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HISTORICAL DYNAMICS OF POSTAL COMMUNICATION DEVELOPMENT OF THE ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Communication is a natural outcome of human activities from time immemorial. The need to communicate with each other, from far off places, had impelled human being to find new modes of communication. The efforts of man to innovate some sort of system to communicate with people in distant places are found even in the early ages of the world's history, which proceeded the dawn of history. In the Middle Stone Age, the primitive hunter was found trying to communicate with his family, waiting in the cave. He used the bone-whistle with which as a returning hunter, he was able to announce his coming to the hungry family, waiting in the cave. Tracks in the jungle, on scrub, made by wild animals, were taken up by primitive man when out to hunt and where suitable, these were developed into foot tracks for man. The common Sanskrit word for "road" or "passage" "marga" is derived presumably from "Marga", wild animal, and coined after "an animal track". The movement of people, which has a basic factor in the spread of ideas and objects of civilization in the full sense of that term, forms the germs of regularized system of communication.

During the initiatory stages of writing, the mankind had tried to communicate through the medium of ideographic symbols. Even to

this day, such picture writing survives in use among the North American Indians. The Alaskan Natives sent their messages in picture form, scratched on a piece of wood, representing the idea of "lack of meat in the tepee", without indicating the exact words. The messages, either by word of mouth or letters written on clay or bone, bamboo-slip or wooden staff, brick, bark or leather, cloth, are indicated by colored strings, had to be laboriously carried - either on foot or on horseback, or by other kinds of transport like

carts and carriages, with draught animals like horses or oxen or camel or dogs in different parts of the country. In Ancient and Medieval India communication gradually developed in a significant way. The paper attempts to focus how communication helped the Ruling class and the Ruled in their management of the day to day affairs in the ancient and medieval Delhi Sultanate period. There was a great transition in the communication system from the ancient and Medieval India.



KEYWORDS: *Communication, Indus Valley, Courier Service, Post, Horsemen, Sultan, Khaliji, Tughluq, Empire.*

INTRODUCTION

The people of Indus Valley of the Fourth and Third Millennia B.C., in possession of a highly developed culture, domesticated the humped Gebu, buffalo, and short horned bull, besides the sheep, pig, dog, elephant, and camel but the cat and probably the horse were unknown to them. For transport, they had wheeled vehicles, to which oxen were yoked. Their society was organized in cities. Their wealth derived mainly from agriculture and trade, which extended far and wide in all directions.¹ The Indus Valley Civilization (3000 B.C. to 2200 B.C.), which is considered far superior to ancient civilizations, probably evolved some sort of communication, which is lost in antiquity. On successful decipherment of the pictographic script of the Indus Valley, some interesting modes of communication came into light.

The Aryans or Indo-Aryans, who destroyed the fortifications of Indus Valley people, had the knowledge of the institution of informants and couriers.²

The traces of these institutions of informants and couriers are found in the Rig Veda Samhita and Satapata Brahmana respectively. The Rig-Veda Culture begun in 2000 B.C.³

More detailed accounts of the institution of Couriers began from the age of Vedic Kalpsutras (800 RC. to 500 B.C.).⁴ They were professional messengers who were employed by the State and during this period, there were no regular facilities for the public to send their communications from one place to another. A special messenger had to be sent to convey a message to a distant place.⁵

In the works of Panini (600 B.C. to 550 B.C.)⁶ are found the mentions of "Janghakara"⁷ for courier and references to a special term "Yaujanika", to denote a courier travelling one Yojana.⁸

Cyprus the Great of Persia, who ruled the vast empire extending to the Greek Cities of Asia Minor and Babylon, is credited with having established the regular courier service, by erecting 550 post houses throughout Persia. About the middle of the Sixth Century B.C., the hordes of Cyprus (c. 558- 530 B.C.) knocked at the gates of India. During the reign of Darius (522-486 B.C.), Gandhara, the territory around Peshawar and Rawalpindi and the Indus Valley as far as the deserts of Rajputana, constituted the twentieth and the most populous Satrapy of the Persian Empire.⁹ The system of regular courier service, in use in Persia, came to be established in the then Gandhara Province.

