

TRACING THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE POSTAL SYSTEM IN MODERN KASHMIR (19TH AND 20TH CENTURY): A HISTORICAL APPRAISAL

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Abstract

The history of modern Postal System in India may be traced back to 1837 when postal services were thrown open to the public. The postal department was set up in 1854 when about 700 Post Offices were already functioning in the country. The Money Order system was introduced in 1880. Similarly, semaphore signaling was started in 1813 between Calcutta and Sagar Island. Even as Samuel Morse was laying the telegraph lines in the United States, the first experimental electric telegraph line in India was set up in 1839, over a distance of 33 km from Calcutta towards Diamond Harbour. In 1851, the circuit was established between Calcutta and Diamond Harbour for the East India Company. Kashmir is having distinct geographical features because of its mountaneous terrain and a different topography from the rest of the India. The relief and physical features of the state are quite contrary to that of the greater Indians plains. So it remained isolated for a long time, however this isolation broke because of the modern infrastructure building and the measures that were taken from time to time during the colonial and post colonial periods to link it with the rest of India. It is in this backdrop, that this paper is an attempt to trace the evolution and development of the modern means of communication in Kashmir. The paper has been confined to the postal system in Kashmir Valley. The commencement of the Dogra regime that is 1846 A.D. has been fixed as the starting point of the study. And it is till the close of the twentieth century that the growth of this very important sector has been traced and studied which is very important for any socio-economic and the political system to sustain and thrive progressively.

Keywords: Postal System, Kashmir, Communication, Development

Introduction

Postal system formed an important branch of communication between countries in the development of both internal and external trade which in turn boost not only the country's economy but equally its political and strategic stand.¹ Prior to the transfer of Kashmir valley to Maharaja Ghulab Singh, there existed a runner post between Lahore and Srinagar. This system was in existence since the Sikh regime.² Gulab Singh however extended his Lahore-Jammu postal system to Srinagar to maintain the communication between the two capitals of his state. But this facility was not for the public convenience neither it was supposed to serve the European visitors, who came chiefly from the cantonments in Rawalpindi and the adjoining areas. It is in this backdrop that a notice was sent to government of India by the then Postmaster General, north-west province in a letter in 1851. The letter read as "there is no post office in Cashmere, and no letter can now be sent from or to cashmere. There are a considerable number of British officers who visit cashmere during summer who suffer from the absence of communications. The other people who suffer are the shawl merchants of Noorpur, Amritsar and Ludhiana, and their only mode of communication is by *Qasid*³ which is both slow and expensive."⁴

Some Interventions

The post master general submitted an estimate of the expenses of the postal system to Kashmir with the hope that government would approve the framed proposal and permit him to bring into operation with the organizational set up as one writer at Kashmir, a peon, 12 runners from Gujarat to Bhimber and 44 runners from Bhimber to Kashmir. All this was estimated at the cost of 328 rupees. Another proposal formulated by him was if post office could not be set up in Kashmir he suggested to assign the duty of delivering letters to British visitors to the official new-writer who was posted at Srinagar to whom services and maintenance allowances should be given.⁵

After a proper discussion at the board of administration at Punjab, some further inquiries were demanded. Consequently a revised estimate was sent by the post master general at an estimated cost of 503 rupees. The proposal read as “assuming Srinagar to be 200 miles distant, the distance be divided into 40 stages of 5 miles and 2 men to be employed at each stage, 1 head overseer, 2 assistants, 1 writer at Srinagar, 1 peon to be the organizational structure of the post to be setup at Srinagar.”

No further attempt was made to establish an imperial postal system to Kashmir till the death of Maharaja Ghulab Singh. Only the existing system between Jammu and Srinagar was made a little more efficient and quick.⁶ With the increase in the number of European visitors to Kashmir, Maharaja Ranbir Singh was persuaded to permit the British to extend the postal system from Murre to Srinagar and from Leh to Muree

In 1880, there were only two post offices. The state had its own postal service and used its own postage stamps although as far back as 1876. There were Indian post offices at Srinagar and Leh.⁷ The state stamps, were, however, used for only local purposes. The letters and other postal articles passing between the post offices of the state and India had to be affixed with both the state and Indian postage.⁸ In 1890, the postal system was re-organized. As a result the dual postage system was abolished. The Domel line of the runners was also abolished and the Tonga mail service was started for the conveyance of the imperial mails by the Jhelum Valley Road. In 1894, the state postal and telegraphs system was entirely amalgamated with India.⁹ Thereafter its progress was very rapid. From two in 1890, the number of post offices rose to 80 in 1900,¹⁰ 106 in 1911 and 146 in 1920. In 1918 the Tonga mail service between Srinagar and Rawalpindi was replaced by the postal motor mail service.¹¹

Post 1947 Scenario

The post-independence developments reveal that there was seen a considerable improvement and speedy development in the communication system particularly after planning. Considerable amount has been spent from time to time for the improvement of the communication system. The table below stands testimony to this.

Table.1. Kashmir Valley-Distribution of Post office (District wise) - 1998

District	No. of post office			Total	Population dependent per post office
	Head office	Sub office	Branch office		
Anantnag	1	20	147	168	4918
Pulwama	-	9	88	97	5324
Srinagar	1	48	58	107	8341
Badgam	-	7	73	80	6216
Baramulla	1	14	149	164	5251
Kupwara	-	6	66	72	5783
Total Kashmir Valley	3	104	581	680	5829

Source: Post Master General, Srinagar

On an average 5829 persons were dependent per post office in Kashmir Valley.¹² There are also inter-district variations as the table revealed. Baramulla, Srinagar and Anantnag were having the highest number of post offices while as Kupwara, Budgam and Pulwama contained the comparatively lesser number of post offices in the valley.

Table.2. Population Dependence in the Districts of Kashmir Valley

S. No.	District	Population dependent per post office
1	Anantnag	4918
2	Pulwama	5324
3	Srinagar	8341
4	Badgam	6216
5	Baramulla	5251

6	Kupwara	5783
7	Total Kashmir Valley	5829

Source: Postmaster General, Srinagar

When it comes to the population dependence on postal service the as per the data the capital city of Srinagar reveals the highest number followed by Budgam¹³.

Conclusion

The state of Jammu and Kashmir was declared one of the backward states at the time of independence. One more important thing is the peculiar and mountain locked geographical features of the valley of Kashmir that kept it isolated for a longer period of time. It was certainly after 1947 particularly after planning when the government attention towards the infrastructural development took place. As is evident from the data available, that there was a proper fund allocation through various annual and five year plans which boosted the infrastructural growth. The postal service as one of the important amenities for both the rural and urban people also showed a considerable development and was aligned on modern lines particularly after the planning era. The number of post offices and the population dependence shows a significant improvement.

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 - ⁷ Walter Lawrence, *The valley of Kashmir*
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 - ¹³ As per the data from Post Master General, Srinagar