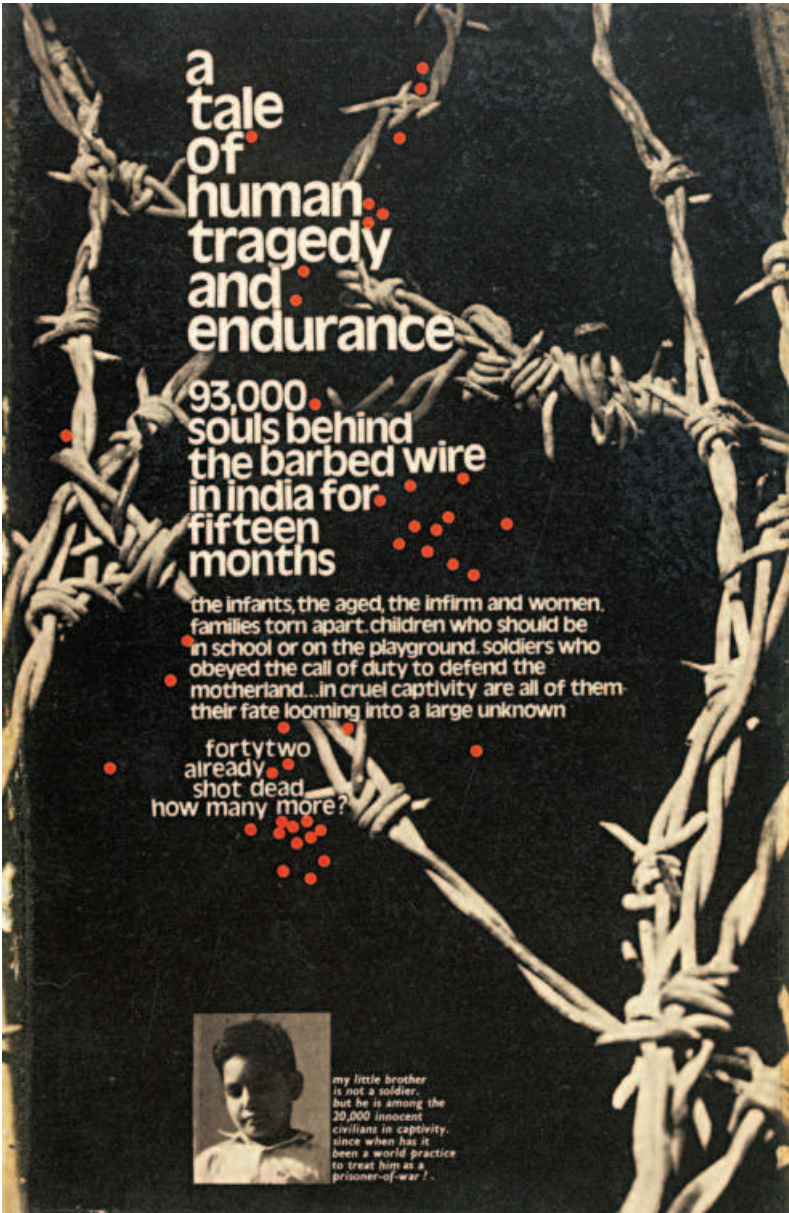