Katyayana (Fourth Century B.C.)¹⁰ Mentions about "Yaujanastika", to mean a courier who was deputed in an errand of a hundred yojanas.¹¹ This is in complete agreement with Kautilya, who refers to the speed of Mauryan courier service, in terms of the distance they travelled from one yojana to a hundred yojanas.¹²

A systematic courier service was found, during the reign of Chandra Gupta Maurya (321 - 297 B.C), for the dispatches of intelligence and confidential reports, from outlying provinces of the vast country to the Emperor.

Chandra Gupta's Empire stretched from Afghanistan to the frontiers of Burma and he governed from his capital, Patiliputra (Patna). He divided the vast area into Provinces, each under a Governor. The difficulty of communication, between the capital city and various provincial capitals, was solved by the use of pigeon post. Letters in cachets were hung from the necks or tied in capsule, in the legs of pigeons which were trained to fly to their destination. This system also continued in the time of Asoka, grandson of Chandra Gupta.

Arthasastra (321 B.C. to 296 B.C.) deals with the institution of informants elaborately. Kautilya says that the informants should be set in motion against inimical, friendly and neutral kings as well as the various departments of the State.¹³ The Court kept watch over the, rural functionaries, by means of special agents called, "Overseers" and "Inspectors", by the Greek authors¹⁴ and it is mentioned in the Asoka edicts as the king's "men" or "reporters".¹⁵ The duty of these officers was to superintend or oversees all that occurred in town or country and to make private reports to the Government. Similar officers were employed by the authorities of independent nations as well as by the monarchical governments of India. They have also utilized courtesans, to transmit to their master's strange pieces of scandalous gossip.¹⁶

To facilitate travel of these officers, pilgrims and general public, there was a special order by Asoka, the Great, for digging wells and planting trees along the public highways, during Third Century before Christ.¹⁷

Asoka, in one of his inscriptions (Rock Edict VI), refers to officers whom he calls "Prativedakas" (reporters) whose duty was to report to the king to whom they had free access at all hours and places, on what was going on in the country. In Pillar Edict IV, Asoka refers to Rajukas (Great officers) whose usual duties were to construct roads and at every ten stadia (According to Pillar Edict. VII, at every half kos), set up a pillar, to indicate the roads and distances.

During the Gupta period (Cir. 330 AD to 500 AD), the commercial corporations and guilds called, 'Srenis' utilised and developed a communication system, suited to their requirements.¹⁸ Their need to transmit bills of exchange and advices and instructions, appears to have given birth to a "Hundi" system. The private messengers employed by these Srenis and their organizations comprising of bankers (sreshthis), traders (sarthavahas) and artisans (kulikas), generally used the trade routes, which were also the pilgrim routes.¹⁹

The caravans of pack oxen, led by a class of people called 'Vanijyakaras' (in modern Indian language Banjaras), used to travel from one part of India to another, doubtless carrying with them the letters and messages among the tradesman themselves and among private individuals also, although these people were mainly carriers of goods. The merchant community of India, linking up the whole of country for trade, from Afghanistan to Bengal and Assam and from Kashmir to Cape Comorin, had to run their own methods of communication (doubtless through the 'Banjaras' and through State co-operation), for transmission of money from one city to another, by the system of deposits and pay orders ('Hundies'). Itinerant religious mendicants, ('Sanyasis') or people in the garb of mendicants were used for espionage purposes by the State as well as by and private persons. Besides these persons to shrines and religious mendicants, rulers and some powerful magnates communicated, through singers and artists on the move.²⁰

India, at the advent of Arabs and Turks, though remained culturally and commercially united; politically it was divided into certain independent kingdoms, who were all interested only in administering their own separate kingdoms, a task that did not involve the maintenance of a country-wide network of a communication system.²¹

