Negotiating Empire: The Colonial Post Office and Indian Society

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The post office arrived in India as part of a colonial agenda, intended mainly as a tool for the British to manage their empire. Over time, it emerged as a space of interaction between British officials and Indian society, where both influenced each other. This paper looks at how, what started as a foreign system became an integral part of Indian daily life, and also explores how, in its early years, the colonial post office dealt with all sorts of difficulties and emerged not only as a space of compliance but also as one of subversion. The paper highlights this dual character of colonial institutions and shows how the post office was reworked into a hybrid institution through dense local participation. This paper draws on firsthand written accounts of colonial officials, postal reports, oral histories, private letters, and a wide range of literature to examine the colonial post office as a site of negotiation between imposition and adaptation. Thus, this paper calls for a rethinking of colonial infrastructures, viewing them not only as static instruments of domination but also as dynamic arenas of social history.

Keywords: Negotiations, Post-Office, Adaptation, Society, Letters.

Introduction

Conventional histories of the empire largely focused on conquests, administration, and control, but colonial infrastructures like roads, railways, telegraphs, and postal networks offer an important parallel perspective for the historical exploration of colonialism. These networks were designed to strengthen control and to project state power, yet they were continuously shaped by society. The Indian post office is a rich example of this paradox. Established through a colonial code and in pursuit of imperial goals, the post office aimed to solidify the British presence and power across the vast empire. From the beginning, however, it was integrated into the daily lives of Indians, highly influenced by local habits, customs, cultural expressions, and political pressures. The experiments and reforms were bold attempts at bureaucratic unity, meant to help the empire communicate more effectively. Yet, in reality,

it revolutionised and transformed communication from a privilege reserved for elites to something available to subalterns.

The post office was not merely an institution forced upon a passive population, it represented a 'negotiated empire,' as it became a space of ongoing interaction between the empire and the people. Villagers, traders, scribes, migrants, pilgrims, and women found ways to subtly engage with and reshape the institution, eventually transforming personal relationships and communities. While the British aimed to control space, time, and communication through stamps and set rates, India's social fabric, rich with its caste rules, kinship ties, honorific language, and rituals, interpreted those regulations in its own unique ways. This paper highlights what Carolyn Marvin has argued, namely how swiftly and profoundly new modes of communication reshape the contours of human society and alter the very fabric of communities.[1] Thus the aim is to move beyond the simple coloniser-colonised binary, by highlighting the post office as a lively cultural and social entity, worked upon by both parties.

Communication before the Colonial rule

The idea of a postal service was not new to India. Long before the East India Company set up its post offices, South Asian rulers had created a complex system for delivering messages, but these services were maintained purely for state purposes.[2] The Delhi Sultanate relied on foot runners known as *'el-davah,'* and horse-based delivery called *'el-wolak,'* to send news between the imperial cities.[3] The fourteenth-century traveller Ibn Battuta also praised the system's efficiency.[4] Later, the Grand Trunk Road built by Sher Shah Suri became a major channel for communication, with rest stops called serais roughly every four miles, where horses and runners were kept ready to deliver the imperial

[1] Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking about Electric Communication in the Late 19th Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 3-8.

[2] S. K. Pain, "Growth and Development of Postal Communication in Colonial Bengal with Special Emphasis on Dinajpur: A Historical Review," *Ensemble* 3, no. 1 (2021): 197-204.

[3] G. Clarke, *The Post Office of India and Its Story* (Plymouth: The Mayflower Press, 1921), 10-26.

[4] Ibn Battuta, *The Rehla of Ibn Battuta: India, Maldive Islands and Ceylon*, trans. and commentary by Mahdi Husain, 2nd ed., reprint (Baroda: Oriental Institute, M. S. University of Baroda, 1976), xxvii-xxix.

messages. During Akbar's rule this system was further improved; however, these networks mainly served rulers, merchants, and elites.[5] For a villager, communication remained oral, physical, and local. Caste and social identities maintained the flow of information, like the barber (nai) used to spread news during weddings, the drummer used to make announcements, and the traveling bards used to share stories. Letters did exist but were mostly for the elites like mercantile and courtly classes.

The coming of the East India Company changed this situation. With trade and territorial expansion, the demand for reliable communication increased. Runners, known as cossids,[6] *kasids*,[7] and harkaras became essential for circulating commercial and political information. They remained as the backbone of the old postal system. Yet, the system was slow, haphazard, and fragile. It was not until the nineteenth century that the Company made serious efforts to create a standardised postal system across the empire, resulting in the Post Office Act of 1837[8] which laid the foundation for a unified postal institution, and the subsequent 1854 reforms further strengthened its structure. Most importantly, these reforms brought the institution closer to the public for the first time, paving the way for its eventual evolution beyond the initial imperial intentions.