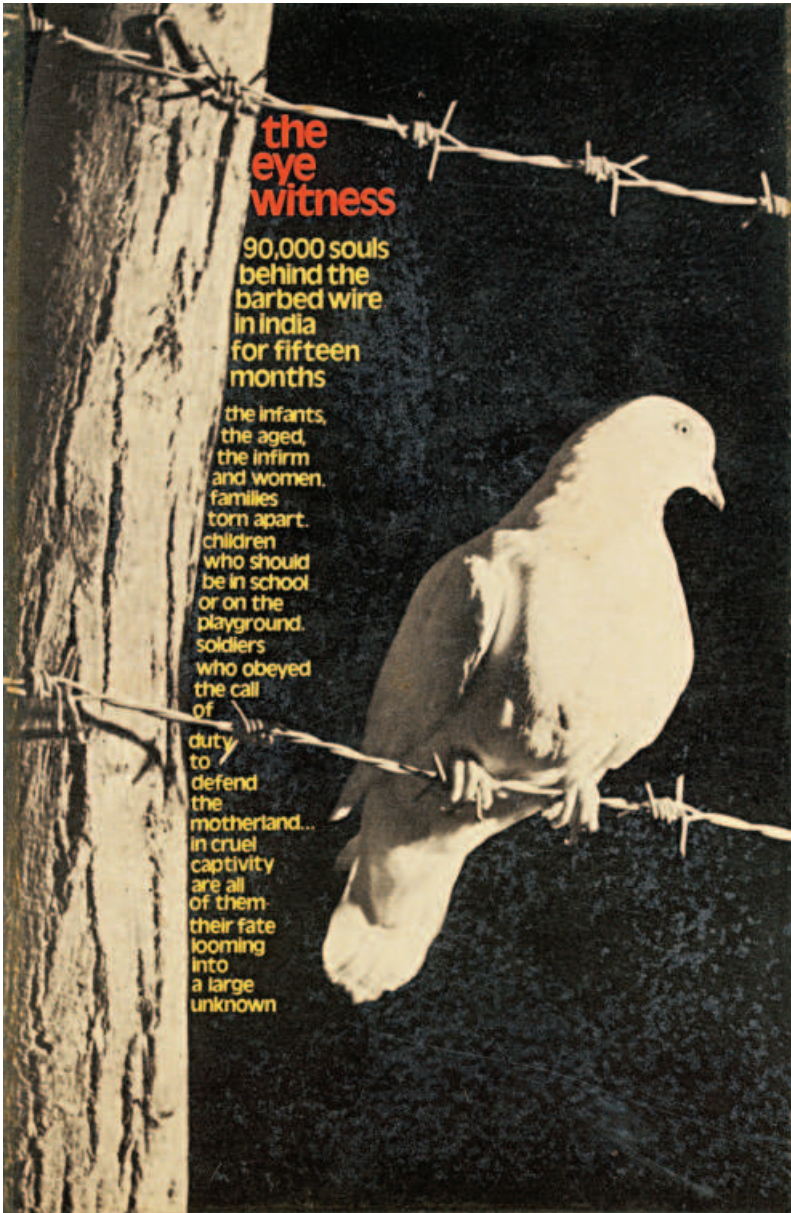