With the conquest of Sind and Multan by Mohammed-bin-Qasim, the nephew of Hajjaj-b--Yusuf Thaqafi, the Governor of Iraq (711- 713 A.D), an efficient communication system, between Iraq and India, was established. AlHajjaj wrote a letter every third day, to his nephew, the conqueror of Sind. The letter used to reach the Arab cantonment of Sind via Wasit, the capital of Iraq, within seven days. This was done with the help of relay horses. When trade developed, the Barid (post) stations were set up, from Basrah to Isle of Khanam and from there, to the isle of Lavan and from this place to Sind. Similar methods were adopted by Mahamud for receiving communications in Sindh when Mahamud of Ghaznah began his Indian invasion from C. 1000 AD. Under Ghaznavids two kinds of Daks were in vogue, namely, post carried by footmen and post carried by horsemen.²²

The Sultanate of Delhi, established in 1206 AD, had its communication system known as "Barid",²³ from the beginning.²⁴ Qutb-ud-din Aibak had employed his staff of news-writers.²⁵ Sultan Balban had developed it and its efficiency contributed substantially to his administrative success.²⁶ It had been described as "one of the most potent instruments of his despotism".²⁷

Realizing the strategic significance of good communications the Sultans organized a well-knit system. It was for receiving information from different parts of their Empire. In a conquered country, their security and authority depended upon the soundness and efficiency of their organisation, in which a good communication system was an important element.

The urgency of maintaining a developed courier system increased, as time went on, with the repeated incursions of the Mongols on the one side and expansion of the empire on the other. It is reported that in 1299 AD, when the Mongolian leader Qutlug Khwaja, crossed the Sind with 20 tunams (2,00,000 soldiers), with the object of conquering, Sultan Ala-ud-din Khalji received the news in advance and had at his disposal, sufficient time to summon his troops from different parts of his empire.²⁸

Alba-ud-din Khalji depended, for the success of his reforms, on a developed system of reporters.²⁹ He received regular news of the progress of his Army while on expedition³⁰ and stages linking him to Delhi were set up, whenever he was out of the capital. Ziauddin Barni wrote of the use of horsemen and swift runners during the reign of Ala-uddin- Khalji. "It was the practice of Sultan" (he wrote in 1310 AD), "to establish posts on the

road. At every half or quarter koso, paiks (runners) were posted and at every town and sub-division on the day, a clerk was deputed to keep him informed of daily happenings ". Mubarak Shah Khalji took a further step in strengthening the communication system, between the North and South India, after the annexation of the Kingdom of Devagiri, in 1318 AD.³¹ The soldiers on expedition were able to communicate with their families. There were instances of Sultan Ala-uddin's post carrying such letters.³²

Soon after 1321 AD, under Ghiyasuddin Tughluq, the communications link had stretched to Warangal, which the young Mohammed Bin Tughlaq was sent to conquer. Muhammed bin Tughluq succeeded in annexing the far flung areas such as Devagiri, Warangal and Madurai. His conquests and consolidations had helped the expansion of the communication areas. In South India, the Telugu Poet, Ketana, in his 'Andhrabhasha Bhushanam,' indicates in a verse "that the main route of Ayodhya from Kanchi passed through Nellore and Orugallu (Warrangal)." ³³ Mahammed Bin Tughluq also appears to have followed the same route and came as far as Warangal while proceeding to Madurai to put down the rebellion there in person.

Ibn Batuta paid a high tribute to the efficiency of the news service, under the Sultan Mohammed Bin Tughluq.³⁴ Kos Minars, found mentioned in the writings of Ibn Batuta, "At every third mile, villages are built, and on the outskirts of every village minarets are constructed. At every minaret, Foot Runners are ready with their waists belted and a stick, two yards long, with small ringing bells of copper at its end. The Foot Runner runs with great speed, with the postal bag in one hand and stick in the other. The next Foot Runner gets ready, at the sound of the small bells, which can be heard from about a mile off. He takes bag from him and runs without delay. The Foot Runners were stated to be swifter than the 'ulagh' or horse dak, whose rider and mounts were changed at every four koso."³⁵

