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### **ORGANIZATION OF THE POSTAL SYSTEM IN INDIA: AN EVOLUTIONARY STUDY**

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#### **Abstract**

The postal system was developed throughout the world out of man's need of communication with the other. In India, also, one might have examples of sending letters from one place to the other by several means, including 'pigeon post'. However, the modern era of postal system was developed in India, through the initiatives of the foreign trading companies, especially for their business interest. With time, Indian common people accepted the system, participated at large scale as it was affordable for them, and even became a part of the system as 'runners'. The English East India Company introduced several changes from time to time through different acts and regulations. The introduction of stamps streamlined the system further, and earned quite a good amount of revenue for the administrative authority. But the most remarkable aspect of the system was its social face, offering many benefits to the common people of India.

**Keywords:** *Post, Dawk, Regulations, Stamps, Social Face.*

*Among the many things, good and bad, that the modern world has produced, surely the postal system, which covers the world, is one of its most beneficent activities.*<sup>1</sup> - Mulk Raj Anand.

The word 'Post' is derived from 'posta', a contraction for 'posita' from the Latin 'Positus', meaning 'to fix or to place'.<sup>2</sup> In the history of mankind, an urge for communicating with the distant ones was always aspired; the postal system stands out as one of the offshoots of the process. It is in this process that all the civilizations of the world have contributed some elements or the other towards the gradual improvement of the communication system, in its form and expanse. In this way, the modern age has brought the entire world inside the corner of home. The postal system, being intimately integrated to this process, underwent many changes and took a long time to reach to the destination of modern postal and communication system.<sup>3</sup>

Among the other communication media, the postal system stands out in the history of communication in colonial India, so far as the participation of the common people was concerned from the beginning. It was a sector that inevitably reshaped the daily life of colonial India, be the rulers or the ruled. The modern era of the postal service in India started with the arrival of the western trading companies, i.e. the Portuguese, the Dutch, the French and the English in this part of the world, mainly for trading activities. These companies, having understood, the inner conflict between the powerful Indian rulers, understood that they might stay longer here, even in the capacity of a ruler, to exploit the huge wealth of the region. This led to the series of politico-military conflicts among the trading companies, with or without involving the Indian rulers, aiming for the supremacy in the region. As one can understand, these tussles inevitably involved bulk of communication to be conveyed to the friend and the foe, and postal service emerged to serve the purpose. Even after the initial conflicts were subdued, the need for the maintenance of the postal service

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and its gradual development were always felt and addressed to by the rulers, both foreign and indigenous, of the region.

The postal system was generally associated in the past with confidential services, administration and with trading activities. Keeping in view their aim for growth in trade, the English decided to start their well controlled postal system as a facilitator and launched the first post office in Bombay in 1688.<sup>4</sup> The English East India Company took the positive steps in the same year and established post offices for bringing all the letters and arranging their delivery at Bombay and Madras. In the meantime in 1699, in addition to Madras and Bombay, Calcutta also became a presidency for the convenience of the English administration. An overland route for conveyance of letters between Madras and Bengal was established by the Governor at Fort St. George, Madras in 1712 A.D and within fifteen years, in 1727, the first post office in Calcutta was established.<sup>5</sup> Kalinkar Datta, in his work '*History of Bengal Subah*' cited many instances and forms of regular inland postal communication in the Nawabi period, where it was mentioned that 'in those days a distance of about 150 miles was covered in two days, 'this would be impossible under any other postal system, except regular relay and of horse post or post coaches'.<sup>6</sup>

### **Postal Service and the English East India Company: Early Phase**

The company faced some difficulties in regularizing the postal communication in this part of the world during the initial phases. As the ruler of a huge geographical landmass, they naturally needed a strong postal network for an effective administration. During the tenure of Lord Clive, as the face of the English East India Company, he tried to reorganize the postal system for the interest of the Company. However, this attempt to reorganize the postal communication system in Indian in general and Bengal in particular did not benefit the common people of the country as it was committed to the service of the officers of the Company as well as the local rich people who could afford it. With the initiatives of Robert Clive, a full-fledged organization of '*Dak*' (postal communication) within the Bengal province and from Bengal to other presidency towns like Madras and Bombay was duly established.<sup>7</sup> As a multiplier effect various local postal services emerged which became immediately popular among the consumers, i.e. the people who were in need of it. These postal services had various names such as, '*Nizamati Dak*' (generally organized by the Nawabs of Bengal between Calcutta and Mursidabad, which was in existence from the date prior to the establishment of British rule over Bengal subah continued thereafter).<sup>8</sup> '*Zamindari Dak*', '*Mahajani Dak*' before the commencement of general postal system throughout the sub-continent there were such types of postal agencies like private post and traders i.e. *mahajan*, who were the chief patrons of such operations on a large scale in different parts of the country), or '*Badshahi Dak*' (prevalent in the Awadh circle). However, the '*Riyasati Dak*' (private dawks operated by the State) who used to maintain the postal communication functional in many areas of the country and even continued till the time of the independence of India. It is to be mentioned in this context that in Hyderabad and some provinces of the south region one can find the traces of '*Nizami Post*'. The Company did not demolish these systems, but, on the contrary, they adjusted their policies in tune with those local services.

