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## GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF POSTAL COMMUNICATION IN COLONIAL BENGAL WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON DINAJPUR: A HISTORICAL REVIEW

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### Abstract:

The development of correspondence mainly postal communication connects the whole world in a communication network. Before the introduction of internet services, postal system was the lifeline of the people at large. When people began to spread out, there was a need for indirect communication and only at that time the concept of messenger came into existence. It is noteworthy to mention here that this vast communication system had been properly developed by the colonial masters from Bengal.

When the human kind began to develop or organize into large groups or States, it was found to be essential for maintaining communication of orders or news between the central administration and its far-flung parts. The seeds of the present post office had their origin in state services maintained purely for state purposes. The postal communication exists from ancient age and the evidences of existence of earliest postal system in the subcontinent were found in the *Atharva Veda*. It is a fact that like all other civilization the system of exchange of information was available in Bengal. Literary sources and folk tales as well as rhymes, however, reveal that the messengers and different animals and birds were used to send messages from one place to another.

Initially, the East India Company started their postal communication system for their personal works and wanted to communicate between various business offices of Bengal including Dinajpur district. It was their necessity to ensure the routes of communication between the trading centres of Calcutta and those of Dhaka, Chittagong, Dinajpur, Rajmahal, Rajshahi, Rangpur and Murshidabad. Clive wanted to establish well communication system between Calcutta and Dinajpur. Because Dinajpur had a strong zamindari system and the king of Dinajpur collects huge revenue from the tenants and sent it to the company's treasury. In Bengal there was only native *daks* known as *Nizamat Dak*. But, this Nizamat Dak was abolished by the Government in 1838. Thereafter, an integrated postal system has been introduced which exists till date.

Postal service in the rural areas not only ensures the delivery of letters, parcels and money orders at the door, but also provides basic local needs of the people like banking and insurance services. There was a huge complaints also made by public in relation to the vast amount of business which the post office transacts. The colonial post office was more anxious to receive complaints founded on well ascertained facts, as there was a tendency to detect any fault lying in the system and the authority was ready to upgrade the system if necessary.

**Keywords:** Anna, Banghy, Dak, District, Imperial, Sarai, Zamindar

### 1.0 Introduction:

The history of communication system is closely linked to the history of mankind. The communication system is an important chapter in modern times. The colonial communication

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system had been developed to improve business trade, fast travel and most importantly exchange of correspondence. The development of correspondence mainly postal communication connects the whole world in a communication network. Before the introduction of internet services, postal system was the lifeline of the people at large. When people began to spread out, there was a need for indirect communication and only at that time the concept of messenger came into existence. Since then the idea of postal service were developed connecting the whole world. All civilization of the world have been contributed few elements for the development of postal communication system step by step. Finally, we got the largest communication network in India today. It is most reliable network in India operated by Union Government of India. It is noteworthy to mention here that this vast communication system had been properly developed by the colonial masters from Bengal and especially they gave importance on Dinajpur. They wanted to connect Dinajpur and might need to be kept continuously informed of what was taking place there. It may also be said that Dinajpur was such a centre for government revenue and for supplying raw materials for British industrial goods. In the early part of colonial rule the postal system had been developed from capital town to greater village level, but in the later part it spread most of the villages and now 89% of the post offices are in rural areas. But till now, the scholars or historian are very hard on the writing of postal history in the micro level. In the present paper, a critical investigation is made for the growth and development of the postal communication in Colonial Bengal from micro level on the basis of current available historical documents.

## 2.0 Background:

The term 'Post Office' is a necessity of a highly civilized community and it is a noteworthy development of modern civilization. This particular terminology was not available in the early Indian civilization. The word 'Post' is derived from the Latin word '*Positus*', it means placed or fixed. The Spanish and Portuguese delegate the post by two words—*Correo* and *Correio*, from the Latin word '*Currere*', which is more conspicuously connected with the name of the Roman Post. When the human kind began to develop or organize into large groups or States, it was found to be essential for maintaining communication of orders or news between the central administration and its far-flung parts. The seeds of the present post office had their origin in state services maintained simply for state purposes. At the initial stage, the medium was voice; and later on by ideographic and phonographic symbols and finally phonetic writing. There was found great human element of error. When an oral message was sent through messenger, there was a chance for disclosing the secrecy. At the same time expedition of news or frequent communication were also required at fixed place or post (Hamilton, G. J., 1910: pp.1-3). From this state requirement and necessity for maintaining secrecy, the fixed place or post came into the arena.