Remarking on the speed, Ibn Batuta wrote, "From Sa'ustan to Multan, it was 10 days journey, and from Multan (Sind) to Delhi, 50 days. But the dak reached the King within five days". The passage of goods by horse and sometimes by runners had begun in Mohammed Bin Tughluq's time. Fresh fruit from Khurasan was taken to the King in Daultabad and so was "Ganges water". The Sultan had organised a system by which signals could be speedily transmitted. The messages were sent by relays of sound of drum. At every twelve miles, a drum house was built, and drummers sat there, by turns, all day and night. When they heard a drum signal booming out, they would take up the beat, and the previous drummer, hearing the passage of his message, would fall silent. Qal Qashandi, wrote in his Sub-al-Aasha, that drums were kept in important places in serial order. When the King halted in one of the cities, and when the gates of the city were opened and closed, strokes were given on the drums. The drum beaters were trained how to beat drums for certain events. The news of victory, defeat, sudden invasion of enemy, rebellion, murders, plunder, births of a prince, death, marriage or important functions were thus .relayed by particular kinds of beatings of drums.

When the Sultan went to Devagiri, he posted dhawa or palki (palanquin), at every mile. He built one bungalow or khanqah, at every manzil (stage), where a "Shaikh" lived. The place was equipped with all the necessary provisions for daily use and all the conveniences needed for a guest. All the necessary provisions were provided in so that the passengers should not feel any inconvenience.³⁶

According to Ibn Batuta, the highways in northern India were infested by robbers. About Malabar, the Arab traveller reported that the journey, along the shore, from Sindhanur to Kanlam in Malabar, took two months and the whole of the way by land it was under the shade of trees, and at the distance of every half mile, there was a house made of wood, in which there was a chamber fitted up for the reception of comers and goers. At each of such chamber, a well is stated to have been provided, with an attendant, appointed to give drink.³⁷

Sayyids and Lodis also developed their means of securing information.³⁸ Under the Delhi Sultanate, besides other principal departments, there was the Barid-i-Mamalik, chief news writer of the Kingdom under whom were numerous "Barid", posted in every administrative sub-division, towns, bazaars and in almost every inhabited locality.³⁹ They reported every important incident to the chief, who communicated them to the Sultan. They reported on the arrival of foreigners in the dominions, on matters of special interest, on the doings of various officials, even on the gossip of the bazaars and the feelings of the people.⁴⁰ Besides reporting on public affairs, they also spied on the conduct of the local officials. In effect, the Barid-i-Mamalik's department combined the function of an exclusive government news organization, with those of secret intelligence service.⁴¹

All the dynasties of the Delhi Sultanate maintained a system of the fast post, with varying degrees of efficiency.

To conclude, the communication system is very important in ancient and medieval India not only for running the administration but also important for the effective functioning of the State. The modern communication system is a much advanced one in comparing with the ancient and medieval system. The advent of the Europeans and the administration of the British rule heralded a new mark in the advancement of the communication in India, and a great boon to Indian Communication system. The Indus Valley people kept some mode of communication and animals were used for carrying communication from one place to another. A some sort of improved communication in ancient India prevailed during the Mauryan and Gupta period because the Maryans and Guptas ruled a vast empire they felt the necessity of an improved communication system. Asoka and Samudra Gupta paid attention to the communication system. Asoka spread the message of Buddha and principles of Buddhism by adopting proper mode prevailing and possible communication system. The Delhi Sultanate kept a separate department for communication to implement the order of the Sultans. The spies were employed in receiving the news from the public and supplying it to the communication department. Thus from Indus Valley to Medieval Period, communication system evolved and it was known by various names and suited to the needs of different monarchs, elite and mercantile communities.

