



## Bangla at the crossroads of ...

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state celebrated separation from a colonial past, Pakistan Post Office issued a special postmark to commemorate the event.

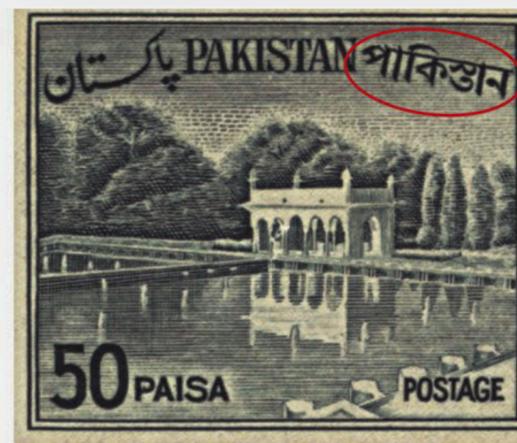
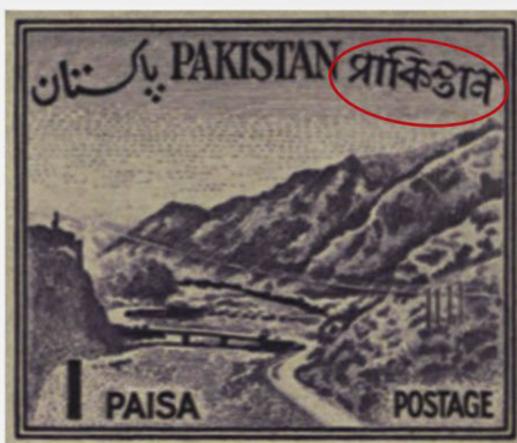
'Long Live Pakistan' it read - in English and Urdu; without incorporating Bengali, or any of the other languages of Pakistan irrespective of the fact that Urdu was never spoken by the majority of the populace.

The first postage stamp of Pakistan featuring Bengali was not issued till 1956, some good eight years after independence; a stamp depicting the country's emblematic crescent and star, and a rose along with a distorted '2 Anna' inscription in Bengali.

