Pandora's Post Box: Empire and Information in India, 1854-1914

At some point following the end of World War One, Dhurjatiprasad Mukherjee, the Bengali sociologist, was walking past a bookshop located behind Calcutta's College Square. Suddenly, the owner of the shop ran outside to usher him within, into a backroom warehouse frequented by a select group of the city's book lovers. On entering, Dhurjati saw two such aficionados, 'their eyes thirsty like those of an alcohol lover eyeing a bottle of champagne', already huddled around a shop employee, watching as he broke open the latest crates to have arrived from Europe. The older of the two was Pramatha Chaudhuri, a barrister and the editor of a modernist Bengali magazine. Dressed like an aristocrat, 'in perfect Bengali attire', Pramatha carried in his hand an empty gold cigarette holder. As he addressed his younger companion, the fingers which clasped it began to tremble in anticipation:

> "You see, this new poetry now being written in England and France contains a very big tragedy behind all that seeming disorder of meter and rhyme. The Great War came and destroyed all the old-world beliefs in the minds of their young, their restless minds are seeking a new refuge. I will show you [an example] if the book has arrived by this mail …oh, here you are, Dhurjati, welcome![1]"

[1] This scene is from Nripendrakrishna Chattopadhay's 'Adda,' in *Nana Katha* (Calcutta, 1978), pp. 4-6. The translated excerpt quoted here is taken from D. Chakrabarty's, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, 2000), pp. 199-200.

Or so the story goes. This reconstruction, by another literary near-contemporary, features in the scholar Dipesh Chakrabarty's evocative examination of *adda*, the Bengali practice of verbal jousting and intellectual sociability centred on the discussion of literature, news and gossip. Chakrabarty notes that through the act of reading, and of gathering together to talk about reading, literati such as Dhurjati and Pramatha imagined themselves citizens of a 'global literary cosmopolis'.[2]

It is surprising, therefore, that the key imperial mechanism which afforded such a sense of connectedness has mostly escaped scholarly attention. The imperial postal service, which took root in India following new legislation introduced in 1854, would over the next six decades expand to integrate most of Britain's Indian and then its wider Asian Empire. The regularity of its mails would be what eventually prompted the likes of Pramatha and friends to scurry into the back rooms of Calcutta bookshops in anticipation of the latest literary marvels from Europe. Its geographic scope would inspire another notable Indian litterateur, the Parsi Indian National Congressman Sir Dinshaw Edulji Wacha, to devote an entire chapter of his autobiography to its history. Published in 1920, Wacha's memoirs trace the 'evolution' of the General Post Office in his home city of Bombay from the days when it was merely a 'congerie of small mean buildings' which gave no hint of its future 'world service', into what he called 'verily the "Literary Gate of Asia" and no mistake'.[3]

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[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 199.
[3] D.E. Wacha, *Shells from the Sands of Bombay: Being my Recollections and Reminiscences, 1860-1875* (Bombay, 1920), pp. 218-37, 225-6, 236.

What historians have written about the imperial postal service in India has mostly presented it as an instrument of colonial state-building, and for obvious reasons. The history of the service appears to fit neatly into broader narratives of imperial consolidation, domination and control. Senior colonial officials in India had from the 1820s imagined roads, railways and steamships, the means by which Britain would convey mail across its imperial possessions, as tools of government and 'the defensive means of the empire'.[4] During the Indian Rebellion of 1857, as both colonizers and rebels fought to defend their routes of communication and disrupt those of their enemy, the strategic significance of the official post became clear.[5] Scholars have also theorised that postal systems function as arms of the state which enable it to 'see' its domains more clearly. The coverage and ordering of space they offer governments allow them to fix their subjects at permanent addresses, to mount epic census-taking efforts, and to more effectively collect rents and taxes.[6] In India, the arrival of an integrated postal service coincided with a new era of intrusiveness by the colonial government, which included a heightened surveillance of its subjects and a growing concern to control their movements.[7] It therefore becomes easy to view the postal service in India as both symbol and instrument of an all-seeing and all-encompassing modern imperial leviathan.

Yet the irony of this great leviathan is the way in which it simultaneously enhanced both the physical mobility of its subjects and the reach of their written and printed thoughts. For while the desire for surveillance, knowledge and control certainly pulled India's colonial administrators

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[4] N. Sinha, *Communication and Colonialism in Eastern India: Bihar, 1760s-1880s*, (London, 2012) pp. 24-32.

[5] C.A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 315-37.

[6] See P. Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City* (London, 2003), pp. 20-61; and his more recent *The State of Freedom: A Social History of the British State since 1800* (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 88-90. More generally, see James Scott, *Seeing like a State: how certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed* (New Haven, CT, 1998).

[7] For a concise summary, see B.D. Metcalf and T.R. Metcalf, *A Concise History of Modern India* (2nd edn, Cambridge, 2006), pp. 92-114.

in one direction, their commitment to early-Victorian notions of free trade, which in turn demanded an unrestricted flow of information, pulled them in another.

As this essay suggests, it was this contradictory official impulse which makes the story of colonial India's postal service part of the now well-studied history of liberalism in the British Empire. However, we are concerned here not so much with those classical yet Eurocentric liberal thinkers such as Edmund Burke and John Stuart Mill who discoursed about British India;[8] nor with those Western-educated Indian literati who appropriated, cannibalized and then redirected European classical liberal thought;[9] nor with the colonial policy-makers and indigenous leaders who in nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal articulated a 'vernacular' yet apparently still 'Lockean' liberalism during disputes over peasant property rights.[10] Rather, this study aims to recover what might initially seem the strange and anomalous echoes of the classic liberal state in Britain as they reverberated thousands of miles away in what was often a very illiberal colonial context.

Patrick Joyce has defined the liberal state as one that 'systematically deploys' political as well as (crucially, in our case) administrative freedom 'as a means of governance'. In Victorian Britain, he argues, the liberal state strove to organize and configure society to be free – in particular, by enhancing the 'connectedness' of its subjects through the 'remarkable extension of its communicative powers'. For Joyce, the British postal service, from the introduction of Rowland Hill's penny post scheme in 1840, and thereafter operating as a department left largely free to determine its own policy, is an emblematic exemplar of the 'mundane state in its liberal forms'. Joyce, nonetheless, regards the effort to extend this liberalizing state instrument to the British

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[8] U. Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago, 1999).
[9] C. A. Bayly, *Recovering liberties: Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire* (Cambridge, 2012).
[10] A. Sartori, *Liberalism in Empire: an Alternative History* (Oakland, CA, 2014).

Empire as an outright institutional failure. He finds the Imperial Post Office of India, from its inception in 1854, to have been 'poorly adapted to contemporary Indian culture and society' and 'predominantly shaped for British use'. He sees a system in which the 'various Indian vernaculars took a decided second place' as one that ultimately highlights 'the jarring distinction between the actual practice of the Indian post and the liberal values of unfettered and universal freedom of communication'.[11]

The remainder of this essay challenges this analysis. It argues, through a closer examination of the interwoven causes and consequences of postal reform in Britain and her empire, that from 1854 India experienced a postally-induced information explosion which at a popular level affected educated Indian elites and semi-literate and illiterate Indian subalterns alike. It describes how the imperial state, through the extension of postal services, not only presented itself as a liberal institution but out of necessity was sometimes forced to behave like one. Lastly, this essay suggests that the transformation in the relationship between empire and information that can be traced back to this liberal shift reveals much about the everyday foundations of British imperial authority in India, not to mention its limits.

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In *Empire and Information*, now considered a classic study, the late C. A. Bayly introduced the notion of the north Indian *ecumene* – a term he used to describe the unified community of thought and communication, and the 'form of cultural and political debate' within it, which predated print 'yet persisted in conjunction with the press and new forms of publicity into the age of nationalism'. This was a world in which discussions of politics, religion, rights, duties and

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[11] Joyce, *State of Freedom*, pp. 1-10, 20, 71-2.

aesthetics had long been conducted via handwritten media which reinforced traditional practices of oral recitation. By the early nineteenth century, the participants in these discussions included traders, diplomats, East India Company [EIC] *munshis*, scholars, jurists, municipal office-holders and clerks in colonial departments. Given the right context, the public which formed around these debates could stretch to include illiterate or semi-literate yet 'literacy-aware…butchers, flower-sellers, bazaar merchants and artisans'.[12]

The striking feature of this ecumene was the ease with which information – in the form of news, views and rumour – moved through it. It travelled as personal correspondence, public newsletter and placard, or satirical song and play. It was carried, often very cheaply, by *harkaras* [runners, literally 'men of all work'] employed by princely and private-owned *daks* [posts], by itinerant merchants and soldiers, as well as a whole host of wandering performers such as bards, puppeteers, actors and jugglers. It was consumed across India's town bazaars, luxurious salons and at its traditional associations of learned men, devoured and then digested in druggist stalls, sweetshops and bustling temple courtyards.[13]

The efficiency of these channels stood in stark contrast to the lines of communication introduced by India's colonizers. By the end of the eighteenth century, Company mails ran by land and by sea between the presidency capitals of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras, and between these cities and the important towns of the interior. In the *mofussil* [interior], District Collectors organized mail couriers that linked their headquarters with the police and revenue stations of the sub-district, funding a system that became known as the District Post or '*zamindari* [landlord] post' through levies raised from Indian landowners. In Bengal, after the Company post was opened

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[12] Bayly, *Empire and Information*, pp. 180-211
[13] *Ibid.*, pp. 199-211.

to private correspondence in the mid-1770s, the official view developed that the provision of mails services was not merely a political necessity, but a public duty and potential source of profit. From 1800, an official effort to improve the accessibility of the 'English Dawk' saw postal rates translated into Persian and Bengali, and advertisements run in newspapers 'for the purpose', so the Presidency's Postmaster General put it, 'of giving confidence to natives with respect to the care of letter, etc. which they may intrust.'[14]

However, for most Indians the 'English Dawk' remained an expensive, cumbersome and largely Anglophone affair. Its reliability can be measured by the 20,000 letters that in 1833 lay unclaimed at the Calcutta Post Office. Postmasters blamed such failures on the native penchant for obscure languages, faulty addresses and refusals of payment.[15] Looking back, Geoffrey Clarke, the later Postmaster General of India's North-Western Provinces, recorded that it did not help matters that postal officials were at this time 'inclined to get as much as possible out of the public'. The system they ran amounted to 'a medley of services in different provinces, each having separate rules and different rates of postage' which encouraged charges that were often arbitrary if not outright exploitative. In 1834, the Bombay Post Office began to charge 'native' letters a higher rate than European, on the grounds that they were written in smaller handwriting and on cheaper, therefore lighter, paper. More generally, the practice of levying postage according to distance, when distances were largely unknown, ensured that the position of humble postal clerk became, so Clarke put it, a 'distinctly lucrative one'. Upon the arrival of a postal runner in large cantonments, the responsibility of collecting and distributing mail fell on military officers, who could not be trusted to provide anything more than a 'sketchy' supervision, particularly during the

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[14] M. Fisher, 'The East India Company's "Suppression of the Native Dak"', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 31, 3 (1994), pp. 311-348, 319-25.
[15] *Ibid.*, p. 326.

