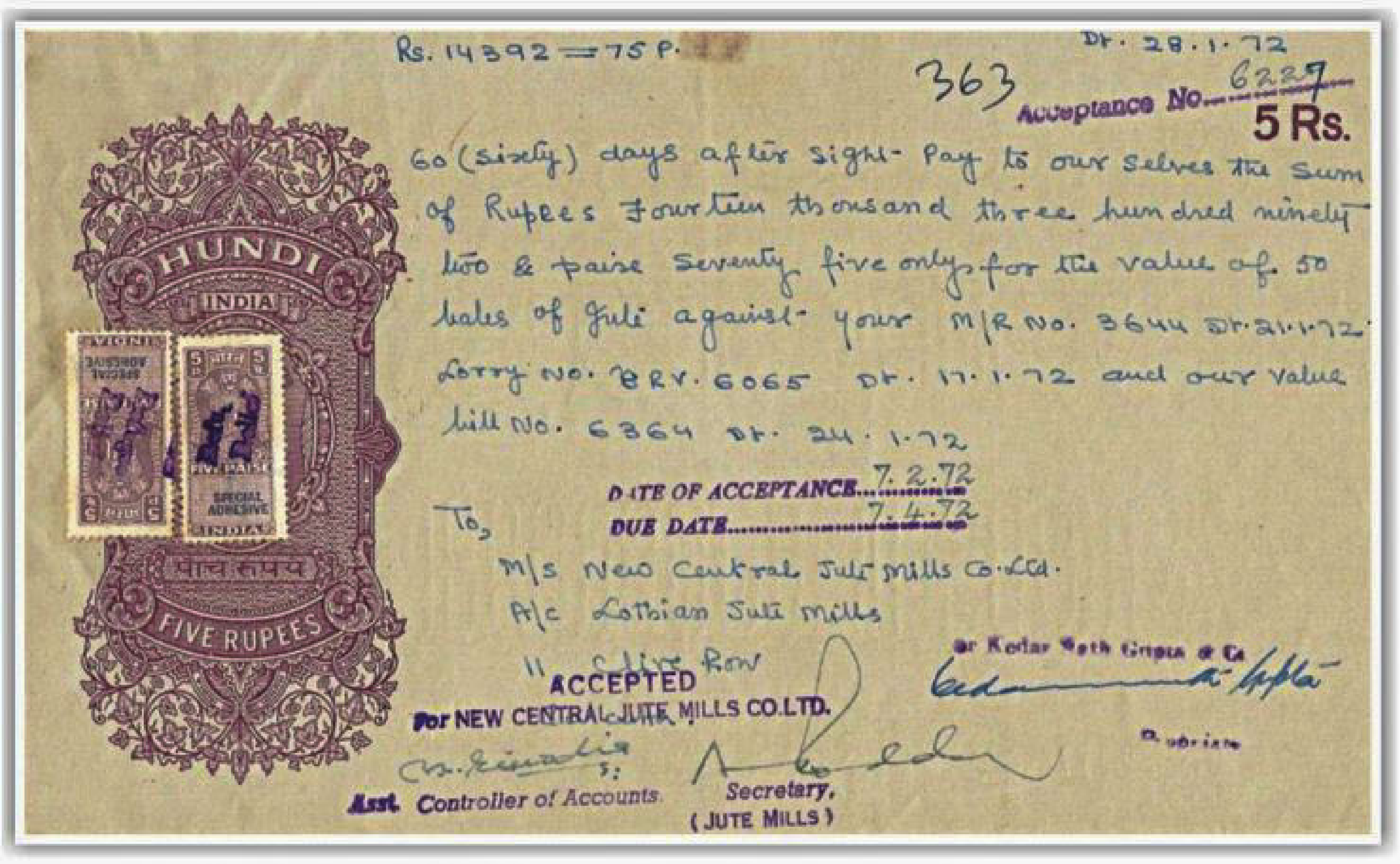
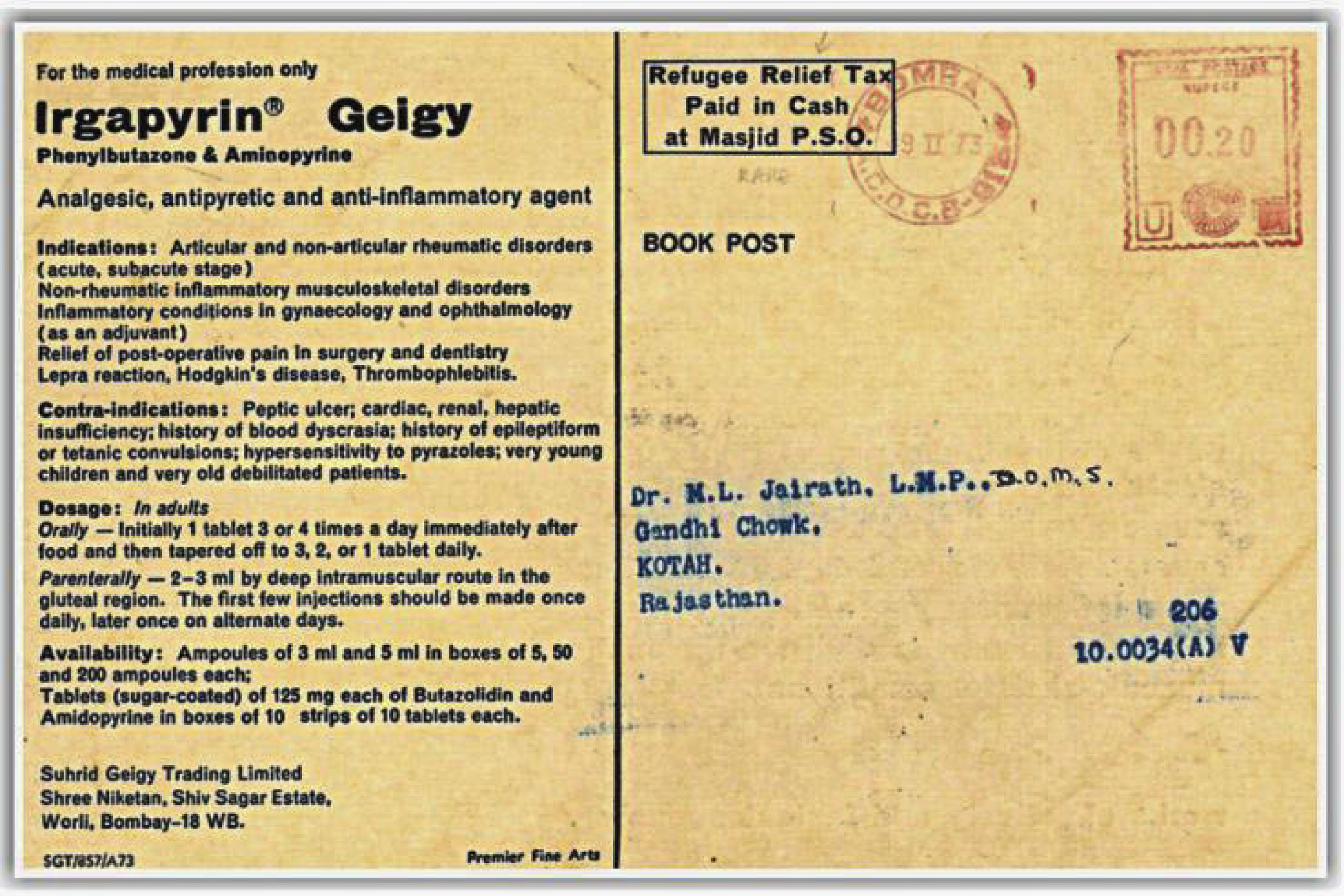
Refugee Relief: The postal tax that helped millions