The Post Office Act of 1854

The 1854 Act was groundbreaking for several reasons. First, it reorganised the postal system into a centralised department under a Director General, unifying the fragmented services of the three presidencies of Bombay, Madras and Calcutta. Second, it introduced postage stamps[9] and a uniform half-anna (1/32 rupee) rate, making communication accessible to more people. As Bowie observed in 1897, the beneficial effects of stamps had "…reached to the

[5] B. K. Sarkar, *Inland Transport and Communication in Medieval India* (Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1925), 72-82.

[6] H. Giles, *The Handstruck Postage Stamps of India* (Calcutta: The Philatelic Society of India, 1988), 3-26.

[7] B. K. Sarkar, *Inland Transport and Communication in Medieval India* (Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1925), 72-82.

[8] Giles, *Handstruck Postage Stamps of India,* 3-26.

[9] S. Balakrishnan, "An Ode to India Post." *Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Ministry of Communications*, 2016.

uttermost ends of the earth, and advantageously influenced the whole of civilised humanity."[10] For the first time, peasants, migrants, and labourers could send letters without high costs, and in comparatively less time. However, intentions and results diverged from the motive. While the British saw the post as an imperial tool, opening the system to the public created unintended consequences in the long run. The rise of letters in vernacular languages,[11] the growth of vernacular newspapers, and the use of the postal service for financial transactions (such as money orders, pensions, and savings) meant that the institution became important and embedded in everyday life. Observers noted this change and its importance with astonishment. Geoffrey Clarke, a senior civil servant in the postal department who wrote a general history of the post office titled *The Post Office of India and its Story* in 1921, noted that "probably in no country in the world is the poor man so dependent upon the post office for the transmission of small sums of money as in India."[12]

Postmen and the People

Central to this institution was the postman. More than just a government and postal employee, he acted as a cultural link between the colonial state and local communities. Unlike the other government employees such as policemen or revenue officials, who represented authority and power, the postman, by contrast, was commonly seen as a friend, sometimes even as a confidant. In Indian society, his work was not restricted to just delivering letters. He read them to those who could not read, wrote replies on their behalf, mediated disputes, and sometimes even helped resolve family tussles. The role of the postman was essential in rural India, where literacy rates were very low. He often worked with professional letter-writers in marketplaces, who composed letters for a fee. This led to the creation of a unique communication economy, through which people who were unable to read or write engaged actively in sending letters. Letter writing and postal services made literacy a shared resource—this will be explored further in the next section.

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[10] A. G. Bowie, *The Romance of the British Post Office* (London: S. W. Partridge Company, 1897),26-33.

[11] G. J. Hamilton, *An Outline of Postal History and Practice* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink and Co., 1910), 197.

[12] Clarke, *Post Office of India,* 71-80.

The post office also carried with it a moral significance. People trusted the postman with money orders, pensions, and important papers. One contemporary district report illustrates how deeply the post office had penetrated local life by the early twentieth century. *The Bankura District Gazetteer* for 1908 recorded 67 post offices, one for every 39 square miles, and around twenty lakh postal articles delivered in a single year, with money orders worth over 9 lakhs paid and more than 6,000 savings deposits.[13] In return for this trust, the postman was expected to be dependable and honest. In the regions with no permanent post offices, his visits were eagerly anticipated. If he missed his regular round, complaints were made quickly. Unlike other officials of the state, who were often exploitative, the postman was viewed as a trustworthy friend. Yet, his role was also fraught with complications. Caste identities and dynamics affected his job. In areas like Malabar, where Brahminical codes were strict, low-caste postmen were prohibited from entering Brahmin neighbourhoods.[14] One infamous incident in Palghat nearly led to unrest when a low-caste postman tried to deliver letters in a Brahmin street.[15] The Postmaster General had to step into this matter, highlighting how imperial institutions were often forced to navigate entrenched social hierarchies within society.

The postman also faced difficult physical challenges, especially in the regions with difficult geographies. For instance, in Bengal's riverine areas, he waded through flooded fields to reach remote villages. On the North-West Frontier, he risked his life amid attacks from tribal raiders. In central India, he travelled through dense forests known for man-eater tigers. His job was not just bureaucratic but also perceived as heroic, and this earned him a place in local folklore as a bringer of both joy and sorrow, carrying news of births and deaths. One very famous example is the poem *The Overland Mail* by Rudyard Kipling, which portrays the postman as a hero.[16]

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[13] L. S. S. O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteer: Bankura* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1908)

[14] Clarke, *Post Office of India, 88-105.*

[15] Ibid, 88-105.

[16] Rudyard Kipling, *Departmental Ditties, Ballads, Barrack Room Ballads and Other Verses* (New York: The Lovell Company, 1899).