'snipe-shooting season'. At the district level in Bengal, these duties usually fell to the local police.[16]

As Britain consolidated its hegemony across India, the popularity of 'native' *daks* when compared with the 'English Dawk' raised mounting official concern. In Company eyes, private *daks* that ran across its territories posed a threat its sovereignty and its perceived right to revenue. Their cheapness, speed and reliability challenged the status of British officials as self-styled purveyors of enlightened scientific method. In 1830, the government of the Bombay Presidency moved to outlaw private *daks* on the grounds that they drained 'public postage revenue' and encouraged smuggling and robbery.[17] The Company's overall suppression of indigenous and unofficial mails came in 1837 when a new Postal Act granted it the sole right to convey correspondence across its territories and imposed a hefty fifty rupee fine on anyone found to have employed alternative services. By the middle of the century, most private *daks* had ceased their operations in British India. The few which remained were those the Company licensed to operate where its mails did not.[18]

The 1837 legislation was also the result of the utilitarian-minded Governor General William Bentinck's push for 'scientific' reform. Drawing on polymetric tables derived from India's first topographical survey, it laid down that the three Presidency Post Offices would thereafter be amalgamated into a single service which would set uniform postage rates according to the actual distances involved. India had in theory gained its first integrated 'public' postal

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[16] G. Clarke, *The Post Office of India and its Story* (London, 1921), pp. 1-2, 17; Fisher, 'The Company's "Suppression"', pp. 319, 338.

[17] *Ibid.*, pp. 319-326, 331-5. Protests from Indian merchants in Bombay saw the full extent of the 1830 ban eventually relaxed.

[18] *Report of the Commissioners for Post Office Enquiry* (Calcutta, 1851), pp. 27-30.

system. In practice, the government's failure to replace the indigenous services it had suppressed meant Indians became subject to an exorbitant, inefficient and unpopular colonial monopoly.[19]

Bayly, writing in *Empire and Information*, notes the irony of a situation in which the British strove to increase, yet at the same time tax and control the diffusion of information. Unlike in Britain, he ventures, the 'information revolution in India may, paradoxically, have been accompanied by a restriction of popular written communication.'[20] However, the glaring omission in his study is any discussion of what happened next – namely, the Indian Postal Act of 1854, which ended the practice of levying postage according to distance, and introduced postage stamps and an India-wide penny post. Having noted the strategic significance of post offices during the 1857 Indian Rebellion, Bayly does not pay them much further attention. Though he briefly concedes that by the late-1860s sub-district level mails had improved significantly, bringing regular correspondence to village police posts, he is more concerned to highlight the state's postal failure to penetrate further into the district. Such shortcomings at a village level support his conclusion that rural India's eventual integration into an imperial network of communication and knowledge-gathering owed less to 'effective government policy' and more to the gradual 'social change' that resulted from the movement to the countryside of literate 'Indian actors', such as village school teachers, letter-writers and litigators.[21]

However, Bayly halts his study around the year 1870, thus giving us a freeze-frame view of postal failure in the Indian *desh* [countryside] just at the moment when, as we shall shortly see,

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[19] Clarke, *Post Office of India*, p. 17.
[20] Bayly, *Empire and Information*, pp. 217-18.
[21] See *ibid*, pp. 335-36. Drawing on evidence from the North-Western Provinces in 1866, Bayly observes that beyond the *thana* [rural police post] deliveries of mail were slow and uncertain, and they remained in the hands of policemen and village watchmen. Villagers were reluctant to use this service because of their unfamiliarity with it, its exorbitant cost, and their distance from the nearest professional letter-writer. Bayly casts literate 'Indian actors' as responsible for eventually bringing urban forms of information and communication to the countryside, such as the vernacular newspaper, which was often read aloud under the tree at the centre of the village.

the Imperial Post Office embarked on a massive rural expansion, one that brought thousands of literate Indian actors – in particular, Indian postmasters – to the villages of the *mofussil*. Bayly is at times also hamstrung by his overall intention, so he puts it, to 'soften the sharp break between tradition and nationalist modernity' by highlighting the resilience of India's old ecumene and the 'techniques of communication, debate and persuasion' which carried over into the post-1857 era.[22] This concern with continuities produces many brilliant insights. It nonetheless masks the sudden ruptures which Britain's more liberal postal policy in India from 1854 brought about – ruptures which, as I shall now discuss, Indian actors seized upon to explore a host of new information possibilities.

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In 1838, one year after Rowland Hill published *Postal Reform, Its Importance and Practicability*, and two years before the introduction of a uniform one penny postage rate across the United Kingdom, the Parliamentary Select Committee convened to enquire into the issue heard evidence to the effect that, of the nation's entire mail traffic, the 'underground post' was estimated to handle between one quarter and one half.[23] As much, therefore, as Britain's liberal postal reform was the result of political pressure mounted by influential free trade lobbyists, it might also be seen as a product of the state's desire to assert its postal sovereignty and, as the Whig MP and chairman of the Select Committee Robert Wallace promised, to reap the rewards of an increased revenue.[24]

A similar tale of a liberalism borne of both idealism and expediency can be told of India's postal transformation. Having observed the success of Rowland Hills's reforms, the Government of India proposed their introduction to the subcontinent in 1846, again in 1847, and then once more

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[22] *Ibid*., pp. 180-81.
[23] Joyce, *State of Freedom*, p. 69.
[24] On the liberal ideas which underpinned Rowland Hill's postal reform, see *ibid*., pp. 85, 112-3.

in 1848. The EIC's Court of Directors in London refused to sanction the scheme, initially on the grounds that the 'difference of circumstances' in India 'seemed to render it doubtful whether the measure could be supported', and subsequently on account of the lack of available information for them to make a considered decision.[25] The Directors, nonetheless, approved the costs of India's postal expansion during the 1840s: of the employment, from 1843, of stipendiary postal officials who took over the management and inspection of postal lines from district collectors and other heads of department acting *ex officio*; of the establishment of *dak* bungalows and post offices on new postal routes; and of the hiring of more runners, more deputy postmasters (to take charge of new 'dawk establishments'), and of new deputy postmaster generals.[26]

In the end, it was the failure of such investment to arrest what the Directors, in their dispatches to Calcutta, termed the 'continued decline' of postal revenue – their realisation, by the early 1850s that the 'financial result of the Post Office administration' had 'become year by year more unfavourable' – which forced their reconsideration of Rowland Hill's postal reform as the only practical solution.[27] Moreover, evidence presented to India's own Commission for Postal Enquiry in 1850, which Governor General Lord Dalhousie had summoned to make the statistical case for an Indian penny post, underlined Britain's continued failure to assert its imperial postal sovereignty. Testimony from Indian lawyers, bankers and merchants, as well as European postmasters and chambers of commerce, revealed the way the local populace continued to circumvent the official post after 1837 and so evade its high rates of postage. The poorer classes

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[25] I[ndia] O[ffice] R[ecords] E/4/818, India Public Department, 'Reform of the Post Office', 15 Dec. 1852 (No. 47), India and Bengal Dispatches, pp. 194-6, 204-5. Reproduced in James C. Melville, *Postal Communication & C. (India), Return to an order of the Honourable, the House of Commons, dated 14 December 1852* (London, 1852), pp. 3-8.

[26] A. G. Sen, *The Post Office of India* (Calcutta, 1875), pp. 64-5; IOR E/4/807, India Public Department, 'Reply to Letter and paragraphs relating to the Post Office, dated in 1848 and 1849', 29 Jan. 1851 (No. 3), India and Bengal Dispatches, pp. 1463-1520.

[27] *Ibid*., pp. 1469, 1473.

enclosed their letters in those of friends, or in the bundles of correspondence sent by businesses; the wealthier resorted to private messengers. One enterprising group in Calcutta, led by an Indian employee of a 'public office' in that city, established an independent courier service to their home village seventy five miles away that reportedly conveyed 'from 150 to 200 letters…in each direction every month'. Elsewhere, in the Bombay Presidency and North-Western Provinces, a system of 'receiving houses' predominated. The 'native postmasters' who ran this system opened their shops to receive and collect letters, which they then 'clubbed' together in packets for dispatch through the official post to their agents across the country, who in turn delivered this correspondence to its individual recipients.[28] The parallels between this situation and the one reported earlier during Britain's parliamentary enquiry into postal reform would have been obvious. Apparently, Dalhousie's Commissioners conducted their deliberations with the final 1839 report of the British select committee, not to mention Rowland Hill's famous pamphlet, 'before them'.[29]

India's imperial penny post was therefore the result of a convergence of factors and interests – pragmatic and altruistic, political and financial – as is made obvious by the way the scheme was presented in public. On the one hand, postal reform showed the government's commitment to an 'unfettered and universal freedom of communication' which had now become a 'duty' of the liberal state. In the report of Dalhousie's Commissioners, which was published in Calcutta in 1851, they promised their new 'plan of postage', intended to be sympathetic to 'the difference between the circumstances of the European and native portion of the community',

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[28] *Report of the Commissioners*, pp. 18-26, 31. This report is also reprinted, along with its detailed statistical appendices, in Melville, *Postal Communication*.

