



HISTORICISING THE POST AND TELEGRAPHIC COMMUNICATIONS IN COLONIAL ODISHA

***Dr. Gokulananda Patro**

Lecturer in History, K.M. Science College, Narendrapur, Ganjam, (Odisha)

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ABSTRACT

Transport system and means of communication is the backbone of progress of a nation. The economic prosperity, social welfare and political strength of a nation largely depends on the type of transport and communication it has. Healthy communication system of a state opens up new vistas for economic activity and socio-cultural interaction, which ultimately puts an end to the stagnation and isolation. Colonial Odisha was lamentably very backward in matter of transport and communication. When Odisha was visited by a famine of most intense and desolating character in 1866, its severity became very terrible because of the lack of the communication facilities. The Famine Commission remarked that "Odisha was shut up between pathless jungles and an impracticable sea". Much care have been taken to reveal the truth behind the backwardness and under development of communication and transport system of Colonial Odisha and for its remedies in this paper.

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INTRODUCTION

Colonial Odisha was lamentably very backward in matter of transport and communication. In ancient times, the Postal system was carried on by Pigeons and *Dak Pratha* which was carried on by horses. In the ancient and the medieval periods the rulers maintained a large body of intelligent agents and secret service Personnels for collection and transmission of news.¹ East India Company Government brought scientific innovations in the telegraph system in India. It arranged Postal communications between Orissa and Fort St. William, Fort St. George and Bombay in the eighteenth century. In the absence of railway and bus services, letters were sent in those days through private messengers. These private messengers were variously known e.g. the *Kasids*, the *Patamars* and the *Tappies*. While the *Kasids* were generally mounted Postman, the *tappies* and the *Patamars* covered the distances on foot.

In 1703 the prove of sending letters by British Authorities in Bengal to Fort St. George through Odisha was noticed. In that year *Kasids* were sent from Bengal to Fort St. George via Orissa.² After getting permission from the Maharaja of Odisha, the English authorities Posted *tappies* at different

places in 1712 between Fort St. George and Ganjam. This facilitated the despatch of letters from former place to later which could reach in 16 days.³ There were references to private merchants bearing half of the charges necessary for maintaining the *tappies* employed by the English East India Company between Ganjam and Madras, towards the 20's of the eighteenth century. As regards the rates of the Postage we have only one reference. In 1720 the charges for sending a letter from Fort St. George to Bengal was 6 *fanams*, i.e. about five paise in modern currency.⁴ To remove all these defects, Dalhousie introduced a new Post office Act in 1854. This Act introduced a uniform rate of half-an-anna for a letter weighing upto half a tola, irrespective of the distances. The fees were to be realised from the sender in shape of stamps to be affixed to the letter. A Director- General of Posts and Telegraphs was appointed for each presidency to superintend the work of the Post officers in his area.

System of Posts before Lord Dalhousie

In 1766 one regular Post office was opened at Cuttack. It facilitated the regular Postal Service between Calcutta and Madras. In 1774 Lord Warren Hasting wanted to introduce Regular runners. So he arranged regular runners at the disposal of a Post Master General and the runners operated on the

*Corresponding author: Dr. Gokulananda Patro,

Lecturer in History, K.M. Science College, Narendrapur, Ganjam, (Odisha).

routes.⁵ For extraordinary conveyance of mails he employed express couriers, called *Cossids*. In 1789, Madras Government established a weekly service with Bombay through Hyderabad and Poona, the southern route of mails were extended up to Masulipattanam from where mails were sorted. From 1800 May 1, the route via Masulipattnam was given up and Dawks from Calcutta did not stop at Guntur, but instead was carried by hurcuras right up to Ellore and then to Bombay as usual.⁶ Due to lack of Inland communication facilities, company's Dak were sent through sea from Ganjam to Balasore and thence to Kedgeree on way to Calcutta.⁷ The East India Company therefore felt it, necessary to take possession of the coastal Orissa for military subjugation. The British Forces conquered Odisha on 14th October 1803 under the commandship of Colonel Campbell and General Hartcourt. They took possession of the Barabati Fort at Cuttack- the strong hold of the Marathas in Odisha. This facilitated the British to made a continuous overland route between Calcutta and Madras Presidencies.⁸

Military operations necessitated that the Postal communication should be controlled by the military department. The Board of Revenue at the Fort William, Calcutta controlled the Postal communications between Calcutta and Madras. To facilitate the Postal communication as a base Post office was started functioning from Cuttack in 1805. It was soon converted into a district Post office.⁹ The imperial Postal system was operated from Cuttack to the station of the East Indian Company factories and connected them to Calcutta. This District Post office controlled the Postal communication to the rural areas through police stations. In the princely States of Orissa, the chiefs were asked to maintain a service which carried the official correspondence passing through their lands. In the areas not covered by the above, where the *thanas* maintained by the Company, the Thanadar was asked to wait at the Dak Chouki and was therefore came to known as "Chaukidar".¹⁰ The organisations of Dak Chouki was dictated by the needs of the Magistrates but the Zamindars and the ruling Chief of Orissa were independent of the magistrates as they had their own revenue and police function.¹¹