85 paisa aerogramme uprated with 'Family Planning' stamp.



Ten paisa 'Refugee Relief' on a hundi document.

Tax Paid in Cash (15.11.71) – the first day of introduction of RRT.



Scarce Permit Imprints used to denote payment of tax.

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It was quite natural that the RRT - being the first of its kind in India - will reveal some unprecedented oversights. Since day one of introduction accounting issues had to be dealt with, especially in offices that handled mail in large volumes. As per rule, a separate 5 paisa stamp had to be affixed on articles to show payment of the tax. That meant a lot of stamps and a lot of glue! Separating stamps from their sheets and affixing them on envelopes was a clumsy, time-consuming affair and something simpler had to be introduced - postal clerks used handstamps marked "Refugee Relief Tax Prepaid in Cash" on envelopes; postal stationery were sold at post offices with such markings, which in turn could be used on any future date. Although orders were sent to suppliers of postmarks at Aligarh in Uttar Pradesh for a supply of oval handstamps bearing the inscription "Refugee Relief Tax Prepaid in Cash", to make matters even simpler, general provisions were made for preparing rubber dyes at the local level.

Unlike the situation which existed with the "Aligarh" handstamps, there were no specific instructions provided as to the language or style that was to be used in the manufacture of the rubber handstamps, and needless to say variations are aplenty. A considerable number of private enterprises were using meter stamps to handle bulk mailing. They were supplied with meter franking machines that simply showed that prepayment of the 5 paisa duty was made. Tax meters have been documented in the states of Bihar, Bombay, Karnataka and West Bengal (only four out of the sixteen then in existence); a unique example used from the Union Territory of New Delhi is also known. Possibly, the rarest form of prepayment of tax collectors encounter was through the use of Permit Imprints. Agencies wishing to avail such services were required to indicate the post office at which the taxed amount was deposited. So far, only a few users have been identified using this mode of payment.

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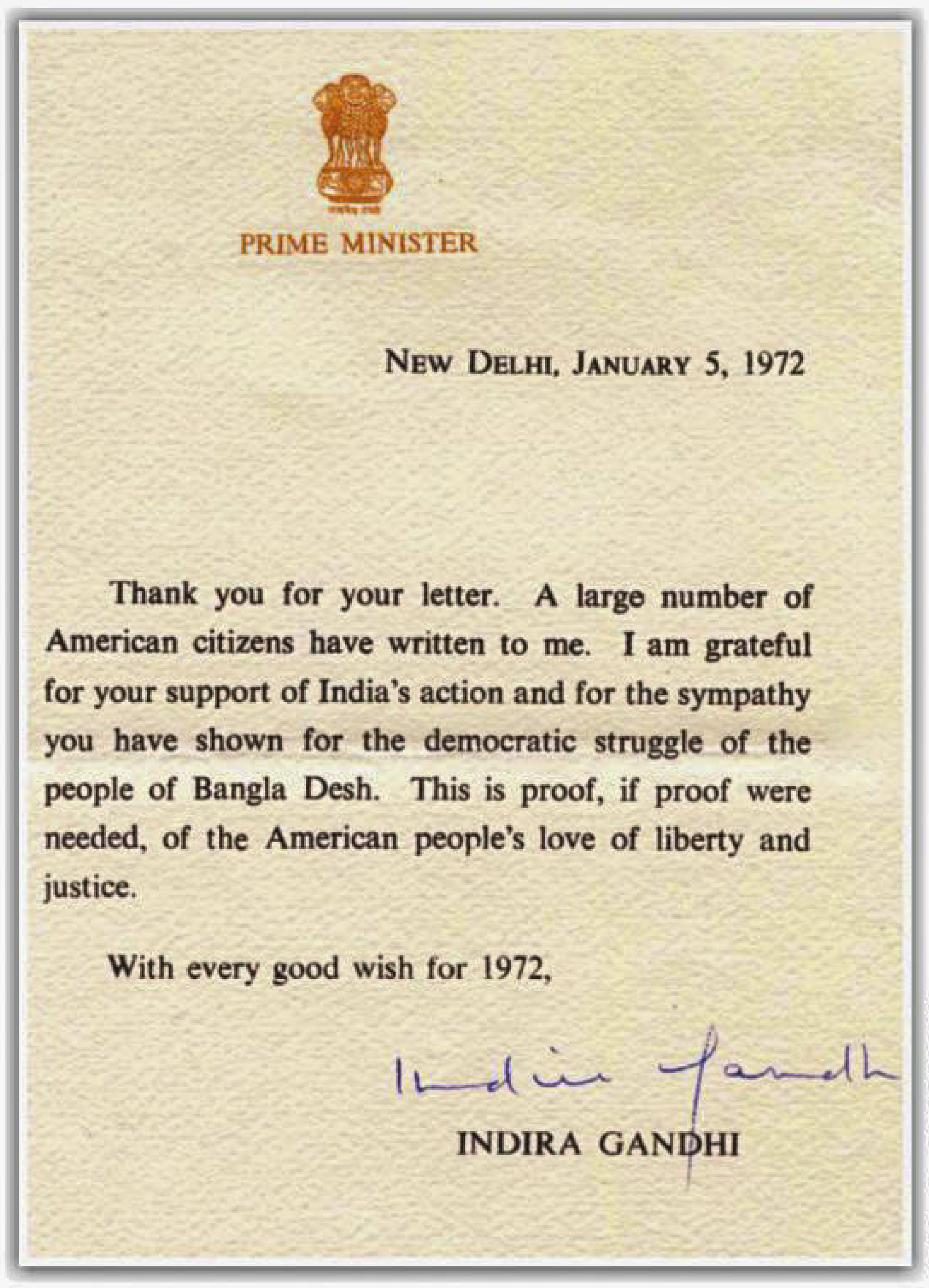
Since the first days of the tax, complaints were lodged as this meant laborious accountancy work at the post offices - the income had to be separately accounted for. Government offices used 'Service' stamps, and these were supplied by state treasuries, which of course had their own supply problems. If an article was posted without the proper prepayment of RRT, the letter was marked "Postage Due" and a penalty, twice the original tax (10 paisa) charged from the recipient. It was quite problematic for institutions that were on the receiving end of mail in large numbers; any letter addressed to such addresses meant that the 'due' was to be collected from them and not the sender, resulting in acute bookkeeping issues. Such grievances were expressed in newspapers during the early days of taxation.