[29] I.G.J. Hamilton, *An Outline of Postal History and Practice with a History of the Post Office of India* (Calcutta, 1910), p. 169.

would form 'the conspicuous and chief benefit which the monopoly of the carriage of letters enables the Government to confer upon the whole body of its subjects.' By 'almost annihilating distance', they claimed, and by 'placing it within the power of every individual to communicate with all parts of the Empire', it would make India's imperial postal service 'what, under any other system, it can never be – the unrestricted means of diffusing knowledge, extending commerce and promoting in every way the social and intellectual improvement of the people'.[30]

Yet, on the other hand, postal reform was portrayed as a remedy for the deficiencies of an ailing system which in its failure to overcome India's own underground post had weakened the imperial state. The report of Dalhousie's Commission included recommendations aimed to eradicate the practice of 'clubbing' by which, it was noted, 'the Post Office is so much defrauded.'[31] One year earlier, a former Irish postmaster of the city of Dacca, in a pamphlet intended to rouse domestic British support for an Indian penny post, declared that India's postal hierarchy had finally arrived at the measure when, 'finding the impossibility of effectually stopping private posts by the laws now in existence', they became 'sensible that the only method of putting down private posts is by reforming the public office, and reducing the postage so as to make it not worth the while of the private carriers to enter into competition with Government'.[32]

The Indian Postal Act of 1854 that implemented the Commission's recommendations set the uniform postage on a letter of up to one quarter of a *tola* in weight at one half *anna*. In effect, the rate for sending a letter from Calcutta to Bombay, which had before been one rupee, became

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[30] *Report of the Commissioners*, pp. 10, 16.
[31] *Ibid*. p 208. These included setting a maximum weight for single letters.
[32] Captain Nathanial Staples, *Observations on the Indian Post Office and Suggestions for its Improvement* (London, 1850), pp. 1-2.

at once thirty two times cheaper.[33] Immediately, the official carriage of postal articles climbed: by 76.9 per cent from October 1854 to April 1856, by 95.25 per cent from 1856 to 1857, and then (notwithstanding the disruption generated by Indian Rebellion) by 121.7 per cent from 1857 to 1858. As importantly, the new Postal Department of India quickly emerged as a financial success. Within a decade of its creation, its revenue from postage had more than doubled, a feat it took Britain's reformed Post Office almost twice as long to achieve. As measured by gross revenue and gross expenditure, the Imperial Post Office of India thereafter continued to operate at a surplus throughout most of the remainder of the century.[34]

This was a key achievement, in that the service's continued solvency ensured it a large degree of autonomy to determine its own policy. As an Indian postal official put it in the mid-1870s: 'the Government have repeatedly declared that so long as the Department pays its own expenses nothing more is desired.'[35] The policy which ensued was to introduce further postage reductions, generally shortly after their introduction in Britain, which resulted in further surges in the volume of correspondence. In the year 1870-71, a year after the Department doubled the weight for each rate of postage, it conveyed over 77 million letters across India as compared to the roughly 43 million it had carried in 1860-61, a total which rose to well over 128 million in 1880-81 . A further postage reduction in 1898 saw this figure top the 250 million mark in 1900-1901. A further three reductions after this caused the annual traffic in letters across the Indian Empire to more than double to a total of almost 530 million by 1920.[36]

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[33] A *tola* was the equivalent of 11.7 grammes; a *rupee* equalled sixteen *anna*, while one *anna* equalled four *paise* (sometimes written as '*pice*'). Each *paisa* was divisible into three *pie*. Under the imperial postal conversion rate, until 1919 a rupee equalled one English shilling and four pence. See D.S. Virk, *Indian Postal History 1873-1923: Gleanings from Post Office Records* (New Delhi, 1991), p. 38.

[34] M.L. Mazumdar, *The Imperial Post Offices of British India*, *1837-1914*, (2 vols., Calcutta, 1990), i. 73, 75-6; *The I[mperial] G[azetteer] of I[ndia]*, *The Indian Empire*, III: *Economic* (Oxford, 1908), p. 432.

[35] Sen, *Post Office*, pp. 65-6.

[36] *IGI*, III, pp. 419, 427, *Statistical Abstract relating to British India from 1910-11 to 1919-20* (London, 1922) p. 91; Virk, *Indian Postal History*, pp. 38, 45; Clarke, *Post Office*, pp. 7-9.

Yet, letters were not the only part of this story. In 1879, the Postal Department introduced the humble postcard to India at the cheap rate of a quarter-*anna*, and scored what might be its most stunning success. Eight million postcards were sold in the first year after their introduction, and thirteen million the following year. By 1920, India's imperial post handled more postcards than letters, to the extent that they comprised over forty-five per cent of the roughly one and a third billion articles the service conveyed annually. Scrawled over both sides, to the point where the address frequently became obscured, often bearing news of births, deaths and weddings, and of other family milestones, the postcard became the most popular means of written communication across British India, and continued as such until well after independence.[37]

The assiduous way the Postal Department compiled these returns is itself of interest as a further echo of the classic liberal state in Britain and its attitude towards information. As Edward Higgs has shown, Britain's central government demanded statistical evidence at a national level both to measure the localities and to mobilize them.[38] As the Imperial Post Office expanded across the Indian Empire, from a total of 889 branches in 1861 to over 15,000 branches by 1904, it too utilized postal returns not only to direct its policy at a local level but to energize local communities.[39] By the mid-1870s, the government had stipulated that new branches of the service proposed for rural districts would first have to show, over an experimental period of six months, that the value in postage of half the correspondence dispatched and received through them matched the cost of a new and permanent post office.[40] During this period of measurement, the Department paid a small stipend to a village notable, typically a schoolmaster, to oversee the temporary office's

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[37] *IGI,* III, pp. 419, 427; *Statistical abstract*, p. 91; Clarke, *Post Office of India*, pp. 7-9; Mazumdar, *Imperial Post Offices*, i. 217-18.

[38] E. Higgs, *The information state in England: The central collection of information on citizens since 1500* (Basingstoke, 2004), pp. 64-9, 83-91.

[39] *IGI*, III, p. 427.

[40] Sen, *Post Office*, pp. 126-9.

management. But as Geoffrey Clarke recalled, the six month period (unless the branch was a 'complete failure') was later 'extended up to two years in order to give the people of the neighbourhood every chance of retaining the office'. The main aim of the policy was to incentivize villagers to use the branch and so turn themselves into self-accountable subjects 'largely responsible for the maintenance of their own post offices'.[41]

More obviously, the collection of postal data by the Department's officials, and its circulation through annual reports, memoranda and (eventually) India-wide statistical abstracts and imperial gazetteers, sustained the efforts of the post-1857 imperial state to legitimize itself, in much the same way that census data in Victorian Britain was used 'to publicize the vitality of the nation as part of a campaign to win support for the state at a time of political unrest'.[42] The Department's willingness to self-publicize its achievements even led it to become its own (and indeed first) historian. The opening page of *The Post Office of India*, a book published in Calcutta in 1875, announced:

> The history of postal improvements may with propriety be considered a history of international progress. If faithfully treated it marks the march of civilisation in a nation, and by affording a good gauge of its prosperity and mental activity, testifies to the success of the general administration of a country.[43]

The most significant feature of this volume is that it was written, under the patronage of the European Postmaster General of Bengal, by the Indian postmaster of Bankipur, one Ananda

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[41] Clarke, *Post Office,* pp. 95-6.
[42] Higgs, *Information State*, p.71.
[43] Sen, *Post Office*, p. 1.

Gopal Sen – a fact indicative of a further way in which the postal service projected itself as the liberal arm of the British Empire. By 1914, the Postal Department could claim that it was the first government service to have Indianised, and compared to other departments this was clearly so. Dalhousie had in late 1852 gained approval from the Court of Directors for a 'change of plan' which provided 'on an extended scale, for the employment of respectable natives'.[44] Five years later, the Government of India ruled that no one would be appointed 'in any capacity to the Post Office' if there was someone 'deserving of promotion' already serving within it.[45] Hopes for Indian advancement in the postal service were raised further by the declaration of the Secretary of State for India in 1879 that 'for the future no person other than a Native of India shall be appointed to an office carrying a salary of Rs. 200 a month or upwards without the previous sanction of the Governor General in Council in each case', a directive that two years later entered the official Indian Post Office Manual as 'Rule No. 474'.[46]

As regards its liberal recruitment and promotion policy, the Postal Department even had its Indian 'poster boys'. In 1884, a photograph of twelve of the most 'Senior Officers of the Post Office' featured Saligram Rai Bahadur, the then Postmaster General of the North-Western Provinces, who had risen from the ranks of humble postal clerks and who for the purpose of having his picture taken had chosen to wear Indian garb. The spiritually-inclined Saligram Rai would later become famous as the 'guru of Agra' and the founder of India's Radhasoami sect, but not before the Department placed him on 'special duty' as a Superintendent (4th Grade) and tasked him to

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[44] IOR E/4/818, 'Reform of the Post Office', 15 Dec. 1852, pp. 256-7.
[45] Sen, *Post Office*, pp. 67-8.
[46] 'Memorandum on the Indian Postal Service' in *Memorandums Prepared for the Public Services Commission* (Bombay, 1912), p. 14. Available at http://dspace.gipe.ac.in/xmlui/handle/10973/35187. The pagination given here and below is for the Memorandum itself.