Addressing the Unaddressable

For colonial postal administrators, the Indian letter-addressing customs presented a significant obstacle. Indian letters frequently contained complex honorifics, references to ambiguous landmarks, or even literary clues in place of explicit postal codes, in contrast to the typical street addresses found in London or Paris, which were well known to all colonial postal officials. The mail sorter frequently had to deal with extremely vague and unusual addresses. Some letters carried emotional and lengthy phrases rather than precise locations like "To the one inseparable from my heart, the fortunate Babu Sibnath Ghose, having the same heart as mine. From post office Hasnabad to the village of Ramnathpur, to reach the house of the fortunate Babu Prayanath Ghose, district Twenty-four Parganas. Don't deliver this letter to any person, other than the addressee, Mr. Postman. This is my request to you."[17] Some other letters bore only names, completely without any geographic references, such as, "To the sacred feet of the most worshipful and respected brother, Guru Pershad Singh," or "To his highness, the revered brother, beneficent lord of us the poor, my benefactor, Munshi Manik Chand."[18] Europeans were also not immune to this practice of writing honorifics before the name.

Faced with such confusing and eccentric directions and names, the Indian postman developed his own ingenious methods of identification, especially for the addresses and names written in the language with which he was not familiar. As postmen were rarely literate in English, they relied instead on descriptions they invented for themselves. The postman would mark his own notes on the back of the letter in the vernacular, cryptic to anyone else, while the delivery clerk read out names. One telling example was that of a judge of the Calcutta High Court, Sir John Stevens, who noticed that his letters consistently bore the phrase "Old Stevens Sahib" on the reverse, which turned out to be a simple device to distinguish his name from his younger colleague, Justice Stephens.[19] To European officials, such descriptions seemed impractical, and sometimes even absurd. However, postmen and clerks, who

[17] Clarke, *Post Office of India, 88-105.*

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

relied on local knowledge, often delivered them successfully. This leads us to a new arena of collaboration between the rulers and ruled.

These tensions and the solutions borne out of them, between the bureaucratic need for uniformity and local identification practices, reflect the flexible nature of the post office. Ordinarily, the postman was a person deeply familiar with the local quarter, and recipients too rarely objected to being identified through striking personal traits; for example, letters might be addressed to "the man with the lame leg" or "he of the squinting eye."[20] However, the real difficulties arose when correspondence was intended for the members of a constantly moving population, such as pilgrims, mendicants, and other wanderers whose locations were not fixed. In sacred centres such as Banaras, where such transient populations were concentrated, the postal department was compelled to appoint specially trained postmen.[21] Postal workers thus emerged as ethnographers, mapping the social landscapes of the towns and villages they served. Moreover, regional languages added more complexity; for example, a single district could feature Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, and various regional dialects, which sometimes made postmen rely only on verbal enquiries. Mistakes occurred frequently, yet successes were common as well, showcasing the resilience of local knowledge networks in laying the strong foundations of this institution.

To address these persistent issues in letter writing and distribution, the colonial post office implemented a number of corrective measures. One such step was to implement instructions in elementary schools on how to properly write correspondence, in coordination with the Education Department. The embossed half-anna (1/32 rupee) envelope was introduced in 1873 as another partial cure, which was offered at the exact value of the stamp and was of a suitable size and texture.[22] The purpose of this innovation was to accustom the public to the usage of standardised covers and to promote the practice of prepayment. However, the issue of underpaid letters continued, and by 1897, they still made up almost one-seventh of all the correspondence the department processed. The difficulties were not merely technical but also

[20] Ibid.

[21] Clarke, *Post Office of India, 88-105.*

[22] G. J. Hamilton, *An Outline of Postal History and Practice* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink and Co., 1910), 129-211.

social, as expressed by Captain G. J. Hamilton of the British Army in his *Outline of Postal History and Practice*.[23] He described the situation as one in which "the comparative backwardness of the country, the apathy of its people, the result of satisfaction and the enervating effect of the climate on foreign residents, all combine to deprive the administration of the aid derived in other countries from complaints."[24] Here, this observation by a colonial bureaucrat captures the prevailing frustration among the officials, who felt isolated in their attempts to reform postal practices in an environment very different from Europe.

Social Life of Letters

The post office played an important and complex role in the history of literacy and education. On one hand, it promoted reading and writing by making letter writing and reading a valuable asset. On the other hand, it allowed even those who could not read to engage in written exchanges through dictation and listening, with the help of the literate. The presence of professional letter-writers (or bazaar writers)[25] introduced another layer. For a small fee, these people would write elaborate letters, filled with metaphors and blessings. This was particularly significant for women. Women, who were barred from formal education, became enthusiastic users of the post through intermediaries. Letters from husbands, sons, and brothers working in cities or the army were vital, providing both emotional support and material help, through letters. Women often took help from postmen or letter-writers to have letters read aloud. In this way, the colonial post fostered new forms of gendered communication, where women were present, but not directly. The content of letters reflect that the post became a medium for many facets of life, including the emotional, economic, and spiritual well-being of the people.

