
Running through the Ages: Postal Service in Colonial India and the 'Runners', an Intimate Engagement

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Abstract: From the very beginning of the Post Office of India or, better to say from its inception there was the term; 'runner' deeply associated with the sector of service. In India, 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 most remarkable aspect of the system was its social face, offering many benefits to the common people of India. In such a different manner that the runner who became the postal peon in later phase gradually assumed to be one of the family member. Who can spread joy or, sorrow with the news on their hand to the entire community. Putuna Mura, the character of recent times actually acted in the society in that way with all the responsibility on her shoulder towards the community regarding the communication.

Keywords: Communication, Crisis, Modernity, Post, Runner, Putuna Mura etc.

Date of Submission: 14-06-2023

Date of Acceptance: 20-06-23

Introduction

Development in the communication system from the earliest seems like the story which we all used to hear from our elders in our childhood. Like the fairy tales there are mention about the king, messenger, informer, intelligence, loot and plunder throughout the entire history of

Running through the Ages: Postal Service in Colonial India and the 'Runners', an Intimate Engagement

communication. 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. As a province, Bengal was also under the development of the communication scenario, with all its possibilities and transformation. 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 the 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.

Objective of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the value of postal services during the Colonial period in India and how it affected the society. This study's central research question is: an inevitable portion of the service commonly known as the runner who became *dak*-peon in the later phase, and their contribution. Putuna Mura can be stated as the part of such mentioned service, who indeed served the postal department from quite a long time in spite of every obligation.

Methodology

To evaluate the background of the postal service as it has appeared.

To explore the evolution of the postal service under the British East India Company to the Crown.

To mark the runners and their duties in present day as it appears. 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 private postal system as a facilitator and launched the first post office in Bombay in 1688.

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 private postal system as a facilitator and launched the first post office in Bombay in 1688. 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

Running through the Ages: Postal Service in Colonial India and the 'Runners', an Intimate Engagement

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.ⁱⁱ Kalikinkar 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'.ⁱⁱⁱ

The word 'Post' is derived from '*posta*', a contraction for '*posita*' from the Latin '*Positus*', meaning 'to fix or to place'.⁴ 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.⁵

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 established⁶. 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.⁷),

Running through the Ages: Postal Service in Colonial India and the 'Runners', an Intimate Engagement

'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 patrons¹ 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 31st March, 1774 General Post office (GPO) was established at Calcutta and, Mr. Redfern was appointed as the first Post Master General, to be assisted with one Indian Deputy, one Indian Assistant, seven sorters and fifteen delivery peons initially.⁸ 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

Running through the Ages: Postal Service in Colonial India and the ‘Runners’, an Intimate Engagement

with the *Banghy* parcels, a bullock cart mail service was started around 1830, in Poona and Panwell regions.⁹

The ‘Runners’

‘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.¹⁰ At its initial stage the postal communication system was very much dependent on the ‘runners’, and thus in postal history they were “living newspapers”¹¹ 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.¹²

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.

However, it was during the British rule that the ‘dawk’ system formalised the designation of ‘runner’ and paid these men according to the distance travelled and the weight of the letters carried. According the available information, in Madras Presidency Governor Edward Harrison first started a Company Postal Service to carry mail to Bengal. The relay system was also introduced at this time—a runner would run a stipulated number of miles, and hand over his mailbag to a waiting runner at a designated time and place. Relays of

Running through the Ages: Postal Service in Colonial India and the 'Runners', an Intimate Engagement

runners can be managed by local authorities simply by agreeing on some rule to transfer bundles between groups of runners. The overriding reason for sending out these foot-soldiers of the postal service was the inaccessibility of the regions they served.

Possibly on account of a plentiful supply of cheap labour, professional runners drawn from lowly classes or tribes were widely employed in colonial India in relays each of eight to ten miles. Trained from their youth, these *dak* runners would speed bare foot, carrying a staff with tassels and metal bells whose tinkling would announce their approach and scare away animals. They were accorded right of way and would sometimes be accompanied by a torch bearer and drummers. This however did not prevent them from being attacked by wild beasts, snakes and robbers. Nor did they necessarily refrain from carrying messages for other clients such as landowners and merchants or even rival princes, much like couriers today. They were neutral and not everyone grudged them a little extra income, their hallmark being integrity of service rather than loyalty to a single client.

