
Postal Communication during Ancient and Medieval Period in India

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Introduction:

Communication is central to all human activities and is an integral part of one's life. It is an essential dimension for meaningful coexistence and harmonious group living. Communication is a dynamic two way process in which two or more people share or exchange ideas, information, knowledge attitudes or feelings through certain signs and symbols. The functions it performs are many, but the primary ones are those of informing, educating, persuading and entertaining.

A quaint feature is the element of romanticism evident in most forms of communication adopted in ancient India one comes across messages written on leaves and stones, preserved as visual relics of an era when images and symbolic representations were the order of the day than the emotive method of communication through music. Most unique to this country is her wealth of oral communication weaved within narratives and carried down generations as part of oral histories. Many of the old Hindu scriptures carry reference to such remarkable '**carriers**' of message. The '*Rigveda*' cites the use of the dog called '*Sarama*' to carry message, even as the '*Atharvaveda*' records the use of couriers, going by the term '*Palagala*'.

The '**Ramayan**' cites instances of Hanuman being sent by Ram to convey message. In '**Mahabharata**' many evidences are there to convey message as **Swan** being **used to convey the message of love** from prince Nal to princess Damayanti. **Chanakya's** '*Arthasastra*' also calls attention to the efficient manner of collecting information and revenue data using **doots** who doubled up as spies for the kings.

Ample evidences are there where **birds and animals are used** as message carriers as homing **pigeon** (earliest times in India), **camels in desert area**, and **horses (during Ashoka in the 4th century B.C.)**

Then, of course, there is the legendary mail runner, or Harkara. The customary jingle of bell as the runner hastens along to ensure a speed delivery of the Letters, has stoked the passions of many a poet, writer and artists, who have eulogized the **mail runner**. At the outset, the mail or *Dak* runner

was used **by kings** and military commanders for purposes of information, missives and royal correspondence.

One of the earliest evidence of a systematic postal service using foot messengers is found during the reign of Chandragupta Maurya (322-298 B.C). He divided his empire into units and placed each of them under a provincial governor. The difficulty of communication between the capital city and the provincial capitals was solved by the use of pigeon post. The letters in little cachets were tied to the feet of trained pigeons which were made to fly to specific destinations and thus important messages were sent, Emperor **Ashoka** (277-268 B.C.) devised a very **efficient means of communication** that proved to be the *raison d'être* for his success in building a vast empire, using a combination of **mail runners, horse couriers, pigeon carriers and camels for official communication**. This was exemplary of how an efficiently operated communication system gave that much needed fillip to effective governance and the extra edge to an aggressive ruler, even in the ancient times.

The origin of the postal system **during the Muslim rule** can be traced to the conquest of Sind by the Arab ruler of **Iraq, Mohammad bin Qasim**, in 712 A.D. The special **horse couriers** carried letters from caliph to Qasim on every third day and from Iraq to Sind in seven days. The Diwan-i-Barid (Department of posts) was established. The **Caliph Muawiyah** (602-680) is **considered the first ruler to have established the Department of posts or *Diwan-i-Barid*** for official communication throughout his far-flung caliphate. The ***Barid* which means a “post animal”, “Post horse”, “Courier” or institution of ‘Post’ was used primarily for imperial communication**. These postal services extended across the Hindukush in the north as far as Kabul and Delhi in the South, with 930 post stations along six routes from Bagdad to Indian. In these routes horses were used for these purposes.

The Empires of the Han chinese, Romans, Kushans, Mauryas and Greeks provide a safe route for traders to travel. They encouraged long distance trade and speedy communication. In the ancient period when external influences were primarily through overland trade and incursions the swiftness of the **horse messengers played a key role in communication**. **Mahmud of Ghazni** (1001-1025) established an elaborate network of foot messengers. Those for intelligence gathering were called '**Sarran**' and horse couriers for urgent missives were called 'Khail Sarran' paid bonuses for their special service. A mounted courier service called '**Askudars**' conveyed private correspondence of important chieftains and also the official correspondence. Each province had a postal headquarter overseen by a **post master called ‘Sahib-i-Barid’**. His importance in the

administrative hierarchy is evident from the responsibilities bestowed upon him-administrative report of the province, and conduct of the military officers. The '*Sahib-i-Risalat*' who was the head of the correspondence department, functioned as the emissary of the conqueror receiving information through postal agencies and acting upon them.