Destination mail posed another set of problems. The transmission and dealing with outgoing and incoming foreign mail is bound by international treaty and regulations administered by the Universal Postal Union (UPU). Usually, if the tax was unpaid on outbound mal, RRT was not collected and the article returned to the sender instead. Although actual figures collected through the RRT were never published, secondary information can be used to come to a ballpark figure. According to estimates by Forbes India, the total collection through all forms of RRT (of which postal tax was just one) was nearly Tk. 26 lakh.

In early 1973, in a letter from the DG, P&T Delhi, to all heads of circles, the RRT was repealed in effect from April 1, 1973. This order embraced all RRT postage and other stamps, so that remaining stocks of RRT adhesives could be exchanged, along with postal stationery, etc., at local offices and treasuries till the end of six months – September 30, 1973.

RRT of India has, in the last four decades, intrigued students of philately. Study of modern postal emissions from the Indian subcontinent is extremely difficult due to lack of proper documentation and open access to archives. Collectors are therefore faced with a situation where only empirical studies can be formed.

1971 saw a humanitarian crisis of unimaginable proportion and this, when tagged with our nationalistic fervour, makes RRT a special subject for the understanding of our past. The RRT of India is probably unique in the philatelic world in the sense that it chronicles the last days of unified Pakistan, the third Indo-Pak War, and a global turning point that led to the emergence of Bangladesh. To any student of Bangladesh philately, RRT remains an interesting collecting avenue and also a testament to the volatile political scenario that helped bring us freedom.



PRIME MINISTER

NEW DELHI, JANUARY 5, 1972

Thank you for your letter. A large number of American citizens have written to me. I am grateful for your support of India's action and for the sympathy you have shown for the democratic struggle of the people of Bangla Desh. This is proof, if proof were needed, of the American people's love of liberty and justice.

With every good wish for 1972,

Indira Gandhi

INDIRA GANDHI

PHOTO: EBAY.COM

Indira Gandhi's reply to an American acknowledging their support to the Bangladesh effort in 1971.

The writer is a sub-editor at The Daily Star and a philatelist. Illustrations are from the collections of Peter Leevers, Ron Klimley, Uttam Singha, and the author.

References:
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Personal correspondence with Peter Leevers.
"India Refugee Relief Tax 1971-73" exhibit by Ron Klimley www.genocidebangladesh.org [Last accessed: December 5, 2016]
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