trek across India overseeing the implementation of its new Revenue Money Order system.[47] A similar high-flyer was Kavasjee Jamasjee Badshah, who like Saligram Rai became Postmaster General of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh, then rose to be Comptroller of the Post Office and finally Postmaster General of Bengal. In 1898, Badshah also had his photograph taken as the one Indian alongside other 'Senior Officers' of the Post Office (this time there were, in all, only eight of them). He, however, chose to appear in western dress, a sartorial gesture that perhaps signalled his education at University College, London, and the fact that he had been 'parachuted' into the upper echelons of the Department, having passed the Indian Civil Service exam and then excelled as an assistant magistrate and collector.[48]

For Indian nationalists, such success stories were insufficient. From the mid-1880s, they complained bitterly that so few Indians had been promoted to senior positions in the service, noting that the 1879 stipulation of the Secretary of State for India was being patently ignored.[49] Yet in 1911, when Gopal Krishna Gokhale repeated this complaint, the Postal Department had prepared its defence. The evidence it supplied to the Royal Commission on the Public Services in India the following year demonstrated that, of 214 appointments in the service from the rank of Superintendent up to Postmaster General, over half now belonged to Indian 'natives' on a monthly salary of between Rs. 200 and Rs. 500.[50]

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[47] The photograph is reproduced in Clarke, *Postal History*, p. ii; see also, IOR V/12/81*, History of Services of Officers Holding Appointments Substantively in the Postal Department under the control of the Government of India* (Calcutta, 1892), pp. 105-6.
[48] *The India List and Indian Office List for 1902* (London, 1902), pp. 24, 483; for the picture see Clarke, *Postal History*, p. 46.
[49] See, for example, Surendranath Banerjea, *Speeches and Writing of Hon. Surendranath Banerjea* (Madras: G. A. Natesan, 1917), pp. 44-5.
[50] 'Memorandum on the Indian Postal Service', pp. 14-15, 22-3.

The comparatively open attitude of the Postal Department to senior appointments is also indicative of another underlying reason for its successful reform and then expansion. The service's Indianisation was far from being simply the product of altruistic idealism. Like Dalhousie's original penny post scheme, it was a policy born from practical necessity, yet one which in turn could be presented as enlightened and liberal. For when we consider the Imperial Post Office of India as a whole, perhaps no other arm of the colonial government came to rely so heavily in its day-to-day operations on the Indian people – on their already existing modes of transportation and communication, not to mention their sources of local information.

It is easy to assume that Britain's postal domination of India was founded on the technological wonders of Western industrialisation. After all, steamboats and railways (which, in the latter case, Dalhousie had compelled to carry mail for free) proved vital to the conveyance of mail between major towns and cities. The extension of such modes of communication across India during the latter-nineteenth century not only mirrored the imperial post's own expansion, it made it possible. But, as a total explanation, the image of steam-driven postal imperialism is misleading. Well into the twentieth century, most mail deliveries in the *mofussil* depended on pre-industrial means of transport and communication. The most important of these were the networks of runners that had once made India's 'native' *daks* so effective. By 1905, of the roughly 145,000 miles of Indian postal routes overseen by the Postal Department, 'runners and boats' accounted for more than 92,000, while railways and steamers (both river and ocean-going) made up around 44,000. The imperial post had conquered more than two thirds of Gandhi's land of '700,000 villages' by foot – as well as (to a much lesser extent) by oar, horse, camel and cart.[51]

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[51] *IGI,* III, p. 429. By 1905, carts, horse and camels made up just over 8,700, miles of 'postal lines'.

Such a conquest began back in the mid-1860s when the Imperial Post Office, buoyed up by a decade of financial success, moved to take control of India's District Post Office, the system that had been established primarily for the conveyance of official mail from the district revenue station to the *thana* [village police post]. Beginning in the North-Western Provinces and Bombay Presidency in 1864-65, the transfer of district postal lines to management by the Imperial Post Office spread to India's Central Provinces in 1868, to the Punjab and Oudh by 1872, and eventually to districts of the Bengal and Madras presidencies by the mid-1870s. In each case, the Postal Department opened new rural post offices and village letter-boxes. Most importantly, it took the delivery and collection of mail out of the hands of local policeman and watchmen, and introduced a new system of 'rural messengers', also known as 'District Letter Collectors' and later simply as 'Village Postmen', their 'circuits' so arranged to ensure that 'every town and village within the transferred Districts have the means of postal communication either daily, twice a week, or weekly'. [52]

The distinctive role of these special rural postmen, whose number grew from a couple of hundred in the late 1860s to 8,242 in 1904, was their function as travelling post offices. Each was tasked to travel beyond the 'usual beats of the Delivery Peons', to visit every village on their circuit (even when they had no letters to deliver there), and to obtain the signature of a village notable to prove they had done so. Each was issued with stamps to sell on their way and armed with a locked post box or post bag for which the supervising postmaster held the key.[53] The system meant that villagers could intercept the rural postman on his circuit to send and receive correspondence, and

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[52] Sen, *Post* Office, pp. 118-25
[53] *IGI*, III, p. 425; Sen, *Post Office*, pp. 131-2. Clarke, however, notes the possibility that sometimes these signatures were faked (*Post Office*, pp. 100-101).

the practice was partly imitated in some Indian cities. In Calcutta from 1897, and then in Bombay and Simla, a method of 'continuous delivery' required the urban postman to stay out on his extended beat. In this case, the correspondence he received and delivered was relayed between himself and his main office via a series of *en route* letter boxes, which peons from his branch periodically filled and emptied.[54]

The central importance of the humble postman on his beat was that, as someone who typically belonged, or would come to belong, to the urban quarter or rural locality that he traversed, he provided that 'intimate knowledge', so Clarke put it in 1921, on which the entire postal system rested.[55] The British postal hierarchy in India may have yearned for a day when Indians addressed their correspondence in the ordered fashion that eventually began to take root back home. They may have bemoaned the fact, as the Director General of the Postal Department did in his annual report of 1874, that there existed no 'post office directory or other similar work of reference' of the type then available in Britain and Europe 'by which the addresses of the bulk of the native population can be learnt'.[56] Their greater problem lay in the fact that across much of the country most people did not actually possess such addresses.

Clarke observed that few Indian towns had street names and that among 'the poorer classes definite local habitations with names are almost unknown'. In the case of India's wanderers and pilgrims, or the families who lived on boats on the large river systems of Bengal and Burma, no fixed places of residence existed. The best a correspondent could do was 'give the name of the addressee, his trade, and the bazaar that he frequents', with further information sometimes

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[54] Clarke, *Post Office*, pp. 4, 103-4; *IGI*, III, p. 430.
[55] Clarke, *Post Office*, p. 88-9.
[56] IOR V/24/3373-3375, *Annual Report on the Operations of the Post Office of India*, 1873-4 (Calcutta, 1874), p. 6.

provided by referencing the recipient's physical defects: '"he with the lame leg" or the "squint-eye" or the "crooked-back"'.[57] Even in India's large cities, street names appear to have been a feature only from 1870. By the early-1900s, official efforts to introduce street numbering to Bombay, Madras and Calcutta had ended in frustration. Where such numbers had been introduced, they had been ignored, left to fade and then painted over, only to be reintroduced and ignored all over again. Walls and doorways that lay beyond the European quarters of Britain's own presidency capitals became palimpsests of the imperial state's failure to make legible its domain.[58]

Annual official postal guides attempted to discipline Indians in the 'manner of addressing articles for the post', and from the 1880s they became available as half-*anna* abridged booklets that could be 'translated into vernacular, at all Post Offices in India'. The formula they laid down was for the recipient's name to be followed by occupation, place of residence, post-town and then district, the latter being important if more than one post-town existed with the same name. The guides also recommended that addresses 'should, whenever possible, be in English, or at least the post-town of destination should be in that language'. However, Britain was never able to get the Indian public to conform to a universal postal language. In the early-1890s, more than half the correspondence carried annually by post continued to be addressed in vernacular scripts – of which, as the *Imperial Gazetteer* noted in 1908, the most commonly used numbered 'upwards of thirty'.[59]

Delivery therefore depended on the local knowledge of the Indian postman, and on the networks of local informants he could call upon to aid in his official translation and identification

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[57] Clarke, *Post Office*, p. 88-9.

[58] R. Harris and R. Lewis, 'Number didn't Count: the Streets of Colonial Bombay and Calcutta', *Urban History*, 39, 4 (2012), pp. 639-58.

[59] *Indian Postal Abstract, being a Summary of the Information relating to the Inland Post contained in the Indian Postal Guide Aug 1887* (Calcutta, 1887), p. 7; Mazumdar, *Imperial Post Offices*, i. 143-46; *IGI,* III, p. 430.

work. The process began, as Clarke described it, once an item reached its designated postal town, whereupon the delivery clerk read out the address to the postman, who then wrote the delivery instructions on the back of the correspondence 'in a script that can only be read by himself'. 'In a large town like Calcutta' where letters were 'received addressed in as many as a dozen different languages', the Postal Department employed special delivery clerks 'versed in the various tongues'. In sacred places such as Benares, with their transient pilgrim populations, it recruited 'a special class of professional identifiers, consisting chiefly of the innkeepers'. When such specialist knowledge was unavailable, and the delivery clerk proved unable to make sense of the address, the postman undertook the investigation himself. In towns and cities, he went to the specific quarter where the language in which the address had been written was known to be spoken and sought the assistance of its literate denizens. In rural areas, he travelled to the most important place on his beat during market day in the hope of finding, if not his addressee, then neighbours willing to undertake the final stage of delivery for him. The postman who worked the same circuit, and who developed his network of informants, became a living compendium of postal knowledge – a walking postal directory.[60]

For these reasons, India's imperial postal service is best understood, not as a colonial imposition but as an act of mass cooperation. In its day-to-day operations it relied on local knowledge, transportation and personnel; on the nodal points of commerce and information (such as markets and bazaars) of the traditional Indian ecumene; and on the unrelenting Indian appetite for written communication – all of which had, from 1854, become revitalized and reorganized at a national level. The Postal Department appeared to fully recognize such dependence when in 1880 it moved to formalize it. Under what it termed its 'cheap agency system', village school-masters,