Under Mohammad of Ghor (1186-1206)

The Arabic model of postal system was adopted by Mohammad of Ghor. *Dhawahs* (runners), *Qasids* (messengers) and *Ulagh/Ulaq's* (horse couriers) took precedence, even over the '*Khola*' or secret service agent employed by the Pala administration in Bengal. These were more in the nature of news couriers, the '*dhawa*' doubling up as errand boys, and the messengers acting as conduits for forward transmission of messages. The Camel riding, couriers were called '*Jamaza*'.

- **Qutbuddin Aibak (1208-1210)**

A messenger post system was introduced by Qutbuddin Aibak that was later expended into the *Dak Chowkis* by this successor, Allauddin Khilji.

- **Genghis Khan (1221-1226)** established the '**Horse post House**' or **yamb messenger system found at** a distance of every 25 miles. In between, were intermediary posts, which also served as sleeping quarters of the imperial foot runners, furnished with bells on their girdle. The runners were each assigned a 3-mile stretch, operating on a relay system, thus covering a ten days journey in one. Though the period of Mongol influenza was confined to a small time frame and terrain in India, the foundations of the first international postal system was being laid.
- **Under Allauddin Khiliji (1292-1318)** – A horse and foot-posts runner prices service was established in 1296 primarily for latest military news and prices of commodities. Horses were stationed at every '*manzil*' and '*dhawahs*' appointed every half a kos or one fourth of a kos (2 miles). A postal Department called '*Mahakama-i-Barid*' under the supervision of two postal officers '*Maalik Barid-i-Mamalik*' (Minister of state News Agency) and his deputy '*Naib Barid-i-Mamlik*' fulfilled the dual needs of *barid* (post) and espionage.
- **Mohammad Bin Tughla (1325-1351)** The postal system has been referred as '**Barid** by Ibn Batuta'. The two types of postal communications were clearly demarcated as the '*Barid-i-Khail*' or horse post that operated the *Ulagh* service and the '**Barid-i-Rajalah**' or foot post functioning as the *Dhawah*. The *ulagh* or the horse post was run by royal horses stationed at a distance of every 4 *kroh* or 8 miles, the horsemen who carried letters being called '*Wulaq*' villages at each third of a *Kroh* served as postal stations or *dhawas*.

The use of camel post is to be noted. In particular it was in use for conveying news from Jajnagar (Orissa) to Delhi, and also between Sind and Gujarat. This also refutes the age-old supposition that Akbar was the first to employ camel post in India. Under Sultan Sikandar Lodi (1489-1517) *Dak Chawkis* throughout the territory served an efficient communication system, official letters were conveyed by runners and horse couriers. Although we find the continuance of the horse courier and foot-relay postal system through eight dynasties of rule, from 1001 to 1526 when the Lodhi dynasty fell through, only the above mentioned rulers made contribution to the communication system. **It was under the Turks that a somewhat concrete communication network was laid with the construction of paved roads, bridges, milestones, *dak-chawkis* and rest houses called *sarais*.** Also new couriers were introduced. There also developed a more uniform system of remuneration for the postal couriers.

Medieval India (1030-1757 AD)

With the advent of the Mughals, came a turning point in the history of Indian postal communications. For, this was the period, when the foundation of a unified communication system was laid.

Under Sher Shah Suri (1540-1545)

The Suri dynasty of the Pashtuns from northern India may have been an aberration of the Mughal period, but proved to be a boon for the postal history of medieval Indian. In the short span of a 5-year rule (1540-1545) Sher Shah Suri established the foundations of a mounted post or horse courier system, wherein conveyance of letters was also extended to traders. This is the first known record of the postal system of a kingdom being used for non-state purposes (trade and business communication). Sher Shah's administrative reforms were so well integrated with the postal system, that it rightly earned the place of the first officially recorded mounted post in India. It is said that he kept 3,400 horses with riders exclusively for the dispatch of news. The existing **Dak-runner-system** was revamped, with two horse couriers stationed at every 2 mile-distance for speedy conveyance of official and trade correspondence. A total of 1700 post houses with 3400 post messengers have been recorded.