Herodotus, the father of History, has described that the regular courier service was established in Persia about 550 B. C. by Cyrus. Another intermediate post office on the Nile Valley was established about 270 B. C., found in the research paper of Dr. R. P. Grenfell. According to Dr. Grenfell it was afforded a highly interesting scene of the postal activities in ancient period and it may be compared with present day postal arrangements (Hamilton, G. J., 1910: pp.1-4). The postal communication exists from ancient age and the evidences of existence of earliest postal system in the subcontinent were found in the *Atharva Veda*. It is a fact that like all other civilization the system of exchange of information was available in Bengal. Literary sources and folk tales as well as rhymes, however, make public that the messengers and different animals and birds were used to send messages from one place to another. Even monsoon clouds and wind were also thought by famous poet Kalidasa in his famous practical works *Meghduta* as a medium for sending messages to a person of choice.

Methodical chronology of the development of postal service during the Muslim Rule can be traced to the reign of Sultan Qutb-Ud-Din Aibak, the first Sultan of Delhi. He created a messenger post system that was lengthened in the Arabic style i.e. *Horse Drawn Dak* from Delhi to Bengal. Sultan Alauddin Khalji established the first recorded *Dak-Chowki* and introduced a reformed postal system. In 1296, He also introduced a Horse and Foot Runner service. Thereafter, Sher Shah Suri introduced *Horse Dak System* in 1541 and constructed the Grand Trunk Road @ 4800 KM from Bengal to Peshawar for the use of postal service. During the early Mughal conquests larger part of the Bengal remained semi-independent (Banglapaedia, en.banglapaedia.org). Mughal Rulers retained the system of *Darogah-I-Dakchauki* during their supremacy in Bengal.

Sher Shah Suri built more than 1700 *Sarais* with separate housing for Hindus and Muslims. There was a provision to station horses for the servants of the postal or news department. There was also police personnel posted at every *sarai* for keeping peace and preventing crime. Besides being useful for travellers, the *sarais* were particularly meant to serve as rest-houses for the servants and runners of the postal department who carried the royal mails. They were provided ration and there were separate arrangements for their food both for Hindus and Muslims. According to Dr. K. R. Qanungo "these *sarais* were veritable arteries of the empire". It may be said these *sarais* were essential to the success of Sher Shah's administration as it was very frequent to supply the Government with important news from distant parts of the kingdom by the postal runners. The system was not new to this country, but it was reviewed and improved by Sher Shah Suri. Actually, Sher Shah revived the *Dak Chauki* and the espionage system of Alauddin Khalji. He appointed an officer known as *Darogha-i-Dakchaukias*, the head of the postal department. Hosts of news writers and news-carriers were employed under him to deliver news of important happenings from every part of the empire. Sher Shah kept himself in touch with every part of his kingdom through the intelligence and postal department. Daily reports of the prices of things also reached the king. News runners and spies were posted in all important towns and markets with the instruction to convey to the court whatever information they consider necessary to be placed before the king (Srivastava, A. L., 1952: pp.104-105). Much of the success of Sher Shah's administration was due to his strong postal and information collection. The organization of post horses was for the rapid carriage of Government despatches and for the accommodation of trade and correspondence. On the main roads Akbar is said to have placed two swift horses and some *meowias* (runners) at a distance of every 10 miles for the conveyance of Government letters and sometimes private communication (Hamilton, G. J., 1910: p.130).