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2. L 'Union Postal, (Periodicals published by the Universal Postal Union, Berne, Switzerland, 1877-1994 A.D.), 1880, p.21 and Encyclopedia Britannica, Vol.I4, p.884. Egypt in 2400 B.C. is accredited to have had a well organized system of posts, for there were generally couriers on the road carrying letters from Thebes, through Syria, Asia Minor, Babylon and Assyria. The Indus Valley Civilization (3000 B.C. to 2200 B.C.) which is considered to be far superior to the contemporary civilizations probably evolved some sort of communication system which is lost in Antiquity. On successful decipherment of the pictographic script of the Indus valley, some interesting modes of communication came into light.
3. Ramachandra Dikshitar, V.R., *Hindu Administrative Institutions*, pp.286-87; *Vedic Age*, pp.210 and 436; Ram Gopal, *India of Vedic Kalpasutras*, p.89. The Vedic Rig Vedic people were having the knowledge of the institution of couriers also.
4. Ramgopal, *India of Vedic Kalpasutras*, Delhi, 1959, p.vi; *Dak Tar*, July 1959, p.25
5. *Ibid.*, p.141
6. *Ibid.* Ram Gopal considering elaborately all the earlier arguments is convinced to fix the date of Panini at about 600 B.C. to 550 B.C.
7. Agarwala, V.S., *India as Known to Panini*, Lucknow, 1973, p.410. Kautilya refers as *Jahgharika*.
8. *Ibid.*
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16. Smith, V.A., *op. cit.* p.136.
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Mukherji, Chandra Gupta Maurya and his times, Delhi, 1960, p.121 Mc Crindle, op.cit., pp.86-87. Ten stadia were equal to some Indian measure of distance, which must have been the Krosa or Kosa. If the medium be taken at 202 1/2 yards, this would give 2022 1/1 yards for the Kos.

18. Beni Prasad, *Theory of Government in Ancient India*, p.308. The commercial corporations or guilds, the references to which are found in the Vedic literature, the Brahmanas, the Dharmasutras, Buddhist and Jaina literatures, Kautilya's Arthashastra, the Smritis and Nitisastras, occupy a more prominent place and stand in definite relations towards the State.

19. Radha Kumud Mookerji, *Local Government in Ancient India*, Oxford, 1920, pp.36, 41 and 148; Satynarayana, K., *A Study of the History and Culture of Andhras*, Vol.II, New Delhi, p.51.

20. Suniti Kumar Chatterji, op.cit. P.12. Beni Prasad, op. cit., p.243.

21. Beni Prasad, op.cit. p.243.

22. Majumdar, R.C., op.cit. p.281.

23. *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Vol. p.658. The "Barid" means a "post-animal", "post-horse", then, "courier". It further means the institution of "post" and finally, the distance between two post stations. The word "Barid" was generally adopted by the Sultanate for the news reporters.

24. Farooquee, A.K.M., *Roads and Communications in Mughal India*, Delhi, 1977, p.125. The Sultanate appears to have borrowed the "Barid" system from Abbasids. Syed Amir Ali, *A Short History of the Saracens*, p. 417. The Abbasids attached greater importance to the barid. Ibn-Khurdedah, who himself filled the office of the Postmaster - General under the Caliph Mutamid, says that in the Central Empire, there were 930 postal stations on the six great high roads, starting from Baghdad with some relay stations in between.

25. Quereshi Ishtiaq Ahmed, *Administration of Sultanate of Delhi*, Lahore, 1942, p.90; Hussain, S.A.O., *Administration under the Mughals*, Dacca, 1952, p.72. The Sultan employed a large number of Ghanzawid and Abbasid officials in his administrative institutions.

26. Habibullah, A.B.M., *Foundation of Muslim Rule in India*, Reprint, Allahabad, 1967, p.164.

27. Ibid. p.164. Driven out from their home lands by Mongols, a large number of officials and generals arrived in the next few years of establishment of the Sultanate of Delhi. The Sultanate thus came to possess expert administrators, within the first two decades of its foundation.

28. Mohammed Habib, and Nizami K.A., (ed.), *A Comprehensive History of India*, Vol.5, May 1990, pp.337-338.

29. Fuller, A.R., and Khallaque, A., *The Reign of Alauddin Khalji*, (Tr. of Barani's *Tarikh-i-Firuz Shahi*) pp.105-110. The Sultan appointed trustworthy 'Barid-i-Mandi' (Reporter of Market) who, together with the Shinnah-i-Mandi (Inspector of Market) had to report to the Sultan on the state of the market and rates of grain, etc.

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