

The Anchal Postal System: The History of Postal System in Travancore and Cochin

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Abstract

India is a land of diversity. It has a unique culture and civilization of its own. There are some peculiar features in Indian states that stand unique from other civilizations of the world. One among such feature was the Postal System of Kerala. In the early days, Postal System was the landmark of communication for royalty, government, and nonofficial purposes. It helped in transmitting messages and information even to the remotest area. Before independence, India was divided into a number of Princely states. During this time, Kerala had three parts: Travancore, Cochin and Malabar. The Postal System that existed in the kingdoms of Travancore and Cochin was known as Anchal. The Anchal Postal System existed long before the introduction of Uniform Penny Postage by Sir Rowland Hill. Anchal was established in Travancore by Anizham Tirunal Marthanda Varma. Anchal proved very efficient in binding the society of Travancore and Cochin.

Its efficiency was so high that it even competed with the British Postal System. The peculiarity and uniqueness of Anchal Postal System led to its growth and development until it was merged with the Indian Post and Telegraph Department on April 1, 1957. The Anchal Postal System can be considered as a model to other postal systems in India, and also to the whole world.

Keywords: *Anchal*, Travancore, Cochin, Malabar, Penny Postage, M.E. (Malayalam Era)

Introduction

A Postal System is a system wherein written documents typically enclosed in envelopes and also in small packages containing other materials are delivered to destinations around the world. Anything sent through a Postal System is called ‘post’ or ‘mail’. The process of communication through written documents started from the inception of writing. During the initial stage, this communication pattern was more or less same throughout the world. Later, this paved the way for the evolution of unique postal systems. In India, there were unique postal systems from the time of Mauryas to that of the Mughal Emperors. But it attained a nationwide impetus only during the British rule. This was an exception in the case of the princely states of Travancore and Cochin in Kerala. They had a unique Postal department known as *Anchal*. This was long before India’s Independence and Kerala’s formation as a separate state. During the initial stage, Anchal managed government records only. Later, service was opened to the public. Anchal stood as an independent organisation and competed with the postal service of the British East India Company. The Anchal runners are the backbone behind the transportation of posts. The innovations and reforms made by the Anchal Postal System helped in shaping the structure of the present Kerala Postal Circle.

History of Anchal Postal System

Anchal was the postal system which existed in the kingdoms of Travancore and Cochin. Some scholars opine that the word Anchal was formulated by Munroe from the Greek word ‘Angelos’ meaning Angel or Messenger. The word ‘Anche’ was used by Chikka Devaraja Wodeyar II of Mysore state. Other scholars opine that Anchal was derived from the Urdu word ‘Ungel’ meaning message. The word Ungel has been inscribed on some of the old records of Travancore and on some wooden fronts of Anchal office buildings. The Anchal department in Travancore was established by Anizham Tirunal Marthanda Varma in 1729. Later, reforms were made by Raja Rama Varma and his successors on the existing Anchal. Valuable information about Anchal is available from two books – T.K. Velupillai’s *Travancore State Manual* and Shangunny Menon’s *History of Travancore*. Evidence from a copper plate grant shows the reward given by Karthika Tirunal Maharaja to the Edappally Anchal Master for communicating the news of Tipu Sultan’s defeat in 1790.

During the early phase, the functions of the Travancore Anchal were confined only to the transmission of royal commands and official communication of government officers. It also had to transport flowers, fruits, vegetables, and other sundry articles to the temple of Sri Padmanabha Swamy, deity of the royal family of Travancore. Later, the department was opened to the public. The Anchal postman was called Anchal Pillai. His uniform was khaki coloured shirt and shorts. He also had a two feet wooden staff with bells attached on it and a khaki hat with red lining on it. The Anchal post boxes were made of cast iron and were called ‘Anchal Pillars’ as they were hexagonal in shape resembling the pillars of temples. The letterbox featured the ‘Shanka’, state emblem of Travancore. Letter boxes were placed in public by choosing central position. The Anchal letterboxes were painted green whereas the letter boxes of Indian Postal department were painted red. The letter boxes were locked, and the date of clearance was to be marked on the box. The people of Travancore were familiar with the Anchal service and they always preferred it over the British Postal System on account of extreme low rates.