Introduction of Modern Post

Lord Dalhousie (1848-56) inaugurated a new era in the history of the Post and Telegraph systems of India. He introduced the system of modern post. His reforms in Postal system is praiseworthy. Before Dalhousie's arrival in India, the Postal system was corrupt and ineffective. It involved a lot of delay. As there was no uniform Postal rate, any amount could be realised. Besides, the fee was realised from the receiver of the letter in cash and not from the sender. As result of which the receiver often refused to receive the letter. A letter from Calcutta to Bombay cost as much as one rupee then. With the introduction of uniform Postage rates irrespective of distances, Cuttack became the head Post office. It continued to be a base Post office and a most important sorting station for the whole of Orissa. There were also Post offices at Balasore, Jaleswar, Puri, Sambalpur and Tamluk in the Postal circle of Bengal.¹² In 1866, Orissa was visited by a Famine of most desolating character. Its severity was aggravated because of the lake proper communication. So the Famine Commission of 1866 recommended for speedy growth of Postal system. It recommended that "proper Postal communication must be established and a telegraph is an essential part of the scheme".¹³

Several bills and laws like Post Office Act of 1837, Zamindar Dak Cess Bill of 1862, The Bengal Council Act of 1862, The Imperial Post Office Act of 1866, The Abolition of Zamindari Dak System (1903-1906), were passed to reform the postal communications in Odisha. In 1866, Cuttack was the only Postal division in Orissa. There were three Post offices in Orissa i.e. in Cuttack, Balasore and Puri, whereas there were 157 Post offices in Bengal presidency. In 1874 good progress had been made in the Postal arrangement. A considerable number of new rural-Post offices and letter boxes were established and the speedy and certainty of the transit and delivery of letter had been enhanced. The people reposed more confidence in the Post and letter correspondence.¹⁴ Nine new imperial Post offices were opened during the year 1879 raising the number of total Post offices to 42, besides 16 district offices, supported partly by Zamindari Dak funds, and 285 letters boxes attached to imperial and 115 to Zamindari Dak.¹⁵ In 1884, one of the major administrative change was affected for the establishment of Postal communication between Cuttack and the headquarter of all the Chiefs of princely states.¹⁶ Up to 1884 there was no regular Postal communication with them, special messenger had to be sent whenever there was any occasion to correspond with them. This was found very injurious to effective administration. The Post Master called on the chiefs of princely states expect Mayurbh anja and Keonjhar, who had lines of their own, to contribute to a fund for meeting the necessary changes, and they gladly responded to the call. The control of the new lines was taken over by the Postal department.¹⁷

Lord Dalhousie introduced the Telegraph system for the first time in India. To supervise the work, O' Shanghnessy was appointed the superintendent of the electric telegraph in India. Nearly four thousand miles of telegraph lines were laid connecting Calcutta with places like Peshawar, Bombay and Madras. Behind this measure, Dalhousie might have the motive to keep the administrative authorities in touch with each other. It was another instrument of his imperialism. Be that as it may, in such a vast country like India, the electric telegraph helped to conquer time and distances. But, Odisha was not fortunate enough to have the benefits of Telegraph system for a long time. In 1875 the establishment of a telegraph line between Cuttack and False Point was proposed.¹⁸ That the line would be of greatest utility to the commercial interest of Odisha, and that it would be of much value to the shipping, in as many as vessels bound for Calcutta could report their arrival to their agents before entering the river Hooghly. Sir Richard Temple's visit to Orissa, however, convinces him of the expediency of the line of telegraph, and looking to the growing trade of False Point, and to the growing trade of Orissa.¹⁹ In view, of great importance of the line, it was ultimately ordered by the Government of India that the line should be established irrespective of any guarantee, and it was accordingly opened on 1st August 1877.²⁰ In 1877, another new line of Telegraph from Cuttack to Jumbo was opened. The usefulness of this line was much impaired by the fact that it stopped at a point 5 miles distant from the harbour of False Point, and was so separated from the shipping by long distances over the water.²¹ Three thousand and sixty eight telegraphic message were transmitted from Balasore office during 1876-77, and the amount received for the corresponding period was Rs. 2,988. The receipts in cash or stamps amounted to Rs. 8,622 showing a large increase over the previous year attributable to the famine in the Madras and Bombay presidency.²² 5848 telegraphic messages were transmitted from the Cuttack office during the year 1876-77.²³