### **3.0 Company's Rule and the Development of Postal Service:**

In the early phase in India the English East India Company had introduced their postal system parallel to the Mughal postal system though in a smaller scale. A regular British postal system was first introduced in 1766 by Lord Clive, the then Governor and Commander-In-Chief of Fort William, Kolkata. The order in the subject was "For enhanced regulation of the *daks* well-ordered that in future all correspondence be despatched from the Government House; the post master or his subordinate attending every night to sort and see them off; that the letters to the various Inland Settlements be made up in separate bags preserved with the Company's seal; that one might open the packets except the chiefs at diverse places who are to open only their particular packets; and ordered that they be directed to monitor the same rule with respect to the letters sent down to Calcutta" (Hamilton, G. J., 1910: p.131-132).

**In Selection from the Records of the Government of India, 1748-1767**, it was said: "Runners were employed at an early period to bear the correspondence, which in those days of isolation were few and far between; there were no available roads but tracks through the jungles beset with tigers, which could only be kept off by lighted torches and the harsh notes of the drum. In the year of

1748 there were postal runners between Cuttack and Gangam; they were very indolent, and it was planned to alternative mounted postmen for them; they were in the line to Madras, but we find that between March and September no communication from Calcutta reached Madras, on that issue the Governor of Calcutta remarked *it is not worthwhile to put the Company to the expense of kassids (couriers) when we have nothing to advise.*"

Initially, the East India Company started their postal communication system for their personal works and wanted to communicate between various business offices of Bengal including Dinajpur district. It was their prerequisite to ensure the routes of communication between the trading centres of Calcutta and those of Dhaka, Chittagong, Dinajpur, Rajmahal, Rajshahi, Rangpur and Murshidabad. During 1861-1862, they selected a postman whose work was carrying the *Daks* from one place to another by way of walking. At the early phase of the company's rule there were two fold postal communication system—Speed Post and Ordinary Post. Speed Post means Horse riding *Dak* system which was mainly used for important and fast work of the company. Ordinary *Dak* means the communications which carried by post man by way of walking. It was used for private, non-commercial and ordinary people (Chakraborty, Indrajit and Gupta, Subhasish, 2014: p. 82).

In 1766, the first reform in postal service was introduced by Robert Clive. A post master was appointed in Calcutta, which was connected with Calcutta to Dinajpur, Dhaka and Patna. Clive wanted to establish well communication system between Calcutta and Dinajpur. Because Dinajpur had a strong zamindari system and the king of Dinajpur collects huge revenue from the tenants and sent it to the company's treasury. During the period of Lord Warren Hastings, a General Post Office (GPO) was established in Calcutta on 17<sup>th</sup> March, 1774. After the establishment of GPO the new tariff for a letter under a regular *Dak System* was 2 Anna on private letters for every 160 KM within Bengal. The copper tickets of the values of two *annas*, to be used exclusively for postal purposes, were specially struck for the public conveyance. Lord Warren Hastings also laid down revised regulations on 1<sup>st</sup> December, 1784 for the postal system, and the further revision were made from time to time until 1837. At the same time a public post was established by the Act XVII of 1837 and the Government reserved to itself the exclusive right to convey correspondence for hire in the territories of the East India Company. In 1798, Lord Wellesley started another reformation of postal system by introducing new laws. By this law Wellesley expanded the postal system throughout Bengal. He also introduced nine new branches of Calcutta GPO i.e. Dhaka, Chittagong, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Natore, Kumarkhali, Raghunathpur, Syllet and Ramu for the expedition of postal services throughout Bengal (Banglapedia, en.banglapedia.org). In Bengal there was only native *daks* known as *Nizam Dak* between Calcutta and Murshidabad. It was maintained by the Nawab Nizam for the sole conveyance of himself, and the members of his family, and those associated with the palace. The time in transportation between Calcutta and Murshidabad was from four to five days, significantly longer than the Government Post took to perform the same distance. During the month it conveyed from 400 to 600 letters and from 25 to 80 parcels. But, this *Nizam Dak* was abolished by the Government in 1838.