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[60] Clarke, *Post Office*, pp. 89-91, 97-9, 100-101; Mazumdar, *Imperial Post Offices,* i. 142-43.

shop-keepers, government pensioners and others now became permanently 'entrusted with postal work' in return for 'a small monthly allowance'. The success of this 'economical method' ensured that well into the next century it remained the principal means by which the imperial post achieved its rural expansion.[61] It also meant thousands more Indians became co-opted into the daily operations of the imperial state. In 1904, the number of the Department's 'Extraneous Agents …holding the appointment of Postmaster' was at 9,371 already one third larger than its workforce of full-time postmasters.[62]

The mundane collaborative aspect of the imperial postal service is also highlighted when we turn to those places where it clearly failed to take hold. In India's princely states the problem came from the top, as the rulers of these territories refused to relinquish their royal *daks*. In 1880, the Postal Department recorded that its 'relations' with India's Native States were 'the reverse of satisfactory': some were printing their own postage stamps, others were using their own 'distributing agencies'; postage charges were often 'arbitrary' and the use of postcards 'unknown'. The Director General proposed that the only remedy to the 'restriction of correspondence that must be the natural consequence of such a diversity of system, or absence of system' was 'the gradual extinction of all local post organisations and their suppression by the Imperial Post.'[63] Several princely states, beginning with Mysore in 1888, did eventually permit the imperial re-organisation of their mail services. Fifteen, however, including Hyderabad, Gwalior, Jaipur, Patiala and Travancore, held out until after the First World War.[64]

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[61] *Annual Report on the Post Office*, 1880-81, p. 5 ; Clarke, *Post Office*, p. 4.
[62] *IGI*, III, p. 425.
[63] *Annual Report on the Post Office*, 1879-80, p. 13.
[64] Clarke, *Post Office*, pp. 112-18, 117.

In Burma, which was governed from Calcutta as the eastern fringe of the Indian Empire, the advance of the imperial post came up against a classic example of postal non-cooperation from below. In the mid-1850s, in the recently conquered territory of Lower Burma, locals greeted Dalhousie's half-*anna* and one *anna* postage stamps with almost complete indifference. Twenty years later, the postal hierarchy in Calcutta observed that there was still an 'apparent absence as yet of any desire on the part of the native population to use the post even when the facilities are offered'. Police patrols remained the main means of conveying mail inland but 'the use made of this agency for the collection and delivery of private correspondence is but small'. The chief problem, the Director General of the Postal Department noted, was the 'want of local postal agents conversant with the Burmese language'. Teachers at vernacular schools were reported 'not to be able or willing to help'.[65]

Following the British conquest of Upper Burma in 1885, colonisation and migration stimulated greater local postal demand, and by 1900 the Imperial Post Office across the entire country comprised 287 branches. Nevertheless, many Burmese still appeared to regard the post office as an alien, indeed largely Anglo-Indian, imposition. In the 1890s, the Director General of India's Postal Department expressed his puzzlement at the failure – 'for reasons which have not been fully explained' – of postcards in Burma.[66] Though, in 1900, the Imperial Post Office did convey fourteen and a half million letters and postcards across the province, over three quarters of

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[65] *Annual Report on the Post Office,* 1875-6, p. 9; G. Davis and D. Martin, *Burma Postal History* (London, 1971), pp. 25-6, 43, 59.
[66] *Annual Report on the Post Office,* 1894-5, p. 5.

these were written or addressed in English and in Indian scripts.[67] Well into the 1930s, the majority

of the staff employed by the postal service in Burma were imported Indian workers.[68]

It should be noted in passing that where the Imperial Post Office flourished in India it was

never a very fast service. The levels of informants and local consultations necessary to ensure

delivery prevented this, as did the system's reliance on postmen who walked their beats. European

and Indian elites who required prompt communication would often send their peons to intercept

the postman as he left his branch.[69] Nonetheless, the service still proved over time a remarkably

reliable one, as the records of its Dead Letter Offices reveal. When a batch of these new offices

were opened in the early 1870s, our Indian postal chronicler Ananda Gopal Sen registered it as

'the reverse of encouraging' that over half the letters they received had to be destroyed, a fact made

worse by the revelation that only 'about five per cent were imperfectly addressed, illegibly

addressed, or wholly without address.' The chief reasons letters remained undeliverable or

unreturnable were unknown villages or districts, unknown scripts, addressees who refused letters

requiring postage on delivery because the substance of their contents was written on the outside,

and original senders who proved impossible to locate.[70]

Three decades later, India's Dead Letter Offices recorded that, of the twenty three million

letters, postcards and other items (excluding money orders) they received over a five year period

ending in 1904, only ten per cent proved completely unreturnable or undeliverable, or just .3 of a

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[67] J. Nisbet, *Burmese under British Rule and Before* (2 vols., London, 1901), i. 265-6. Nisbet notes that the other quarter comprised correspondence written in Burmese as well as Chinese.
[68] As late as 1931, 57 per cent of Burma's combined postal, telegraph and telephone labour force consisted of imported Indian workers while Burmese made up less than a third; see J. Baxter, *Report on Indian Immigration* (Rangoon, 1941), p. 33.
[69] Clarke, *Post Office*, pp. 97-8.
[70] Sen, *Post Office*, pp. 104-8.

per cent of the total of such items posted over this period.[71] Perhaps the discipline that the Postal Discipline sought to instil through its annual postal guides had indeed transformed the so-called 'careless and vague' Indian habit of addressing mail which official publications continued to complain about.[72] A more likely scenario was that the Department's own Indianisation, combined with the occasional benefits gleamed from the imperial state's wider information-gathering exercises, had enabled it to know India better. In the mid-1870s, the problem of unknown scripts was solved by a concerted effort on the part of postal officials to collect and identify specimens of the most common 'vernacular characters passing through the Post Office in India'. In 1877, these were then reproduced in a seventy page manual printed by the Photographic Department of the Survey of India.[73] To improve mails deliveries to 'less-known' and 'petty' villages in the *mofussil*, India's various postmaster generals, including Rai Saligram Bahadur, oversaw the compilation of comprehensive village directories. From the 1880s, using the village lists collected during imperial census efforts, these directories named and located every village of the district alphabetically.[74] From roughly the same time, the performance of India's Dead Letter Offices may have also improved through the promotion of Indians to take charge of key such offices in Bombay and Allahabad. By 1912, Indian postal officials managed half of these.[75]

It needs, finally, to be stressed that as the postal service embedded itself deeper in India's linguistic and topographical complexity, it also developed into a more popular and truly subaltern phenomenon. In contrast to Britain, such a transformation did not wait upon the 'tide of increased

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[71] *IGI,* III, p. 430.

[72] *Ibid*., p. 430.

[73] C.W. Hutchinson, *Specimens of Various Vernacular Characters passing through the Post Office in India* (Calcutta, 1877); Sen, *Post Office*, pp. 104-5.

[74] *Village Directory of the Presidency of Bengal,* I*: Burdwan* (Calcutta, 1884), pp. 1-2; see also the 'Preface' to the *Oudh Village Directory,* VI*: Kheri* (Allahabad, 1893).

[75] *History of Services*, pp. 28-9, 71; 'Memorandum on the Indian Postal Service', pp. 22-3.

literacy and state schooling' which swept through the working classes.[76] Rather, as the former Postmaster General Geoffrey Clarke made clear, the Imperial Post Office in India was:

largely used by people who can neither read nor write, and this is made possible by the existence of professional letter-writers, who are to be found in every town and village in the country. For a pice (farthing) they will write an address, and for two pice they will write a short letter or a postcard or fill up a money order, though slightly higher fees are charged if the letter is very long.[77]

Clarke's striking claim is corroborated by other chroniclers of late nineteenth and early twentieth century India, both colonial and modern. An American missionary, writing in 1918 of a letter he received from 165 illiterate residents of a village located outside the southern Indian temple town of Nagalapuram, explained that 'in every large village there lives a professional letter-writer' – who, in this particular case, had got the correspondents to individually sign their letter by affixing their thumbprints in ink on its reverse.[78] Some years later, Sir H. Verney Lovett, while surveying the progress of rural education in India between 1858 and 1918, noted that when the Indian villager 'wished to send or decipher a letter, he obtained the assistance of his village accountant or a professional scribe'. Citing the testimony of a village schoolmaster in Oudh in 1883, Lovett suggested that the prevalence of such services, combined with the overall lack of

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[76] Joyce, *State of Freedom*, p. 81.
[77] Clarke, *Post Office*, p. 94.
[78] Brenton Thoburn Badley, *India, Beloved of Heaven* (New York, 1918), p. 139.

opportunities to read and write, explained why so many villagers lost their literacy on finishing school.[79]

Recent scholarship has highlighted the letters sent via literate intermediaries from illiterate Punjabis to their soldier-relatives fighting the 'Great War' in Europe and, over the same years, from illiterate wives in rural Gorakhpur to their migrant husbands in Assam and Burma. This latter stream of correspondence was conducted via the pre-paid reply postcard, introduced to India in 1884, which consisted of two detachable halves joined together, each with an impressed quarter-*anna* stamp. The wives of Gorakhpur migrants, we are told, typically cajoled 'someone or the other, very likely a semi-literate village boy, to scribble a few ritualized "wishing you well" lines on the self-addressed "return" or *jawabi* half of the double postcard that came attached to the original missive.'[80]

Mediation by literate proxies could of course place limits on the kind of written expression found in this form of subaltern communication. Yet its striking attraction was how cheap it proved. If Clarke's figures are correct, and we factor in the cost of a quarter-*anna* postcard, then in the early 1900s written communication with any part of the wider Indian Empire became available for no more than one *anna*, an amount that was then equivalent to between one third and one quarter of the average daily wage of an 'able-bodied agricultural labourer'.[81] Britain's liberal postal policy had set the illiterate 'correspondent' on his and her path to becoming an archetype celebrated in Indian film and literature – the professional scribe, who set up his shop outside (or on the verandas

