

Bangla at the crossroads of recognition – a philatelic narrative



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The 1940s was a turbulent time in the Indian subcontinent; shortly after the end of World War II, the peoples' demand for freedom was ever high and division of the land between Pakistan and India seemed inevitable.

Even before the formation of Pakistan, the probable difficulties facing the new nation were being addressed and the matter of the State Language was in the forefront. In an article appearing in *The Daily Azad*, noted educationist and linguist Dr Mohammed Shahidullah challenged the advocacy of Urdu as state language over all other spoken tongues. He, along with other figures and parties, rejected all discriminatory rhetoric regarding the official language of Pakistan. They argued the one language policy will only marginalise the minority, the very notion that the new country was hoping to eradicate.

Following separation, the language debate continued resulting in the initial days of resistance in 1948 - the one language policy being advocated and somehow forced upon the inhabitants of East Bengal (later termed as East Pakistan).

In his maiden visit to the eastern wing of the country, the founder and Governor-General of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, arrived in Dhaka on 19 March 1948. At the height of civil unrest and public opposition, on 21 March, dur-

ing a public meeting at the Racecourse Ground, he gave his historic speech in front of a crowd with high expectations.

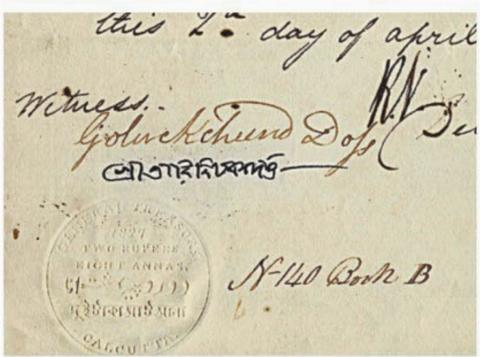
He went on to say, that the language issue has been raised to create a vision among the Muslims of Pakistan. Jinnah further reiterated the policy of the powers that be saying, "Urdu, and only Urdu" embodied the spirit of the Muslim nations.

Later Jinnah delivered a similar speech at Curzon Hall and on the radio. His stance was straightforward – an "Urdu-only" policy. He even retracted from the commitment made by Khawaja Nazimuddin with student leaders regarding the language issue. In 1952 the Language Movement saw renewed fervour and the fateful events of 21 February paved way for the establishment of Bengali as one of the state languages of Pakistan.

That was a history told time and again. Disparity was a major issue. The very idea that the whole nation will have to comply with a language foreign to them gave rise to some practical problems. In our present times, when the

Internet is accessible by the mass, it is quite difficult to fathom the impact of having only a single language in stamps, currency and so forth. It may seem quite a trivial issue but the matter was of great significance in those early days of Pakistan.

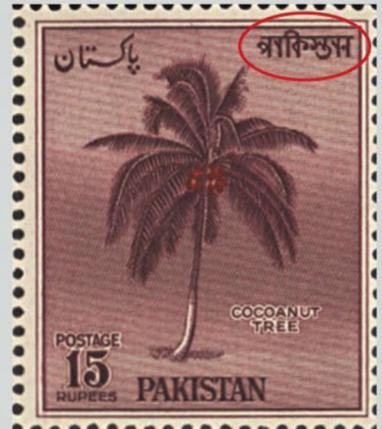
August, 1947. A new nation was born. As the two wings of the newly formed



Revenue stamps of British India (c. 1800-1873) featuring Bengali as part of the design.



Revenue stamp of Princely State of Tripura.



Postage stamps of Pakistan featuring Bengali in design. Inscriptions are deformed.



Salimullah Muslim Hall, University of Dacca. Issued between 1948-1954.