The most important postal reform of India was introduced by Lord Dalhousie in 1852. A Postal Reform Committee was constituted with fourteen members and after prolonged discussion their report had been accepted by the House of Commons, the Lower House of British Parliament in 1852 and it sent to the Government of India for execution. The Company's Government was more active for the rapid development of Indian postal communication and it was reflected in the reports of postal reforms in India. The Committee said "having thus inclined of the several points connected with the subject of our inquiry, we beg to summarize the principal changes in the existing postal system of India which we have recommended in the course of our report" (Postal

Communication & C. (INDIA), 1952: pp. 99-102). The foremost recommendations of the report were as follows:

- A uniform rate of inland postage @ half Anna will be introduced.
- An alteration of weight for inland postage will also be introduced.
- The differential rates of postage will be discontinued.
- Differential rates of postage will also be discontinued in case of imported newspapers.
- Charging of ship letter postage will be changed.
- An alteration of weight for charging ship newspaper postage.
- Consolidation of steam and inland postage on steamer letters.
- Compulsory use of stamps in all cases of prepayment.
- Compulsory prepayment of letter postage by means of a double charge on unpaid letters.
- An alteration in the scale of *banghy* (parcel) postage for weight and distance.
- Introduction of uniform pamphlet postage @ one *anna* on parcels not exceeding 20 *tolahs*.
- Consolidation of steam and inland postage on books and pamphlets.
- Complete abolition of franking and charge of postage on official correspondence to public departments.
- Expansion of the exclusive advantage of the post office in respect to letters.
- Restructuring of post office establishments.
- Detachment of Post Master General from the presidency post offices.
- Simplification in the process of receiving and delivering letters.
- Introduction of letter boxes, and discontinuance of the practices of giving receipts for ordinary letters.
- Complete discontinuance of the detailed registry of ordinary letters.
- Special registration of letters.
- Comprehensive use of accelerators, and increased of delivery peons
- Increase in the number of receiving houses.
- More development in the present mode of keeping accounts.
- Preparation of General Manual for the guidance of post masters.
- General use of transportation bags.
- Establishment of sorting offices.
- Introduction of a system of fine.
- Extension and improvement of the *District Daks*.

It is to be noted that the Postal Reform Committee had its last recommendation emphasised on the extension and improvement of the *District Dak* system. It means they wanted to establish strong networking system right from presidency to direct villages. However, the significant part of the report is observed that "*In the Lower Provinces of Bengal a postal communication between each police*

stations and sadar station of the district is kept up by the zamindars under the provisions of Regulation XX. of 1817; but these posts are not access to the community, who are subsequently obliged, to send letters by more circulations routes, even where a direct postal communication exists. Even the zamindars who pay for the daks are not allowed to use it, and as an instance of the difficulty which the public suffer from this exclusion, we may mention, that while police reports from Serajgunge to Bogra, a distance of 40 miles, go by Zamindary Dak in one day and a half, all private letters go by Pubna and Rajshahi, and are six days on the road" (Postal Communication & C. (INDIA), 1952: pp. 99-104).

It may be mentioned here that when the post office began to develop, the district *daks* were confined to the limits of each particular district. It was relieved the Magistrates of their control and the lines were worked as a supplementary to the post office system. The entire expenses of the district *daks* were maintained from the funds of local cess up to 1868. It was said that when district postal system became self-supporting, the charges were to be accepted by the imperial post. Finally, in 1906, the colonial Government had abolished the local cess and the district *dak* became the regular part of the post office and the charges for their maintenance were an imperial one. In the district level the post offices consists of head, sub and branch. The head offices were at the headquarters of district, sub offices were in the most important towns and branch offices in the large villages (Hamilton, G. J., 1910: p.196-197). The unique feature was that the most of the branch offices were in charge of extra-departmental men, such as schoolmasters, stationmasters, shopkeepers, pensioners etc, who performed postal duties in exchange of a small amount of remuneration.

During the year of 1877-1884, we found significant postal services in the socio-economic needs of the rural people. The Colonial Government had introduced the following popular services; (Ramchandran, N. K., 2011: p. 63).