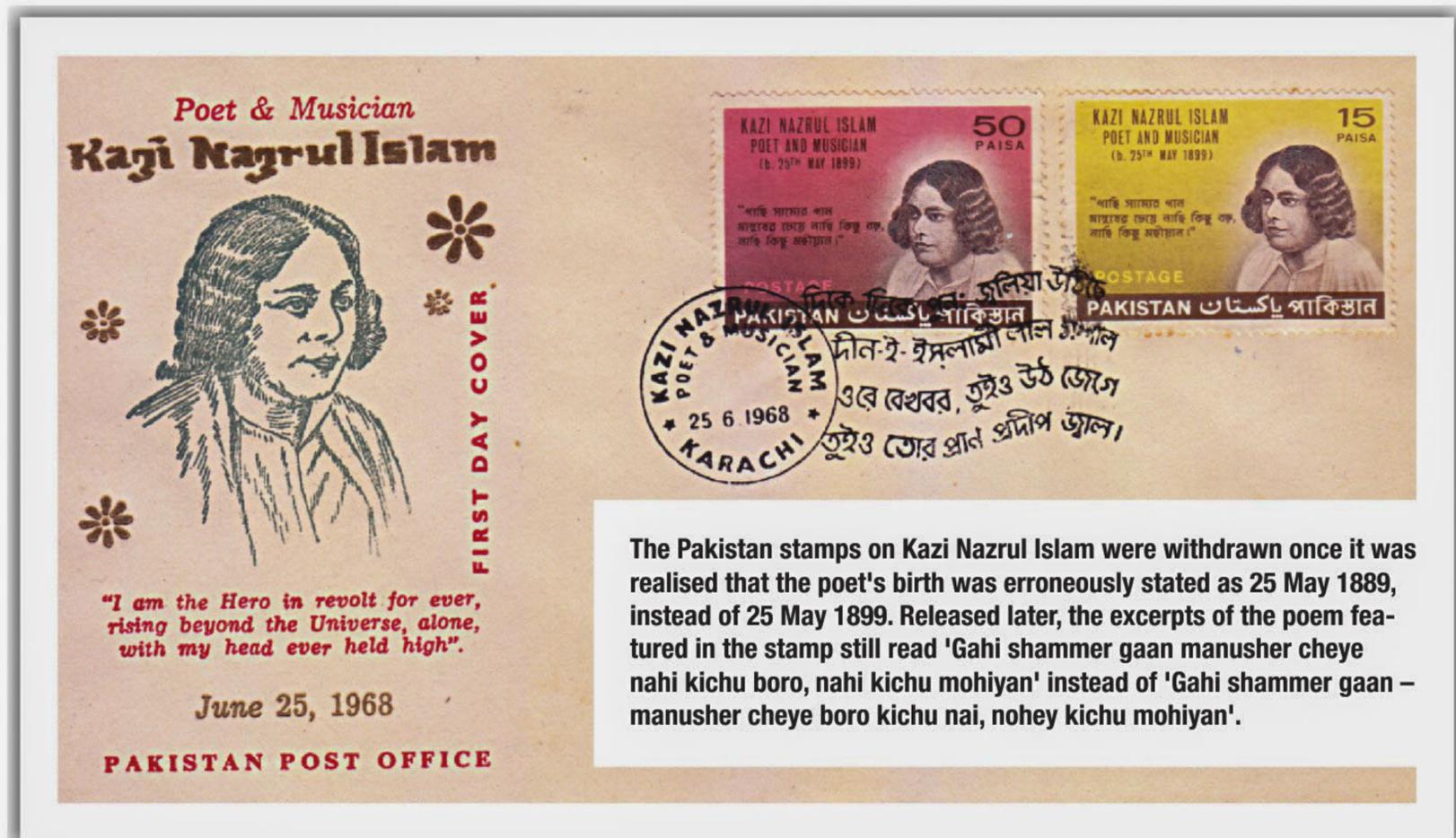
In an attempt to trace the history of Bengali language through footprints of philately, it becomes evident that although postage stamps featuring Bengali first appeared in 1956, philatelic documents related to Bengali language dates far back.

In the field of specialised stamp collecting ('philately' as it is called), although the focus is primarily on 'postage stamps', other stamp-like objects, revenue stamps for instance, are also deemed collectible.

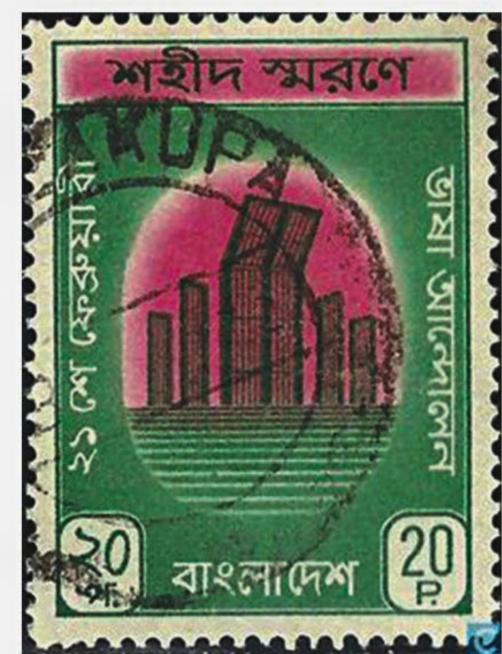
And possibly it is in revenue philately that the first documented use of Bengali is noted. Specialist collectors have in their possessions documents written in Bengali, some dating as early as the reign of the East Indian Company, when Bengal was a Presidency. Although Persian was the official language, court documents in Bengali scripts are known. The language of the people, as it seemed, was simply accepted. Tax reforms were made under the East India Company and revenue stamped paper initially issued. As the methods evolved so did means of collecting tax and between c.1800 to 1873, Bengali was featured on stamped papers of the Bengal Presidency. The same measure was continued after the shift of power from the East



Stamp issued on 21 February, 1972 commemorating the Martyrs of Language Movement.