As a **great postal administer** **Ator Sher Shah established a self sustaining postal system.** The entire postal system was under supervision of the *Darogah-I-Dak* and the *Darogah-I-Dak Chawki*, superintendent of postal Department. He served also as Director of Post Houses,

receiving the administrative dispatched for conveyance to the ruler. The department of correspondence was overseen by the *Dewan-I-Isha* who issued letters and royal firmeans, forwarding the same for transmission to the *Darogah-I-Dak Chawki*. These imperial firmeans and correspondence were served by **Mir Munshis, the Head Clearks.**

Mughal Period (1030-1757 AD)

Babur (1526-1530) developed the speed and efficiency of the horse courier system along the north-western route of **Kabul-Agra** to serve the postal and army link with his capital at Agra, in 1527. At distances of **18th Kuroh, a yaub, a Dak Chawki and 6 post horses** were kept fastened, and arrangement was made for payment of **Post-masters and grooms, as well as for the horse-corn.** During this period the department of **post and intelligence** is known as *Darogah-I-Dak Chowki*. This postal system followed throughtout the empire, with a **large no of postal officers** under the *Darogah-I-Dak Chawki*, was called *Diwan-I-Insa*. The chief Darogah or postmaster juggled his duties, acting as overseer of postal conduit posings, ensuring steady supply of dak runners, couriers and Jasus, coordinating the news gathering from far-flung provinces and the functions of the two post-house clerks called *tariq-navis*. Mail of the Mughal ruler and those of the military, administration and commerce, were carried by runners and mounted couriers. During times of emergency, the messages were borne by carriages drawn by fast stallions. These were however used specially for conveying express news of the state. In deserts, camels were used, where they were trained to run at great speeds. A postal runner began his journey with a written permit (Signed and sealed) by the *Darogh-I-Dak-Dhawki* (Chief of Postal Department) which made it obligatory for **Faujdar, who provided safe** passage through their area of supervision. The return journey permit was sanctioned by the *sawnih-navis*.

Humayau During the period of Humayau, the same postal system was continued.

Jalaluddin Mohammed Akbar (1556-1605). The system of *Dawk-Chawki* was established to procure and transmit secret news and messages along the different *dawk* routes. The chief Darogh or postmaster networked and administered the news gathering and postal communications, serving the dual needs of espionage and administration. A Darogh supervised operations at the *Dak Chowki* and a *Nazir* took charge at every *pargana* level. The *Darogah-I-Dawk* chawki at the headquarters of a province or *pargana*, exercised complete sway over his domain. *Dawk Chowkis* having two horses in each were established throughout his country and a set of *Meova* (*Mehvas*) footman were stationed at every five miles on the important roads with Turkish swift horses at each stage. There were 4,000 meal carriers.

Jahangir's (1605-1627) chief contribution to postal history is with respect to his ascendancy over Bengal in eastern India. He appointed the *Darogah* or superintendent of the *Dak chowki* for receipt and dispatch of letters to and from Dhaka capital of Bengal since 1610, at every provincial headquarters. The pigeon post was also introduced for carrying messages from Bengal to Orrisa and Rajmahal to Murshidabad.

Under Shahjahan's rule (1627-1658) more no. of *chowkis* was established. Ruler related to postal laws and orders were enforced during the period of Aurangzeb (1658-1707). Postal runners were bound by structures that dictated a minimum postal mileage of *Jaribi Kuroh* in one *ghari* (hour), failing which a penalty was imposed, equaling a quarter of their salary.

Conclusion:

During, (1030-1757.AD) the period of Muhgal rule in India left its indelible mark on not only the arts and culture of the land, but also laid the foundations of an organized postal administration in India. From a parochialistic system of postal government, there emerged an expansive system of district region operations controlled by a centralized postal authority.

Till early medieval period postal communication was for exclusive sovereign usage spurred on by a military rationale, initiated by the landmark postal reforms of Sher Shah Suri, the Mughal regime witnessed a gradual changeover to a communication mechanism merged with administrative restructuring.

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