The private dawk system could not be used by the general common men of the country, but, the rulers enjoyed the system for maintaining communication with their families. The important fact was that the Company had realized very soon that they actually needed a strong postal network in the provinces as well as even for the revenue collection. There were more than one reason behind the development of postal services during the Company rule, and the reason was military necessity. Apart from that in order to maintain law and order they understood the necessity of the postal service. Warren Hastings became the first Governor-General of the English East India Company in 1773 and took special care towards reorienting the postal system during his tenure. As a corollary on 31<sup>st</sup> March, 1774 General Post office (GPO) was established at Calcutta and Mr. Redfern was appointed as the first Post Master General (Bengal Presidency), to be assisted with one Indian Deputy, one Indian Assistant, seven sorters and fifteen delivery peons initially.<sup>9</sup> The British rulers aimed at integration of the common people with the system and allowed them to take benefit of this system by sending letters to their near and dear ones. On their part, the common

people of India also understood the need of this postal communication system in tune with the gradual emergence of towns and cities throughout the country.

The English East India Company primarily started the postal service to dispatch the government post but to support the district administration which was used to be a District Post or 'Zamindari Post'. The 'District Post' was administrated by the landlords for their administrative interests. The British rulers imposed tax on the landlords in exchange of their administering the 'District Post', and the landlords realized this money from the common populace. The East India Company, in a further move to streamline their postal network, introduced the *Banghy* (parcel) post in 1825 between Bombay and Poona. Later on along with the *banghy* parcels, a bullock cart mail service was started around 1830, in Poona and Panwell (Panvel) regions.<sup>10</sup>

### **Runners: The Linkage**

'The English East India Company certainly tried to develop a nationwide postal system but they continued with the 'runner' services which were contemporary with the private *dawk* system. There were males, specially recruited for the purpose, with the attribute like physical fitness, which could function as the bridges between two ends, carrying the messages in forms of letters or notes, from one end to the other. The imperial and commercial interests of the company necessitated creation of proper postal communication centering Calcutta during 1775 A.D.<sup>11</sup> At its initial stage the postal communication system was very much dependent on the 'runners', and thus in postal history they were "living newspapers".<sup>12</sup> With time, the revolution of transport service through land and water, like the making of newer roadways, the steamship service as well as the introduction of railways at a later stage, there was a complete reorientation of the communication sector. As it is universally accepted that there was plurality in Indian society, and one of its components, i.e. caste, touched the 'runners' also. The runners were generally from poor and needy outcaste families, even from the tribes and they were paid very less and did not able to get minimum respect for rendering their service. Geoffrey Clarke, Director General of Post, (1919-21) narrated his experience on this issue, old pictures of messengers generally show them carrying a long pole, sometimes the letter is struck in a craft at the end of the pole. In this way, the lowly could deliver it to a high person without defiling either the messenger or its receiver.<sup>13</sup>

Though in some provinces the postal men were considered as family members to the common people, they were also considered as the most valuable linkages for the military staffs also who remained in distant places during their tenure of service. It is to be mentioned in this connection that at a later period high postage rates and lesser salary made the government runners start distributing private posts by charging lesser amount.

