further penalty. Compared to other forms of duty, postal tax has a multitude of advantages. As the levy is usually small (the RRT was just five paisa, or ten paisa in case of fiscal instruments), the response from the general public is not apprehensive; and for a country like India—with an extensive postal network and millions of postal articles being transmitted every day—the prospect of recuperating the targeted amount was feasible even within a very short time.

To put matters of the refugee crisis and the introduction of the tax in context, one must look back at the events of 1947 when

the subcontinent was divided into India and Pakistan. Political and economic disparity gave rise to resentments in the Eastern wing of Pakistan, which, in just 24 years, culminated into a demand for sovereignty.

On December 7, 1970 the first general election of Pakistan at the federal level was held. The Awami League bagged 167 out of 169 seats allotted to East Pakistan in the National Assembly, the strength of which was 313. Even after securing absolute majority, the Awami League was not allowed to form government. Further talks took place at the highest level to bring about a solution to the apparent stalemate but on March 25, 1971 the West Pakistan army engaged in a brutal onslaught on Bengali civilians and military/paramilitary forces of the erstwhile East Pakistan. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was arrested; a section of the prominent Awami League leaders escaped capture, crossed the border and eventually formed the Mujibnagar government in exile. Inside East Pakistan, a section of the population rebelled and as soon as the declaration of independence was made, Bengalis were at war!

Within a few days of the onslaught, cross border movement by refugees was noted at the highest level. On March 29, 1971, in a correspondence to Sadruddin Aga Khan, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), FL Pijnacker Hordijk, the representative in India, warned of an imminent global refugee crisis. Even such early cautionary responses failed to predict the scale of the mass exodus. The people and the government of India had from the early days of the conflict empathised with sufferings of the population of East Pakistan. Since the start of the conflict, the diplomatic position of India to the exodus was clear; although borders remained open on humanitarian grounds, they would under no circumstances allow the refugees to settle in the country.

Samer Sen, Permanent Representative of India at the United Nations, met Secretary

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