The amount received for the corresponding period was Rs. 5,209. The receipts in cash or stamps amounted to Rs. 8,622, showing a large increase over the previous year, attribute to the same cause.²⁴ In 1880, there were two telegraph stations; Cuttack and Balasore. 983 messages were sent from Balasore office, and 2006 received; 2685 messages were sent from Cuttack office and 2554 received.²⁵ There was considerable increase in the number of messages received for transmission to Puri by Post and in general correspondence exceeding that in previous year. This was due to increase in trade. The extraordinary and unstringent conditions imposed by telegraph department was a bar to the development of communication system Orissa.²⁶ A Telegraph Office was opened at Hookeytolah, and was worked by Telephone between Jumboo and that place. A proposal of much importance was now under consideration of Bengal Chamber of Commerce. The Chamber had urged the connection of Light House at False Point, with the telephone system, in order that vessels passing may report themselves. There were two difficulties in giving effect to his proposal. A line from Bhadrak to Chandabali and another from Cuttack to Puri was very useful and under consideration of Government.²⁷ The Postal lines opened 3 years ago from Cuttack to the headquarters of the Tributary Chief were in such fair working order as to be able to meet the cost of runners out of their receipts. The Tributary Chief had now to pay only for the Post Offices and contingencies.²⁸ During the past three year the Balasore and Mayurbhanj line was worked under the order and at the expenses of the Tributary Chief. The telegraph Department of Cuttack and Balasore was satisfactorily maintained in 1883-84.²⁹ In the aggregate number of messages received or despatched, there was increase both in Cuttack and Balasore district, giving a corresponding increase in the revenue. The increase in the number of messages in Cuttack office was in private message which indicated that the inducement held out by the reduced scale of charges had led to the wire being more available to the public. The increase in trade also contributed to the result.³⁰ In furnishing the figure relating to the office Mr. Smith the Telegraph Master of Cuttack makes following remarks:³¹

“The Jumboo Office was closed on 25th April last and the communication is carried between Cuttack and Hookitolah by telephone. The system was not quite a success as the induced signals from morse telegraphy (the wire for telephone being carried on the same spot as other wire) interfere with perfect working, but communication had been carried on since the closing of the Jumboo Office entirely by telephone”. In 1886-87, the administration of Postal Department of this division was running smoothly in Orissa division. In 1886 there were only four Telegraph Offices in Orissa; the False Point was converted into a combined Post of Telegraph Office on 1st December 1887.³² In 1888, the Telegraphic Communication were opened in Puri Sadder Station, Chandabali and Kendrapara and it connected with between Jumboo and False Point. The number of messages received amounted to 1514 and revenue realised was Rs.2000.³³ The increase in the number of State and Private message received and despatched was said to be due to the opening of combined Post and Telegraph Office at Balasore and Chandabali.³⁴ In 1887, one of the major problems of the Postal System was the late arrival of Post from Calcutta. The attention of the Director of the Post Offices, when visited to Orissa in 1886 was called to the subject. It is heartening to note that all the district in Orissa showed an increase sale of stamps, viz. Cuttack, Rs.64659, Puri Rs.7551, and Balasore Rs.2260.

The total agreement increase in three districts together amounted to Rs.32950 when compared with previous year. The telegraphic communication with Khurda, Puri and Alba were opened in 1887. The number of messages received from Puri and sent from Puri and Khurda was 26995 and 2646 respectively and revenue realised was Rs. 2816 in 1893.³⁵ In 1899, two branch Post Offices were opened at Jumboo and Barchanna.³⁶ In 1899, new Telegraph Offices were opened connecting Cuttack and Jajpur. Puri District Officer wrote that there was a small increase in the number of Telegraphs. He also recommended for the opening of telegraph office at Pipli.³⁷ In Cuttack division the total number of Post Offices was 52. In addition 32 miles of wire and two new offices were added in 1899. In addition 32 miles of wire, the extension of Cuttack line to Dharmasala had made the existing system of Telegraph.³⁸ in Puri there were five Zamindari Post Offices in 1899 and to those had been added, the lines connecting Astarang and Delang. At the same time the number of runners of Provincial Offices was increased from 2 to 3. A new Post office was established at Kalapathar. The Telegraph Revenue realised from the message despatched had been Rs.3345 or Rs.529 more than in 1898-99. The Magistrate thought that the telegram had become popular.

In 1900, the total number of Post offices in Balasore district was 30. There were 3 telegraph offices in Balasore viz. Bhadrak, Chandabali and Balasore. Total number of Post and telegraph offices only in 1900 were as follows: Jaleswar, Balasore, Bhadrak, Chandabali, Jajpur, Kendrapara, Dharmasala, False Point, Cuttack, Puri, Pipli, Khurda, Ganjam . Although Colonial Orissa was very backward in a matter of postal and telegraph communication incomparable to Bengal during the early British administration things were improved towards the 30s of the 20th century. In 1936, the total number of Post offices in the coastal districts of Orissa was, 40 in Balasore, 65 in Cuttack, 31 in Puri, 76 in Ganjam. Total number of telegraph offices in Orissa were, 10 in Ganjam, 4 in Puri, 36 in Cuttack and 10 in Balasore, total 60 in Orissa. But considering the population and area of Colonial Orissa, the progress made in the development of postal and telegraph communications was indeed uninspiring and unsatisfactory. It seems the British Government was not so serious for the development of Colonial Orissa in comparable to Bengal. In spite of that, the Postal and Telegraphic communication of Colonial Odisha helped it to enter into the main stream of modern civilization.

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