### **Postal Service and the English East India Company: Later Phase**

There was no general postal system in Indian sub-continent prior to 1837 A.D., and the common people did not have any access to the said service. It was generally for the police stations and the administrative headquarters, and for the local zamindars.<sup>14</sup> There were two types of letters, one with red ink stamp on the cover (fully paid) and the other with stamp in black ink (the unpaid ones). It should be mentioned that letters with stamp in red ink with the word 'free' was exclusively for the Company officials. It was generally known as "franking" and the Company officials as well as their servants had also enjoyed the service to some extent.<sup>15</sup> In the lower provinces of Bengal the postal communication between each police *thannah* and the *sudder* station of the districts was generally monitored by the zamindars under the provisions of Regulation XX (1817 A.D.). During the initial phase the posts were not open to the 'native' community, who were consequently obliged to communicate through more circuitous routes, even where a district postal communication existed.<sup>16</sup> The Indian rulers had their own postal stamps, with an imprint of the ruler's photograph. In order to keep their separate identities each and every state painted its post-box in different colors from the others. This practice ultimately brought many shades of colors which got integrated with the postal system of India since its early days. An English private postal company named *M/s Rozarion/Rosario*, had open their own post office in Calcutta in 1829, they used to charge one *anna* for

each *tola* of a letter's weight.<sup>17</sup> Authorized by the British East India Company, *Mr. Bacon* had started a mail service between Calcutta and Diamond Harbour towards the end of eighteenth century.<sup>18</sup>

The Act, passed on 24<sup>th</sup> July 1837 by Lord Auckland, and effected from 1<sup>st</sup> October of the same year, repealed the Dawk Regulation XI 1830 (Bombay). By this regulation all the private dawk systems were abolished. Sir Rowland Hill introduced the new system of postage rate to the said system. The British Government sought to introduce the same in this sub-continent with immediate effect, but that was not easy considering the socio-economic condition of the country.

Lord Dalhousie became the Governor General of India in 1848. It was him who streamlined the postal sector to a great extent. He not only followed the policy of expansion but at the same time he had modernized the sector. In Bengal Presidency the District Post was made available to the public in 1850 AD.<sup>19</sup> It is interesting to note in this connection that the numbers of letters written in Indian languages were not at all negligible; and it was only in Calcutta that those exceeded the European letters by about one-third by 1850 AD.<sup>20</sup> During 1851 in Bengal, besides Calcutta GPO and its 'Receiving Houses' there were seventy-four principal and seventy subordinate offices.<sup>21</sup> The chart given below will show the equation.

Provinces	Post Offices	Receiving Houses
Bengal	157	13
Madras	130	20
Bombay	107	12
North West Province	251	10

(Annual Report of Post Office, 1855-56, p.3)<sup>22</sup>

It is in this context that the postal sector flourished with the help of the 1854 regulation of Lord Dalhousie. The enactment of Post Office Act, 1854 had two significant aspects.<sup>23</sup> First it heralded the introduction of postage stamps on all-India basis; and secondly, it established a total monopoly of the Government in regard to the management of the post offices and the exclusion of competition from the private players in the sector dedicated to the transference of letters, the postal privilege as it was called.<sup>24</sup>

### **Postage Stamps**

The growing grievances among the people of India, often taking the shapes of revolts against the English East India Co. made the Company feel the need to strengthen as well as streamline the postal system thoroughly. Postage stamps provide important landmarks in the history of nations. That is why with a close scrutiny aiming towards the systematic development of the sector, many new elements were introduced into the postal system among which the introduction of postage stamps (1852), the 'Scinde Dawk Stamp' was one of the most important one. Along with the introduction of postage stamp came the fixation of postage rates for letters.<sup>25</sup> The Indian post office was recognized as a separate organization with national importance. It was then placed under a unitary control of a Director General of the Post Office in India. On 1<sup>st</sup> October 1854 the first postage stamp was issued in all India basis.<sup>26</sup> With the new regulations the post offices flourished in different parts of India to a great extent. With time, the stamps started to be printed with the emblem of Her Majesty Queen Victoria. That served as the sign of legitimacy for the common people who started to trust the functioning of the post office gradually. The uniform rate of postage was imposed which made the system popular further.

### **Social Face of the Post**

Gradually many novel schemes were introduced in the Department of Post such as 'Money Order', 'Value Payable', and 'Certificate Scheme' etc., which undoubtedly attracted common people. A massive change can be noticed in the postal sector of colonial India with the introduction of railways in 1853. The Railway Mail Service (RMS) was introduced in 1864 followed by the 'Value Payable' (V.P.) system in 1877 and last but not the least, the launching of the 'Post Cards' in 1879, certainly to remain for long as the lifeline of the postal communication system in the country. The other landmark in the said sector was the introduction of 'Money Order' system during 1880, which ensured a safe passage for transferring money



to a distant place within India. Post office Savings Bank in 1882, Postal Life Insurance in 1884 added newer dimensions to the postal sector and made it more and more a reliable institution of British India. The reliability as well as the reach of the postal service emerged so fast that during 1892 the post-offices were entrusted with the assignments of selling 'quinine' to counter malaria as an epidemic.<sup>27</sup> Thus, with the gradual development of a social face, the postal service in colonial India not only developed just as a sector of communication, but it also got integrated with the administration in such a way where the common people of India participated largely.