[79] H. H. Dodwell, ed., *The Cambridge History of the British Empire*, V: *The Indian Empire* (Cambridge, 1932) p. 342.
[80] David Omissi, 'The Indian Army in Europe, 1914-1918' in E. Storm and A. Al Tuma, eds., *Colonial Soldiers in Europe: 'Aliens in Uniform' in Wartime Societies* (New York, 2016), pp. 119-39, 129; S. Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922-1992* (Delhi, 1995), pp 36-7.
[81] Clarke, *Post Office*, p. 94. For the year 1903, the *Imperial Gazetteer of India* (III, p. 473) estimated this weekly wage to be approximately seven rupees.

of) new post offices in India's town and cities, well on his way to being an eventual focus for national nostalgia.[82]

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As well as sustaining this popular stream of correspondence, the reformed imperial post in India played a hitherto overlooked role in what became a spectacularly enhanced diffusion of print. For many scholars, the nineteenth century roots of this diffusion have been of less interest than the question of why, given the introduction of moveable metal print to the subcontinent by Jesuits in 1556, it took so long. Various explanations for this delay have been given, ranging from the challenge of reproducing Indian scripts, to Indian religious sensitivities, to the monopolies maintained by India's bazaar writer establishments and to the political fears of Indian rulers.[83]

In *Empire and Information*, however, Bayly entirely recasts the terms of this debate. India's long resistance to print, he argues, in fact testifies to the vitality of its existing ecumene. 'Indians had created a highly effective information order in which strategically placed written media reinforced a powerful culture of oral communication; printing in this sense was not needed *until society itself began to change more radically under colonial rule*'. When such resistance collapsed, roughly between the years 1820 and 1840, it was partly on account of the existing ecumene's flexibility. Indian entrepreneurs, religious reformers and *munshis* discovered that the types of information with which they had begun to experiment – such as doctrinal tracts, legal entitlements and written reports – circulated more easily in printed form. The early nineteenth century colonial

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[82] See, *inter alia*, R. K. Narayan's famous short story 'Annamalai', the Bollywood movie *Welcome to Sajjanpur* (2008), and chapter 11, 'The Letter Writers of Bombay', in N.D. Kundalia, *The Lost Generation: Chronicling India's Dying Professions* (Gurgaon, 2015).

[83] As summarized by Bayly, *Empire and Information*, pp. 238-9. Research by Francesca Orsini (see below) has now challenged the claim that the technical problems which Indian scripts posed Indian lithographers inhibited print's development.

movement for 'useful knowledge' further stimulated indigenous printing, as Indians began to imitate and emulate the publications which it spawned.[84]

But it remains unclear exactly what kind of print revolution Bayly is discussing as having emerged during this formative period. Other scholars have noted the 'tentative' character of early nineteenth century Indian publishing, a business yet to manifest the hallmarks of a dynamic and expanding industry. An abundance of new titles emerged, but they were typically the result of print-patronage rather than print-capitalism. Books remained a luxury consumer-item, dependent for their existence on the initiative of state and private (often aristocratic) sponsors. In turn, the tastes of this official and elite clientele ensured a continuity in genre and content which spanned the transition from scribal to print culture.[85]

Even the considerable number of new Indian-run and Indian-owned newspapers founded during the early-1800s do not yield compelling evidence of print's immediate commercial vitality. In an age before mass advertising, newspapers came and went, undermined by their reliance on geographically-limited lists of subscribers. Those which survived typically drew on private or official support, which in the latter case came in the form of government subscriptions and the waiving of inland postage.[86] The *Jam-e-Jahan Numa*, a Calcutta-based Urdu and then later Persian weekly, which lasted from the early-1820s through to the mid-1840s, is a clear example. In 1822, its Indian editor complained to colonial officials of 'being liable to payment of full postage, which has restrained many intending subscribers in the mofussil from patronizing the said News Paper'

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[84] Bayly, *Empire and Information*, pp. 200, 238-9. My italics.
[85] See F. Orsini, 'Pandits, Printers and others: Publishing in Nineteenth-Century Benares', in A. Gupta and S. Chakravorty, eds., *Print Areas: Book history in India* (Delhi, 2004), pp. 103-138, 110-112; U. Stark, *An Empire of Books: The Naval Kishore Press and the Diffusion of the Printed Word in Colonial India* (Delhi, 2007), pp. 59-64.
[86] See A.F. Salahuddin Ahmed, *Social Ideas and Social Change in Bengal, 1818-1835* (Leiden, 1965), pp. 79-99.

and 'materially impeded and obstructed' its progress.[87] During the 1830s, the *mofussil* circulation of this paper was still a mere twelve copies. Its longevity was ultimately secured not through sales but through the financial backing it received from European merchants and officials.[88]

The challenge for would-be Indian print capitalists was the perennial one of distribution. The colonial administration made attempts to improve matters before 1854. In 1829, the authorities in Bengal introduced a two *anna* and four *anna* postage for newspapers sent to various 'Dawk Stations' located across the three presidencies – a measure which in part explains the flurry of new journals founded in Calcutta after this date. However, these reductions only applied to Calcutta newspapers; publishers and editors elsewhere still paid a postage based on distance.[89] The situation improved when the government's Postal Act of 1837 established a uniform three *anna* newspaper postage across the Indian Empire. Yet, this rate still proved exorbitant when compared with that offered by the private *daks* that the same legislation sought to suppress. In the early-1830s, these *daks* had carried handwritten newsletters across northern India for a mere three *paise*.[90]

The Indian penny post transformed this situation entirely. Dalhousie's Postal Commissioners, being 'not insensible of the great advantage which the country derives from the free circulation of newspapers', and conceiving it 'the duty, no less than the interest, of the Government to encourage it by every proper means consistent with considerations of finance' recommended a uniform cheap postage of two *annas* for printed matter. Dalhousie then intervened to reduce this rate to one *anna*, making it closer to that previously offered by northern India's

[87] Quoted in Stark, *Empire of Books*, p. 357.
[88] On *Jam-e-Jahan's* circulation see Bayly, *Empire and Information*, pp. 239-40; on its European patrons see Salahuddin Ahmed, *Social Ideas*, pp. 82-3, 90-94.
[89] Mazumdar, *Imperial Post Offices*, i.. 350-55. Under Bengal's 1829 postal regulations, Madras was considered a two *anna* station but Bombay a four *anna* station.
[90] Bayly, *Empire and Information*, p. 239.

'native' *daks*.[91] As importantly, the 1854 Postal Act reduced the rate on books, pamphlets and newspapers sent in bulk through the *banghy* [parcel] post to a single *anna* for up to twenty *tolas* [or eight and one-fifth ounces] in weight, irrespective of distance.[92]

Once again, this apparently more liberal policy also reflected the government's desire to eradicate private competition. The Postal Commissioners' report of 1851 had noted the method by which Bombay's newspaper owners managed to 'evade' postage. From the time when, over a decade earlier, the authorities had reduced the *banghy* rate on printed matter to two *annas* for up to 40 *tolas* sent up to 100 miles, these owners had run a system equivalent to the city's network of 'native postmasters' and 'receiving houses'. Packets of Bombay newspapers reached Poona, Karachi 'and ports on the Malabar coast' by imperial *banghy*, from where private agents collected and then distributed them.[93] In effect, the extension of a uniform cheap postage for print across the entire Indian Empire represented the imperial state's recognition that more of its previous attempts at postal suppression had failed.

According to the Postal Department's first Director General, the new one *anna* rate from 1854 gave 'sufficient evidence of the great impetus thereby given to the diffusion of information'. In the nineteenth months that followed, he observed, the postal circulation of newspapers more than doubled, while for books and pamphlets it more than quadrupled.[94] Trade circulars made up much of this immediately increased traffic, although official postal returns do not record exactly how much. Works of print-patronage published by mission presses, by the colonial government,

[91] *Report of the Commissioners*, p. 46; Mazumdar, *Imperial Post Offices*, i. 61-2.
[92] *Ibid*., pp. 379-81; Clarke, *Post Office*, pp. 33, 48-50. The *banghy* post derived its name from the original bamboo stick which a porter carried over his shoulder with bulk items hanging from each end. The service was opened to the public in 1837, but by the 1850s, with the arrival of mail carts and then trains, the term referred more generally to India's parcel post.
[93] *Report of the Commissioners*, p. 30.
[94] Quoted in Mazumdar, *Imperial Post Offices*, i. 77-8.

and by aristocratic sponsors, probably formed another significant portion. Yet evidence suggests that the penny post's introduction also prompted a sudden surge in commercial Indian book production. During the 1850s, the Reverend James Long produced three catalogues of Bengali books. In the second, which appeared in 1855, he estimated that between 1844 and 1854 not less than two million such works had been published. In the third, which appeared in 1859, he claimed the total number of Bengali books published between 1834 and 1859 was not less than eight million. As Tapti Roy has noted, these figures only add up if we allow that around two million works were published each decade until 1854, and a striking four million in the five years that followed.[95]

Each subsequent reduction in the postage levied on print testifies further to the catalysing impact of the imperial post on local publishing. In 1871, the Postal Department transformed Dalhousie's one *anna* revolution into a half-*anna* revolution, and then a decade later into a quarter-*anna* revolution. In 1878, the postage on book packets was likewise reduced to a half *anna* rate for every ten *tolas*. Following these reductions, the postal traffic in pamphlets, circulars, books and newspapers climbed: in the case of newspapers, after the introduction of the quarter-*anna* rate in 1881, by over one million per year over the two decades which followed.[96] By 1920, more than sixty million newspapers were being carried annually by the Imperial Post Office of India, with a roughly equivalent number of packets, most of which contained books, pamphlets and circulars.[97]

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[95] T. Roy, 'Disciplining the Printed Text: Colonial and Nationalist Surveillance of Bengali Literature', in P. Chatterjee, ed., *Texts of Power: Emerging Disciplines in Colonial Bengal* (Minneapolis, 1995), pp. 30-62, 34.