Postcard showing children appealing for the release of POWs.



Propaganda picture postcard.



Picture postcard with a propaganda message.

The war after the war: Pakistan’s POWs and postal propaganda

MANNAN MASHHUR ZARIF

The cessation of conflict on December 16, 1971 led to the surrender of the Eastern Command of the Pakistan Army, and over 90 thousand Pakistani prisoners of war (POW) were taken into custody. In the months following the laying down of arms, they were moved to Indian camps, and this sparked one of the most intense political campaigns seen in South Asia since the Partition of 1947.

For Pakistan, the defeat created a moment of national humiliation. Within the country, the government were faced with rising public rage and a sudden resurgence of talk about military accountability. There was also a growing fear within the military that the POWs might disclose details of atrocities committed by the army during the nine months of Bangladesh’s freedom struggle. Thus, it was felt that the immediate release of the POWs from Indian camps was essential to save Pakistan from further shame.

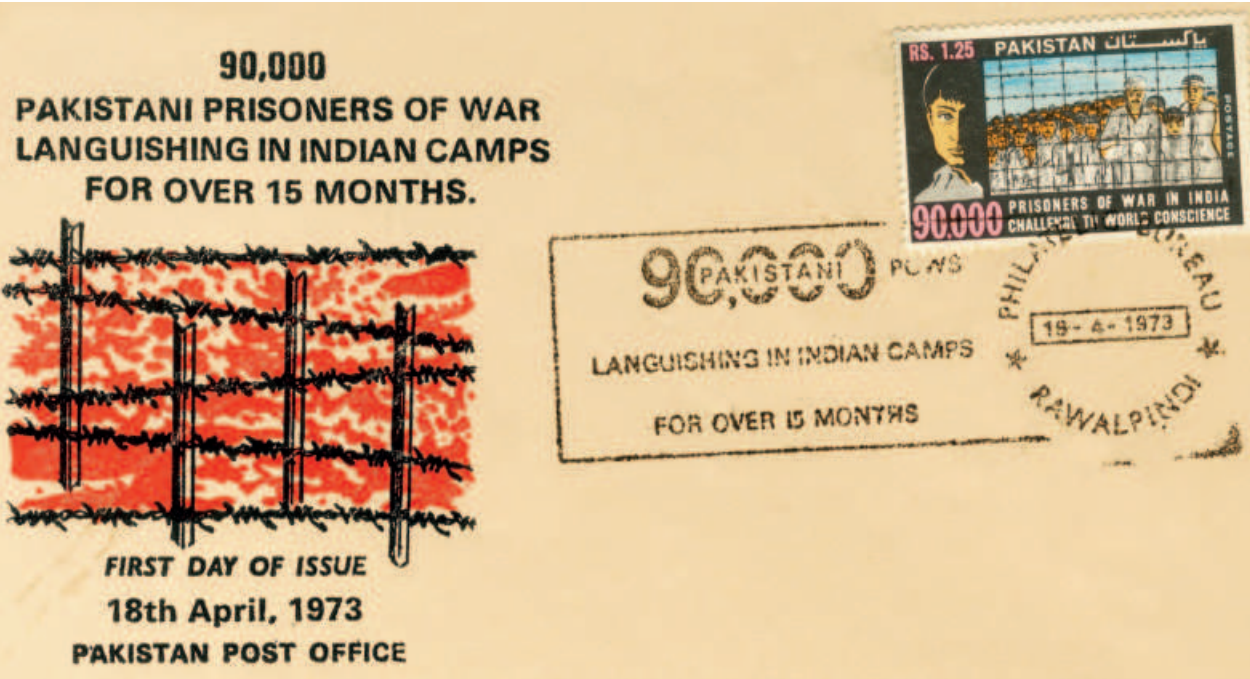


Aerogramme sent to NSW, Australia.

After the events of 1971, the country also found itself globally isolated. There was mounting worldwide sympathy for Bangladesh and India’s control of the POW talks. The international press viewed the situation not as a humanitarian concern at all, but rightly in the context of war crimes committed by an occupying army. To counter this growing pressure, the Government of Pakistan needed to construct its narrative fairly quickly.

Postal evidence supports the view that a propaganda campaign was underway as soon as the army surrendered. This was a desperate measure to address internal disputes and to regain a fast-disappearing moral stance abroad.

In mid-1973, a philatelic scheme was launched. It eventually failed to achieve its desired goal, but the stamps, postal stationery, postal markings, and picture postcards of the time remain as



First Day Cover dated April 18, 1973 from the Rawalpindi Philatelic Bureau.

documents of contemporary political history.

UNDERSTANDING PHILATELIC PROPAGANDA

Since their first issue in 1840, postage stamps have been used to indicate the prepayment of postage. Even in the early days, it was understood that because of the cross-border exchange of letters, stamps could reach wider international audiences and spread national narratives. The fact that they were widely collected meant that any information conveyed through them was preserved by collectors.

During both World Wars, the nations at war rediscovered how effectively philatelic materials could present national narratives across international audiences. The Cold War period saw a wider use of this tactic. Nations used philately to present political narratives and often to counter rival ideas. This created an international precedent for what stamps could achieve beyond their postal function.

By the time the world entered the tumultuous times of the 1970s, the use of stamps and philately as a means of spreading political messages was already an established practice. In the 1971 War, the Mujibnagar Government fully exploited this “newly discovered” tool in diplomatic warfare. It used stamps to present the case of Bangladesh, a nation desperately trying to fight a genocide and proclaim political sovereignty.

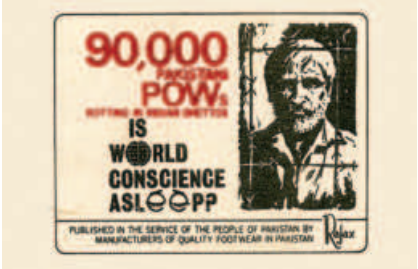
Initially, Pakistan tried to counter this clever philatelic campaign. Although late in realising its potential, post-December 1971 the country adopted its own scheme to garner international sympathy. This time, for the case of the POWs, it echoed the Cold War strategy of “rebranding” political and military failures as humanitarian tragedies.