## Conclusion

The postal system of India is a part of the story of development of communication in this part of the world. The vast British Empire and their officials genuinely needed a strong and effective line of communication for the need for the sake of the running of the administration. It has been an important public sector, closely associated with common people which emboldened the presence of the colonial rule in India. On the other hand with the introduction of organized communication sector comprising of the railways, the telegraph and the postal service, the Indians, classes along with the masses, anticipated the potential of it in realizing the 'self rule'. But the postal service, because of its affordability, expanse and personal touch, soon became a tool for the ruled, an alternative which could lead them to self-sufficiency in thought and resultant action.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup>Anand, Mulk Raj ed. (1987) *Story of the Indian Post Office*, Akshar Printers, p. 1
- <sup>2</sup>Majumdar, Mohinilal. (1995) *Early History and Growth of Postal System in India*, RDDHI-India, p.3
- <sup>3</sup>Khatua M.K. (1998) *The Evolution of Postal System Nepex-98*, North Eastern Philatelic Exhibition, p. 17
- <sup>4</sup>Ahmed H. Noor. (1995) *India Post Through Ages*, Postal History Society India, p. 16
- <sup>5</sup>Mazumdar, Mohinilal. (1999) *The Imperial Post Offices of British India*, Volume II, Phila Publications, p.6
- <sup>6</sup>Datta, Kalikinkar. (1936) *Studies in the History of the Bengal Subah 1740-1770*, pp. 413-415
- <sup>7</sup>Home Department (Public) Proceedings, 24<sup>th</sup> March, 1766, p. 350. NAI, New Delhi
- <sup>8</sup>Banerji, C.R. (1968) *Postal service in Calcutta*, Calcutta GPO Centenary (1868-1968), p. 24
- <sup>9</sup>Chattopadhyay, Basudeb. (2004) *A Jingle of Bells*, K P Bagchi & Co., p.37
- <sup>10</sup>*Bombay Dock (1830) Regulation I*. NAI, New Delhi
- <sup>11</sup>Ahmed H. Noor. *India Post through Ages*, p. 63
- <sup>12</sup>Majumdar, Mohinilal, *Early History and Growth of the Postal System in India*, p. 11
- <sup>13</sup>Zilliaccus, Laurin. (1956) *From Pillar to Post*, London, William Heinemann, p. 27
- <sup>14</sup>Nair, Vijaykumaran K.C. (2018) *From Mail to Email*, Blue Rose Publisher, p. 34
- <sup>15</sup>Hamilton Ivie G.J. (1910) *An Outline of Postal History and Practice, with a History of the Post Office of India*, Thacker Spink and Co., p. 151
- <sup>16</sup>*Report of Post Office Commissioners 1852*, p. 99. NAI, New Delhi
- <sup>17</sup>*Samachar Darpan*, June 6, 1829 AD, National Library, Kolkata
- <sup>18</sup>Ahmed H. Noor, *India Post Through Ages*, p. 20
- <sup>19</sup>*Report of Post Office Commissioners, 1852*, p. 100. NAI, New Delhi
- <sup>20</sup>Banerji, C. R. (1968) 'Postal service in Calcutta', *Calcutta GPO Centenary (1868-1968)*, pp. 26-27
- <sup>21</sup>*Report of Post Office Commissioners, Annual Report of Director General of Post Offices, 1852-53*, p. 100. NAI, New Delhi
- <sup>22</sup>Ahmed, H. Noor. *India Post Through Ages*, p.49
- <sup>23</sup>A.R.P.O 1855-56, p. 1. NAI, New Delhi
- <sup>24</sup>Leg. Papers of Indian Post Office Act, 1854, p. 147. NAI, New Delhi
- <sup>25</sup>Clarke, Geoffrey. (1921) *The post office of India and its story*, John Lane The Bodley Head, p.32
- <sup>26</sup>Anand, Mulk Raj. (1987) *Story of the Indian Post Office*, p. 10
- <sup>27</sup>Singh, Arvind Kumar. (2009) *India Post: A Journey through Ages*, p.475

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