- The introduction of Value Payable Parcel in 1877
- Enforcement of insurance on Letters and Parcels in 1878
- Introduction of Post Card in 1879, the most cheapest communication letter
- Money Order in 1880
- Savings Bank in 1882
- Telegraph M. O. & Postal Life Insurance in 1884

In the last part of 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the postmen were also used to serve non-postal function such as the sale of Quinine to control Malaria, collection of tobacco excise, sale of TB seals, sale of Passport application formats etc. (Ramchandran, N. K., 2011: p. 85). The Government had also introduced Mobile Post Offices in 1938-1939 during the time of fairs, local festivals and other social gatherings in the different districts.

#### **4.0 Postal Statistics of Undivided Dinajpur:**

There has been a marked change and increase in the use of postal communication within few years. Since 1861-1862, the years for which statistics are available, the total number of letters, newspapers, parcels, and books has increased from 63028 to 157701 in 1870-1871 or by nearly two and a half times. The total number of articles like letters, parcels and books etc. despatched from the Dinajpur District post office was 58677 in 1861-1862 and 88050 in 1865-1866. The total postal receipts have been increased from £652, 16s. 2d. in 1861-1862, to £1944, 5s. 5d. in 1870-1871 (Hunter, W. W., 1876: pp. 78-79).

The following table, exhibiting the number of letters, newspapers, books etc. received at and despatched from the District post office, together with the postal receipts and expenditure for each of the years 1861-1862, 1865-1866, and 1870-1871 (Hunter, W. W., 1876: pp. 77-79). The data was given by Director General of Post Offices to the Director General of Statistics to the Government of India. The table shows that postal communication and service had been developed rapidly. The introduction of Railway system in India was a turning point for the rapid development of postal communication in the different corners of the country. The Railway Mail Service (RMS) forms a separate branch in the way of communication.

**Table 1: Postal Statistics of Undivided Dinajpur**

	1861-1862			1865-1866			1870-1871		
	Received	Despatched		Received	Despatched		Received	Despatched	
Letters....	52,111	57,391		80,407	86,954		143,381	Data not available	
Newspapers..	7,898	514		7,748	387		9,543		
Parcels.....	2,767	712		1,954	702		2,748		
Books.....	252	60		524	7		2,029		
<b>Total</b>	<b>63,028</b>	<b>58,677</b>		<b>90,633</b>	<b>88,050</b>		<b>157,701</b>		
Sale of Postage Stamps.....	£250	3	11	£320	6	10	£458	4	11
Cash Collections...									
Total Postal Receipts....	402	12	3	475	9	0	592	4	6
Total Postal Expenditure...	652	16	2	795	15	10	1050	8	6
	1124	5	5	1426	5	9	1944	5	5

(Source: Hunter, W. W., A Statistical Account of Bengal: Dinajpur, Trubner & Co., London, 1876)

## 5.0 Concluding Remarks:

- After careful study and observation, it may be said that the postal communication in India had started for the conveyance of royal and official correspondence for the ruling elites. But, gradually, private correspondence was carried on payment basis and subsequently the number of private letters and parcels increased. Though, the Colonial Government had expressed their views that the post office is an institution deriving revenue from the public only in return for the services rendered both to the public and to the Government. After postal reforms of 1852, all expenses for the maintenance of postal system of the Government came from private correspondence.
- Since the beginning of the postal communication in India, it was fully Royal or Government operated system and that system has been sustained till date. In the early phase of colonial rule the postal system had been developed from capital town to greater village level, but in the later part it spread most of the villages and now 89% of the post offices are in rural areas. The sole cause of its development in the rural areas was the establishment of connectivity with all villages.
- Postal service in the rural areas not only ensures the delivery of letters, parcels and money orders at the door, but also provides basic local needs of the people like banking and insurance

services. Subsequently, the postal service in India was the life line of rural people in colonial and even post colonial period.

- There was a huge complaints also made by public in relation to the vast amount of business which the post office transacts. The colonial post office was more anxious to receive complaints founded on well ascertained facts, as there was a tendency to detect any fault lying in the system and the authority was ready to upgrade the system if necessary.

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