The Pakistan stamps on Kazi Nazrul Islam were withdrawn once it was realised that the poet's birth was erroneously stated as 25 May 1889, instead of 25 May 1899. Released later, the excerpts of the poem featured in the stamp still read 'Gahi shammer gaan manusher cheye nahi kichu boro, nahi kichu mohiyani' instead of 'Gahi shammer gaan - manusher cheye boro kichu nai, nohey kichu mohiyani'.



Khyber Pass definitive stamps showing distorted Bengali script - 'Shakistan'; Inscription retouched; and normal.

India Company to the Crown.

It is interesting to note that Princely Indian States of Tripura and Cooch Behar issued their own revenue stamps in the mid-1930s. Some of these were printed from renowned printers of England, while others were produced locally. The aesthetically beautiful stamps of Tripura and

Cooch Behar lay testament to the fact that these States had considerable prominence and they highlighted their mother tongue with due fervour.

Although measures were taken to print stamps of Pakistan since day one, the government had to resort to overprinting British Indian stamps with the words 'Pakistan' in English. Unfortunately the entire consignment was damaged in an arson attack. Thus, the Pakistan Post Office decreed the use of hand-rubber stamps to overprint the word 'Pakistan'.

On 1 October, 1947 official overprints were introduced, which bore text only in English.

While Mohammed Ali Jinnah made it clear that Pakistan's official language would solely be Urdu, in 1956 Bengali was given the status of official language.

One cannot deny that Pakistan did have stamps focusing on East Pakistani themes, but the fact that the first inclusion of Bengali took eight years is simply astounding. And given the fact that first words '2 annas' were in a deformed Bengali script adds to that astonishment.

In 1962, when Pakistan moved to decimal currency a set of three stamps featuring the Khyber Pass was issued in one paisa, two paisa and three paisa denominations. All stamps featured the word 'Pakistan' in a distorted form - the Bengali

letter 'Sha' replacing 'Pa'. Thus, 'Pakistan' became 'Shakistan'! Despite fervent criticism these stamps were not withdrawn; various retouches to the die were made before issuing the stamps in the corrected script.

According to Banglapedia, during the 24 years (1947-1971), Pakistan issued 296 stamps, of which only 51 were with subjects related to East Pakistan. Up until 1971, only one Bengali personality, Kazi Nazrul Islam, was honoured.

This too, however, was also not free from controversy!

The stamps, scheduled to be issued to commemorate the poet's birth anniversary in May, were rejected before being put on sale because of an error in date. The new stamps were then issued with the necessary changes, yet the excerpt of the poem featured in the stamp remained incorrect. On 11 December 1971, the last stamp of unified Pakistan was issued in Dhaka.

Following the surrender of the Pakistan army, on 20 December, 1971 the Bangladesh Post Office became operational and orders were given to handstamp the words 'Bangladesh' in English and Bengali, on all postal emissions of the previous regime.

This continued till 29 April, 1973.

Language played an important role in shaping the political scenario of Pakistan

and the resentment felt for an unbiased acceptance fuelled our strife for freedom. On 21 February, 1972 Bangladesh issued its first commemorative stamp on Ekushey February. Interestingly enough, this first stamp featured only Bengali! And quite aptly so.

Today's generation, growing up with all sorts of electronic communication methods, remains mostly unaware of the heritage of postage system and stamps. And consequently, a large source of history that remains tangibly within our reach, often remains untapped or ignored.

For the layman from the slightly older generation, stamps evoke images of a romantic past, a childhood passion that involved fierce rivalry between friends in a quest to fill as many album pages as possible. Those who nurture this hobby beyond their teen days soon unravel that stamps, and everything related to it, are actually a witness of the past and the present, and 'philately - the study of postage stamps' is no mean feat, and certainly not a passé.

The writer is a Sub-editor at The Daily Star and a philatelist. Major references consulted were Bangladesher Dakhyabostha by Siddique Mahmudur Rahman, and Banglapedia. Special thanks to philatelists Mohammed Monirul Islam, Syed Ahsan Habib for providing images used here as illustration.