[96] Virk, *Indian Postal History*, pp. 39-40; Mazumdar, *Imperial Post Offices*, i. 211-6; *IGI*, III, p. 427. In the first year after the 1854 Postal Act, the imperial post carried just two and a half million newspapers. For example, in 1878, the rates for books, pamphlets and newspapers sent through the *banghy* post were reduced to one half *anna* for packets up to ten *tolas* in weight.

[97] *Statistical Abstract*, p.91.

Older methods of distribution, along what Bayly describes as the 'recessed lines' of the ecumene, still remained important.[98] Indian publishers continued to depend on itinerant book-*wallahs*, who tramped through major cities and suburbs carrying their printed wares on their head; they relied, too, on the town bazaars which had earlier sold handwritten media, and on provincial networks of sales representatives connected by social ties of marriage, kinship, caste and village. When, from the 1860s, the booksellers of Calcutta's Battala neighbourhood began to reach out to a provincial readership, they drew on trusted fellow villagers and townsmen as their up-country representatives.[99] Often, improved postal services – especially the *banghy* post, which utilised India's new roads and railways – simply made getting print to these existing sites and agents of local distribution faster and cheaper.

Yet the imperial postal network still had one major advantage over these existing channels: it enabled local publishers to circumvent them and establish lines of supply which led directly to their readers. A key feature of print's commercialisation in India after 1854 was the way the medium began to sell itself. From the middle of the nineteenth century, publishers in Calcutta started to place notices of new titles in newspapers, and to advertise them on the back pages or inside covers of existing booklets, pamphlets and serials (such as the increasingly popular almanac). Book extracts served as another form of advanced notice and became the staple content of periodicals. Certain journals responded to their readers' demand for the volumes previewed in their pages by offering to act as postal book agencies. In general, the postage rates included in

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[98] Bayly, *Empire and Information*, pp. 243, 344-5.
[99] See A. Ghosh, *Power in Print: Popular Publishing and the Politics of Language and Culture in a Colonial Society*, *1778-1905* (New Delhi, 2005), pp. 123-31.

these booklists and advertisements were modest, while some Indian presses chose to waive them altogether.[100]

Not only did postal distribution cut the reliance of Indian publishers on colportage, it placed print in the hands of readers who might be situated beyond the personalized networks of the ecumene – who might happen across a text by chance, discover they had a taste for it and at once know where to send off for more of it. Ulrike Stark's pioneering study of Lucknow's Naval Kishore Press (established in 1858) reveals the speed with which mail-order print came to dominate the north Indian retail book market. According to an estimate given by the publisher Naval Kishore himself in 1870, his press received on average a remarkable 25,000 letters from potential and existing customers a year. It was no coincidence that the firm's head office and warehouse were situated adjacent to Lucknow's General Post Office. Some contemporaries assumed that these premises had been built expressly for the press's benefit.[101]

For India's growing population of itinerant professionals, print's increased availability as a mail-order commodity transformed their intellectual lives. At the same time (as Bayly has argued) their own mobility fed its diffusion. Many Indian students in the university cities of Calcutta, Madras and Bombay had moved there from the interior. Despite sojourns in the capital, their provincial ties remained strong. Their home towns and villages were where their families generally remained, and where they themselves returned for festivals, celebrations and funerals. On graduation, they left the capital to work as provincial officials, lawyers, doctors, teachers and even postmasters, and took their appetite for print with them. It was the imperial post that sustained the libraries, reading rooms and debating societies which they established in the *mofussil*. Regular

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[100] *Ibid*., pp. 128-9; Orsini, 'Pandit, Printers and others', pp. 124-25; Stark, *Empire of Books*, pp. 198-203; *The Theosophist*, 1, 2 (1879), p. 33.
[101] Stark, *Empire of Books*, pp. 201-3.

transfusions by post kept these sites and their participants connected to the lifeblood of the metropolis.[102]

Very often, such contact was facilitated through reading matter that was recycled. As in Britain, the penny post in India encouraged the establishment of 'circulating libraries' that collected up periodicals in major cities such as Bombay and then re-posted them across the interior. One contemporary source reported that such libraries 'took up between them one-third of the daily output at reduced rates', delivering papers to, and collecting papers from, subscribers throughout the day, before ironing them and mailing them inland. [103] A notice from the Bombay Circulating Library in 1890 indicates that it offered loans and sales of 'English and Indian' newspapers, periodicals and books to its 'upwards of three thousand subscribers' and had branches in Allahabad, Calcutta, Karachi, Lahore, Madras and Poona.[104] Research that has claimed a 'patchy' diffusion of print across nineteenth century India has, by examining only local sites of book production and retail, neglected this enormous rise in postal distribution, and so missed the essential point: because print was not *produced* or *sold* in a given locality does not mean that it failed to be *circulated* or *consumed* there.[105]

Nor did the postal distribution of print stop at the boundaries of the Indian Empire. It may lie beyond the scope of this essay to examine the full effects of Dalhousie's penny post reform in other parts of British Asia; but suffice it to say that, from the mid-1850s, official efforts to ensure cheap 'colonial postage' between Britain and its overseas possessions, and between these various territories, saw rates for printed matter go down and down, further than those for

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[102] Ghosh, *Power in Print*, pp. 168-9.
[103] Quoted in S. Natarajan, *A History of the Press in India* (London, 1962), p. 122.
[104] See the front matter of the *Times of India Directory,* 1890 (Bombay, 1890).
[105] R. Darnton, 'Book Production in British India, 1850-1900', *Book History*, 5, pp. 239-62, 257.

correspondence.[106] An affordable intra-imperial book post enabled Indian print-entrepreneurs to exploit new markets abroad: as occurred, for example, when from the mid-1870s Bombay publishers began to produce Islamic works for distribution, via Singapore, to the Malay-reading public of Southeast Asia. Inevitably, the system which eventually became formalized as the Imperial Penny Post scheme of 1898 exposed Indian readers to an increasing amount of print produced outside their country. Much of this material came from the West. A fair portion also came from the pens of Arab, Indian and other Asian writers based overseas. Frequently, such literati composed their works for consumption across a wider colonial public sphere – one that eventually stretched from Durban to Cairo, to Colombo, Rangoon, Singapore, Hong Kong and Shanghai.[107]

In India, as across the rest of this public sphere, the imperial post also influenced the material forms through which print capitalism manifested itself. Enhanced postal distribution generated the sales that enabled local publishers to achieve economies of scale, which in turn brought down the retail price of their works. In Bengal, for instance, the same book that when it first appeared in the 1820s sold for one rupee, in 1857 (and on better standard paper) sold for two *annas*.[108] Furthermore, postal distribution contributed to the reduced size and weight of the printed formats in circulation. Book producers and consumers after 1854 increasingly preferred formats that were smaller and lighter, and hence more easily distributable at the cheapest rates of inland

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[106] For the low rates the British Treasury set for postage on '*British, Foreign or Colonial*' newspapers see Lewis Hertslet, ed., *A Complete Collection of the Treaties and Conventions and Reciprocal Regulations at present subsisting between Great Britain and Foreign Powers,* X (London, 1859), pp. 320-3, 325-30, 397-8. For 'colonial postage' rates between India and the rest of Asia see the *Indian Postal Guide, 1873,* pp. 30, 45; and the *Indian Postal Guide, 1887,* pp. 37, 44, 47.

[107] I. Proudfoot, *Early Malay Printed Books: A Provisional Account of Materials Published in the Singapore-Malaysia area up to 1920* (Kuala Lumpur, 1993), pp. 27-36, 675; M.R. Frost, 'Asia's Maritime Networks and the Colonial Public Sphere, 1840-1920', *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*, 6, 2 (2004), pp. 63-94; Isabel Hofmeyr, *Gandhi's Printing Press: Experiments in Slow Reading* (Cambridge, MA, 2013).

[108] Ghosh, *Power in Print,* pp. 126-7.

and colonial postage. Such formats offered publishers faster financial returns which in turn allowed them to recycle their capital. In the case of large works, the costs of production and purchase could be spread over the duration of the complete work's issue by instalment. Across India and beyond, a habit of serialisation took hold which saw lengthy historical and religious epics broken up into more portable and mail-friendly portions.[109]

What is more, the move to serialisation encouraged local publishers to experiment. It allowed them to test the marketability of a new title, author, or genre, by gauging the audience response to a new work as it unfolded. It was easier to commit to a 500 copy issue of an easily distributable twenty page instalment than the print-run of an entire 200 page hardbound volume – and hardbound volumes not only required book buyers to make a greater investment of cash up front but cost considerably more in postage. In Bengal, from 1854, experimentation took the form of original prose compositions known explicitly as 'little books': stories and dramas which sold for between one and eight *annas*. These works, which often caricatured 'new urban lifestyles and mores', had by the mid-1860s come to challenge scriptures and mythologies as 'the staple of the publishing industry'.[110] Late-nineteenth century Benares, as Francesca Orsini has shown, witnessed the birth of what we might call Hindi-pulp fiction – mysteries, magical tales and detective stories, all of them genres that lent themselves well to serialisation as pamphlets or in periodicals.[111] Scholars who have focused on the age of print-patronage in India before 1854 have emphasised its continuities with an earlier scribal culture, and have therefore tended to assert the near-proverbial adage that print 'did not produce new books, only more old books'.[112] However,

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[109] Stark, *Empire of Books*, pp. 66-70; Orsini, 'Pandits, Printers and others', pp. 122-5; Roy, 'Disciplining the Printed Text', pp. 44-6.
[110] *Ibid*., pp. 47-53.
[111] Orsini, 'Pandits, Printers and others', pp. 121-5.
[112] S. Blackburn, *Print, Folklore and Nationalism in Colonial South India* (Delhi, 2003), pp. 1-9; Bayly, *Empire and Information*, pp. 242-3.

for our period, Orisini's summary, that indigenous printing now included 'genres *reproduced* and genres *introduced*', proves more accurate.[113]

Of course, the imperial post did not generate India's print explosion by itself. Broader changes in colonial society to which Bayly and other scholars have pointed cannot be ignored. The emergence of nationalist consciousness, the expansion of education and literacy, and also new technological advances (especially in paper production) all played their part. Some of these long-term changes were themselves a part of colonial policy. The appearance of Charles Wood's Education Despatch in 1854, for instance, set the colonial government on course to establish new Indian universities and vernacular schools, which in turn generated a heightened demand for printed textbooks.