From the British viewpoint, the post office was never completely harmless. The State was always worried that this unrestricted flow of letters could lead to conspiracies and sedition. This also led to the dual role of the post office, of supporting communication while also monitoring it, which persisted

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

[25] C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 180-211.

throughout the colonial period. Vernacular newspapers, which were mainly dependent on postal distribution, faced several strict censorship laws.[26] Occasionally, private letters also served as evidence in sedition trials. Yet, total surveillance was never achieved. Smuggled letters, coded language, and oral messages often went undetected. Ironically, the system that was meant to strengthen the empire also contained elements of anti-colonial resistance. By the early twentieth century, revolutionaries used the post to circulate pamphlets, instructions, and funds. Thus, the empire's network turned into the nation's weapon.

Figure 1: Public letter writer writing a letter for two women in the bazaar
Source: Vintage Punjab: The Archives[27]

The postal communication has also fostered 'acculturation' and accelerated the pace of rural development.[28] The social significance of the post office appears in Indian literature and folklore, as communication was essentially a social affair.[29] Poets and writers often portrayed the postman as a figure to express themes of longing, separation, and fate. Mirza Ghalib, in the mid-

[26] Government of India, *Vernacular Press Act, 1878* (Act No. IX of 1878), enacted 14 March 1878, https://www.indiacode.nic.in/repealedfileopen?rfilename=A1878-9.pdf.

[27] Vintage Punjab: The Archives, "Public letter writer writing a letter for two women in the bazaar, Rawalpindi, Panjab, 1939," Facebook post, September 19, 2015, accessed September 5, 2025, https://share.google/images/mQs1Lo8rePecZRg8J.

[28] A. K. Sinha, "Communication and Rural Development: The Indian Scene" (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1986), 59-70.

[29] C. Cherry, *On Human Communication* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1957), 1-26.

nineteenth century, wrote letters that became masterpieces, blending humour with sadness.[30] Later, Rabindranath Tagore's play *The Post Office*[31] was also woven around the post office as a modern institution penetrating into the interiors of the subcontinent, and exploring how people perceived it. Moreover, his poem *The Wicked Postman* captures the deep emotional place held by the post office in everyday life.[32] In popular culture, the postman was significant. Folk songs celebrated the arrival of the postman or mourned the sad messages he brought. Stories were told of postmen who faced dangerous situations like storms or tigers to deliver letters. Overall, the institution became part of cultural memory. This cultural appropriation held political weight. It demonstrated how an imperial institution could be made local, filled with community meanings, and integrated into collective identity. The post office was no longer seen as foreign; rather, it became one's own.

Figure 2: The Lost Art of Letter Writing
Source: Sushil Mehra, Pan India Postal Pictorial Place Cancellations[33]

[30] Frances Pritchett and Owen Cornwall, eds., *Ghalib: Selected Poems and Letters* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 1-20.

[31] Rabindranath Tagore, *The Post Office.* trans. D. Mukherjee (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1914).

[32] Rabindranath Tagore, "The Wicked Postman." in *The Crescent Moon* (London: Macmillan, 1913).

[33] Sushil Mehra, "The Lost Art of Letter Writing," image posted to Pan India Postal Pictorial Place Cancellations, Facebook, December 26, 2024, accessed September 5, 2025, https://share.google/images/3DlJ0ZipW9Y5QtecL.

Conclusion

The history of the Indian post office is not just about colonial bureaucracy; rather, it is a history of communities in transition, of cultures dealing with the ideas of modernity, and of the empire transforming from within. What started as an alien institution set up mainly for imperial ease became a deeply rooted part of Indian daily life and society. This change happened slowly and through the countless acts of adjustment on both sides. Postmen navigated physical and caste barriers; villagers adopted and later embraced letter writing while maintaining their oral traditions; women used intermediaries and engaged in correspondence enthusiastically; freedom fighters turned this imperial network into a method of mass resistance; poets and writers gave this institution a place in literature and culture. In conclusion, the post office is a window into the complexities of colonial rule and the society of that time. It shows that infrastructures are not just technical, but also social and cultural. Exploring the post office also reveals the contradictions of the empire, and allows us to engage in historical thinking at its best, by viewing the past not as static foreign domination but as a dynamic interaction. Even today, the history of the post office demonstrates how communities may adapt and reshape the structures of power, and how developing cultures can leave a lasting impact on the institutions that attempted to rule them.

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