THE CAMPAIGN

In July 1973, the Pakistan Post Office issued a special postage stamp of Rs 1.25 denomination to raise world conscience in favour of the 90,000 Pakistani prisoners of war in Indian camps.

Released on July 18, 1973, the stamp—designed by Mukhtar Ahmed, a Pakistani designer—is noteworthy—

A gloomy picture of a prison camp is shown in a rectangle on the right side of the stamp against a black background. A multitude of prisoners clad in uniform are shown standing behind a mesh of barbed wire. In the broader panel to the left of the rectangle, a sad boy is shown anxiously waiting for the return of his father. The figure 90,000 appears in pink below the figure of the boy, while



Publicity labels issued by Rajax, a footwear manufacturer.

the caption “Prisoners of War in India, Challenge to World Conscience” appears in two lines in white below the rectangle.

The accompanying First Day Cancellation reinforced the same message with the slogan, “90,000 Pakistan POWs Languishing in Indian Camps for Over 15 Months.”

On August 16, 1973, two different aerogrammes were issued, also on this topic, and their designs mirrored the urgency of the stamp—

A human hand suspended in barbed wire at the centre, the Human Rights symbol at the left, and the words “HELP RELEASE PRISONERS OF WAR 90,000” in the bottom panel. Barbed wire appears on the front in black, forming a frame line.

In addition to the stamps and postal stationery, a slogan postmark was introduced. It simply read: “90,000 POWs in Indian Camps are on World Conscience.”

The postmark is known to have been used to cancel stamps and stationery, and was also used as a transit mark on mail destined for foreign addresses. Another slogan, “HELP TO RELEASE PAKISTANI POWs,” appears in violet on some covers. This is likely of private



Propaganda stamp.

origin and possibly produced by a commercial enterprise.

Private labels amplified the campaign further. At least two commercial firms—S A Lodhy & Co. (transfer stamp manufacturers) and Rajax (manufacturers of footwear)—issued labels with similar designs, differentiated only by their imprints. Each depicts a Pakistani POW behind barbed wire, accompanied by the text: “90,000 Pakistani POWs Rotting in Indian Ghettos; is the world conscience asleep?”

A second text-only version is also known: “90,000 Pakistani POWs languishing in Indian camps for over 15 months; is world conscience asleep?” Additionally, three picture postcards were printed by Golden Block Works Ltd., Karachi, publishing the same message. The close similarity between the texts on the labels and the postcards suggests that all were commissioned from a single source—likely printed at the same Karachi press—and may have been released around July 18, 1973.

A FAILED SCHEME?

Perhaps not.

Pakistan did succeed in repatriating its nearly 90 thousand POWs without a trial for the crimes they had committed. The momentum for the return of prisoners came not from postal propaganda alone but from diplomatic channels opened through the Simla Agreement and finalised in the Delhi Agreement. The philatelic messaging ran parallel to these talks, shaping public sentiment in Pakistan but perhaps having little influence on the negotiations themselves.

As for the “misinformation campaign”, one may question how it came to be accepted internationally. While it does not explicitly ban “propaganda”, the Universal Postal Union, the specialised UN agency that serves as the central coordinating body for international postal services, has loose guidelines on what subjects are deemed acceptable on postage stamps.

Under Article 6 (Postage Stamps) of the UPU Convention, postage stamps must be “devoid of political character or of any topic of an offensive nature in respect of a person or a country”. The UPU views stamps as symbols of national identity and culture, expecting members to uphold quality and cultural relevance in their designs, discouraging “abusive” issues or those lacking postal or philatelic value, and promoting international peace through stamps.

While some renowned catalogues give September 10, 1973 as the date on which the POW stamps were withdrawn from circulation, an official directive on the matter remains untraceable. The issue is still debated among collectors of 1971 philately.

Pakistan’s philatelic campaign of 1973 stands as a compelling reminder of how states repeatedly turn to visual, easily exportable media when political narratives begin to slip beyond their control.

The POW stamp and its related postal material sought to reshape a conversation that had already been framed internationally as an issue of war crimes, not humanitarian neglect. And although the campaign did little to alter global opinion or secure early repatriation, it left behind a fascinating paper trail.

Mannan Mashhur Zarif is a journalist and a philatelist. Images are from the personal collection of the author.