Nevertheless, too exclusive a focus on such long-term societal changes can obscure the suddenness with which print's enhanced diffusion took place. We have stressed the significance of the 1854 Indian Postal Act as a turning-point – a rupture – that established conditions for a new era of print-capitalism. The striking thing about the years after 1854 was the speed with which Indian entrepreneurs seized on print once it became more economically-viable for them to do so. Freed by an increasingly cheap postal distribution from their reliance on state and aristocratic sponsors, they nurtured new reading publics. No longer content to follow colonial forms of 'useful knowledge' in what amounted to a game of cultural catch-up, they experimented with new genres. In either case, their efforts placed them in the vanguard of the region's information revolution, as

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[113] Orsini, 'Pandits, Printers and others', p. 119.

print transformed from a previous luxury item into an accessible and highly mobile mass commodity.[114]

The parallels with the shift in Victorian Britain from 'petty-commodity' to 'capitalist print production' are obvious.[115] Yet it India, the liberal postal policy of the state played an even greater role. Unlike their grander counterparts in Britain, especially those who secured transportation contracts with railway companies, Indian publishers were in no position to develop entirely independent mass distribution networks. In the colonial context they possessed neither the capital nor the option – railways, after all, remained in the hands of the government. So the imperial postal service, by 'almost annihilating' the tyranny of distance, proved essential. It made possible the provincial, national and even regional readerships that established the whole business of Asian publishing on a new commercial footing.[116]

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Once notions of Britain's supposed imperial postal failure in India are set aside, new understandings of the relationship between empire and information, and of the origins of print capitalism and its material forms, emerge. So too does a more nuanced appreciation of the workings of the imperial state. In part inspired by an old mode of theorizing, studies of the colonial encounter have often emphasised the monolithic character of this state. But following a more recent theorizing, this essay suggests that the imperial state is better conceptualized as an *assemblage* comprising heterogeneous administrative parts. Particular historical circumstances

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[114] Similar arguments have been made by Stark and Orsini in the excellent studies already cited, although both scholars place less emphasis on the 1854 Postal Act as a catalyst.
[115] N.N. Feltes, *Modes of Production of Victorian Novels* (Chicago, 1986), p. 3.
[116] See S. Colclough, 'Distribution', in D. McKitterick, ed,, *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain,* VI: *1830-1914* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 238-80.

conditioned the ways these parts behaved; some were clearly more authoritarian in their functions, while others were more liberal. For the people of India, the distinct ways in which these various parts operated effected different, sometimes contrary, responses. As Geoffrey Clarke observed, 'the Indian villager dreads the presence of the Government officer in his neighbourhood, but he makes an exception in the case of Post Office employees … The postman is always a welcome visitor'. The state could be one thing, but it could also be another – both adversary and ally.[117]

The complexity of this imperial state assemblage is further underscored when we compare the imperial postal service with its 'sister' service, the Indian Telegraph Department. Though in 1914 both departments merged and had operated combined branches before this date, for much of our period they followed altogether different historical trajectories. Deep Kanta Lahiri Choudhury has shown that for decades the telegraph service in India remained an expensive and Anglophone creation, one that favoured European business and restricted Indian access – until, eventually, India's successful penny post influenced a change in its policy. Telegraph personnel, nevertheless, remained mostly British, since 'only a handful of Indian recruits were trained in how to signal at the engineering colleges'. Most significantly, the telegraph service was perceived to function, and on several occasions clearly did function, as an intelligence gathering and surveillance arm of the imperial state – the so-called 'eyes and ears of the British people'.[118]

In contrast, even before Dalhousie's liberal postal reforms, colonial officials showed a 'limited state interest in the content of the mails'; instead, they focused their attention on

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[117] Clarke, *Post Office*, p.88. The two theoretical studies that have perhaps most shaped notions of a monolithic imperial state are E. Said's *Orientalism* (New York, 1979) and J. Scott's *Seeing like a State*. On the idea of the *assemblage* in social theory see M. DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* (London, 2006).
[118] D.K. Lahiri Choudhury, *Telegraphic Imperialism: Crisis and Panic in the Indian Empire from c. 1830* (Basingstoke, 2010), pp. 118, 137-44, 211-13.

monitoring new Indian newspapers.[119] After 1854, though mail was opened following the outbreak

of the 1857 Indian Rebellion, the government's attitude to the postal service remained for the next

five decades positively laissez-faire.[120] In both the Indian and European Anglophone press, the

view developed that it was the state's duty, as in Britain and America, to safeguard the sanctity of

an untampered Indian post. By the time the British announced their new, 'gagging', Vernacular

Press Act of 1878, Calcutta's *Brahmo Public Opinion* could claim that 'It [the Government] cannot

break open letters, or at least cannot act on such a violation of public confidence.' Based on this

assumption, the same journal opposed the new legislation on the grounds that since vernacular

newspapers were already distributed by mail, the Indian publisher had merely to post seditious

articles 'to his subscribers in envelopes' to render the authorities 'entirely powerless':[121]

Only in 1898 did a new Indian Postal Act specifically empower post masters acting under

the authority of a Postmaster General to intercept newspapers, books or other documents

containing seditious matter. Yet, even after this, the postal service rarely appears to have

functioned as an effective tool of state surveillance and information gathering – for reasons that

are obvious. As Deana Heath has noted in her study of the imperial British response to 'obscene'

literature, after1900 the postal workforce comprised so many Indians, of which several thousand

were 'Extraneous' part-time postmasters, that European officials became reluctant to accord it a

prominent role in monitoring officially censured literature.[122] We might add that as a consequence

of India's penny postage revolution, and her integration into a regional and then pan-imperial

postal system, the sheer mass and diversity of discourse which colonial officials had to contend

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[119] Fisher 'The Company's "Suppression"', pp. 345-6.
[120] Stark, *Empire of Books*, pp. 83-6.
[121] *The Brahmo Public Opinion*, 25 Apr. 1978, cited in Lahiri Choudhury, *Telegraphic Imperialism*, p. 141.
[122] D. Heath, *Purifying Empire: Obscenity and the Politics of Moral Regulation in Britain, India and Australia* (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 180-82.

with began to overwhelm them. In 1907, Herbert Hope Risley, the then Home Secretary to the Government of India, reported:

> We are overwhelmed with a mass of heterogeneous material, some of it misguided, some of it frankly seditious, the mere bulk of which to say nothing of its chaotic character, renders it unmanageable…This mass of matter has already got beyond our control.[123]

The activities of revolutionary Indian nationalists at this time ultimately did prompt an official effort to make the Postal Department serve as 'the eyes and ears of Empire'. In July 1907, for instance, official permission was given to intercept political leaflets intended for Punjabi troops in Rangoon. It appear, however, that the main result of this experiment were serious internal administrative divisions. Following the discovery in late-1907 that Indian officials had tampered with the mail of a British MP, the Secretary of State for India John Morley demanded that Viceroy Minto's administration in India consult him before any such action was taken again. It took another two years, and the assassination of Curzon Wyllie in London by Madan Lal Dhingra in July 1909, for the Indian Office to fully accept the Government of India's demand for more checks on mail. Meanwhile, in a further indication of the immense challenge to the imperial state posed by the massive volume of material that passed through its postal network, overseas Indian revolutionaries did not even bother to disguise the inflammatory tracts they had sent home in 1907, but mailed them in open packets.[124]

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[123] Quoted by N.G. Barrier, *Banned*: *Controversial Literature and Political Control in India* (New Delhi, 1976), p. 16.
[124] Barrier, *Banned*, pp. 25-6, 38-9.

As the colonial authorities moved to confiscate such material, Indian revolutionaries responded by hiding their tracts in sealed covers, wrapping them in magazines, stuffing them into self-help manuals, or even sewing them into English novels such as *Oliver Twist*. New measures intended to deal with such concealment only generated further bureaucratic fractiousness. When postal officials were instructed to hand mail addressed to students or to hostels over to the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), the procedure resulted in delays, the destruction of innocent documents, and on one occasion in a complete 'break-down in communication at the highest echelons of the bureaucracy'. The question of *who* had the authorisation to open *which* mail remained contentious. All the while, the authorities worked in fear of the public's discovery that their commitment to an unadulterated post was a fraud. While packets could be easily examined then rewrapped, sealed correspondence was another matter.[125] In late-1910, the Director of India's CID conceded that he would 'sooner risk the delivery of envelopes containing seditious matter than the appearance or reality of a police supervision of the post. … We must accept the immunity of closed letters as a small sacrifice to the sacred character of the post'.[126]

Such qualms dissolved with the outbreak of World War One, after which a comprehensive system of postal censorship was adopted across the British Empire. Nevertheless, though that narrative lies outside the scope of our present study, we might wonder, given the long liberal leash on which the imperial postal service had operated for sixty years, how far it was ever suited to a more authoritarian purpose. While further work is required on India's interwar postal service as an instrument of imperial control, the research undertaken so far suggests that the amount of 'heterogeneous material' mailed daily across the British Empire meant that an effective

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[125] *Ibid.*, pp. 38-41
[126] Quoted in *ibid*, pp. 40-41.

surveillance of its postal network remained near-impossible.[127] In other words, India's colonial rulers had in 1854, in a crucial moment of liberal enthusiasm, opened a Pandora's post box which their successors may never have fully shut.

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[127] G. Shaw, 'On the Wrong End of the Raj: Some Aspects of Censorship in British India and its Circumvention, 1920s-1940s' in A. Gupta and S. Chakravorty, eds., *Moveable Type: Book history in India* (New Delhi, 2008), pp. 94-171, 104-8, 131-48.