Rudyard Kipling, in his poem '*The Overland Mail*' (1886), painted a picture of the mail-runners from different areas and the integrity showed by them during the execution of their assignments. He wrote,

Is the torrent in spate? He must ford it or swim.
Has the rain wrecked the road? He must climb by the cliff.
Does the tempest cry halt? What are tempests to him?
The Service admits not a "but" or and "if."
While the breath's in his mouth, he must bear without fail,
In the Name of the Empress, the Overland Mail.¹³

Putuna Mura, the lady presently appointed at the Ajodhya Hill Top Branch Post Office, Purulia, West Bengal. She gets her appointment after the sudden demise of her husband, Buddheswar Mura with no other alternative in front her. Although it was tough to perform her duty with her child in the home in such a crisis, there were so many obstacles appeared before her as hurdle in performing the duty. One can find the actual picture from the Bengali poem 'Runner' by Sukanta Bhattacharya, where he expressed the feelings, obstacles, dangers faced by the community regarding perform their duty-

“Oh, Runner...

No one will ever know of your pain or your plight

Running through the Ages: Postal Service in Colonial India and the 'Runners', an Intimate Engagement

Your story will be a secret of the dark black night..."¹⁴

There was severe pressure on the shoulder of the delivery peon Putuna Mura, although in recent times the lack of letters and articles was felt by her. Instead of those the number was increased in the volume of Aadhar Card, parcel etc. but, due to the incensement in public courier services the Department of Post recently lost the dignity. She has uttered during the interview that even she performed her duty in the crisis but the Department never fulfilled her requirements. For which she was very much upset, she uttered furthermore that during the duty she has faced danger of wild animals, lonely paths, dacoits etc. even she faced threat from the Maoist people also. In the initial stage during the joining she was forced to carry her only 1 year old son along with her and three daughters at her home but, never step back in performing the duty with such excuse. Putuna is a surviving relic of this virtually defunct institution whose roots lie deep in the country's postal past. In Bengal the tribulations of these tireless messengers traversing miles on foot their bells jingling through the stillness of the night delivering the mails and messages in remote regions and covering stipulated distances with strict timeframes. During her service for more than 30-35 years she is delivering letters on foot near about 15-20 kilo-meters per day. The area of Ajodhya Hill and the surrounded villages such as, Borgora, Chatrajera, Usul-Dungri, Saparmera under Baghmundi-Block, Purulia District has enjoyed her deliberate communication service for long time. According to her she worked for about 12 hours a day in many occasion. Starting from morning 7 a.m., when she steps out from her tiny mud house covered by palm leaves and hops across the branch post office beyond the dirt road to evening 7 p.m. to perform the duty. Huge workload never succeeded to restrict her back from the duty. Even at the beginning due to her illiteracy she was not able to read the address on those letters though after asking the villagers she delivered the letters to assigned addresses, never ever missed a single one. As per her words it was perhaps 1988/1990 when she joined the duty, in her long career she has faced wild beasts, dacoits, Maoist in the remote hilly path from where she managed to escape applying her presence of mind. An interesting fact she revealed that during the British period their ancestral, Khepu Mura performed duty as runner under the Raj and from that from time they are in the said profession by almost heredity. She has joined in the sector with the minimum 600 rupees monthly wage, from where she made some progress of course with time but, according to her that was not enough. She urges through the interview for some Government scheme or help for the rest of her life. The Purulia District Authority expressed

Running through the Ages: Postal Service in Colonial India and the 'Runners', an Intimate Engagement

their gratitude with giving her Certificate of Excellence, but she urges for something more for her bravery and contribution towards the sector of communication¹⁵.

Conclusion

It has been remarked that '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.'¹⁶ The quote clearly indicates the value of the postal system in general, with which one can assume the possibilities and scope of the sector. 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. In which the runner or the delivery persons was very much crucial as the sector itself. As a matter of fact Putuna also utters her realization about the future of her service like the others. Because the gradual fall in the sector, she expressed with sorrow that nowadays very less quantity of letters are there to deliver, some kind of Governmental correspondences and some parcels are only for deliver. She blamed the cellular phone, computer, internet etc. for the dissolution of the Postal services. Obviously once the massive sector of communication step back gradually with the development of telegraph, railways, telephone and now mobile phone, computer, internet etc., which was in true sense make the transformation from 'mail to e-mail.' Well indeed the scope was very much limited for the people like Putuna Mura who have been serving the sector for a long time.

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Running through the Ages: Postal Service in Colonial India and the 'Runners', an Intimate Engagement

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