In the year 965 M.E. (1789-1790), the Anchal offices in the state were grouped into two divisions, one extending from Thovala to Varkala and the other from Quilon to Parur. Each division was under the control of a Melvicharippu or Superintendent. It also consisted of a clerk, a daffadar and a peon. In 989 M.E. (1813-14), by a Royal Proclamation, the judicial institutions in the state were directed to transmit all communications to the petitioners, plaintiffs, and defendants through the Anchal service. In 993 M.E. (1817-18) by another Royal Proclamation, the landed gentry of the State were permitted to forward written complaints to the Huzur office through the Anchal, free of cost. In 1844 A.D., the Anchal establishment in Travancore formed part of the Huzur Rayasam Department (correspondence). The staff of the Anchal establishment at that time consisted of 1 Melvicharippukar, 2 Sekharippus, 2 clerks, 1 cashier, 2 peons, 47 Anchal Pillamars and 170 Anchal runners. The Melvicharippukar, besides being a General Superintendent, appeared to have exercised some sort of magisterial authority in inflicting punishment on runners if the requisite speed was not maintained by them. The Sekharippus were entrusted with the duty of distributing payment to the staff. At important stations, the services of Viruthikars (landed gentry) were also utilised. At that time, there were delivery peons only at Trivandrum, the capital. The number of Anchal stations at that time was 46.

In 1024 M.E. (1848-1849), the services of Anchal were thrown open to government servants and petitioners. The private letters of government servants and the petitions of the inhabitants being carried free. The posting of private letters was for the first time permitted in 1036 M.E. (1860-61). Separate receipts were granted to every letter posted and at the same time nominal registers of covers posted were kept. In the same year, the system of carrying Express Letters was also introduced and the distinction between letter and Bhangi (parcel) mails was for the first time introduced. In 1037 M.E. (1861-62), posters on letters, packets and parcels were regulated along with the introduction of Nadacooly or rural delivery. In the following year, several new branch

offices were opened. Registration of letters was for the first time introduced in 1041 M.E. (1865-66). Transportation was one of the prime factors responsible for the growth of Anchal Postal System. Anchal used the services of boats, railways and even bullock carts for their smooth functioning. In 1044 M.E. (1868-69), a boat transit from Trivandrum to Shornur was laid mainly for public transport and for the transportation of heavy parcels. Its headquarters was at the Huzur Cutcherry at Trivandrum and its controlling officer was the Anchal superintendent. In 1888, there were 10 transit agency stations. Out of these, 6 were in the Travancore state, 3 in the Cochin state and 1 in the Malabar district. The introduction of railway into Travancore was by the extension of South Indian Railway lines from Tirunelveli to Quilon. The next line was from Quilon to Trivandrum and further extension of this line was from Trivandrum beach to Thambanoor. Anchal also had its mail service running from Trivandrum to Shencotta. The Cochin Shornur Railway line played a pivotal role in the mail service of Cochin Anchal.

Dated hand stamps were supplied to important Anchal offices in the state in 1047 M.E. (1871-72). In the following year, clocks were supplied to important Anchal offices in the state. The year 1049 M.E. (1873-74) witnessed the introduction of paper for correspondence in place of cadjan leaves. Sorting offices were established in 1875 along with a number of delivery peons for the distribution of mails on a wide range. In 1881, an experienced officer of the British Indian Postal Department was appointed as the head of the Anchal department. In 1882, new Anchal rules were passed, providing greater facilities for communication. The system of obtaining acknowledgement receipts was also introduced. The Madras Government undertook steps to supply the necessary water-mark paper stamped with Travancore stamps. But as the supply of the adhesive stamps by the Madras Government was inadequate, the Government of Travancore commenced printing their own stamps. During 1061 M.E. (1886 A.D.) and the labels were printed at the Stamp Office attached to the Huzur Cutcherry. In the next year government negotiated with Mr. Alexander Cowan and Sons in England for the manufacture of stamp paper for the use of government and the stamps were printed on paper specially manufactured for the purpose. The stamps were manufactured in the Stamp Manufactory and from there, they were sent to the Central Stamp depot. From there they were issued to the several branches and local depots for sale. The stamps were sold by licensed vendors. In 1064 M.E. (1888-89), the first Anchal Regulation was passed and adhesive Anchal stamps were introduced for the first time. In 1065 M.E., embossed envelopes were introduced for the use of the public. Reply cards were introduced in 1066 M.E. (1890-91). In 1892, the Madras Government suggested the amalgamation of the Anchal with the British Postal System. As it would have caused great inconvenience to the state, the amalgamation was not given effect to. A Dead Letter office was established in 1070 M.E. (1894-95).

In 1073 M.E. (1897-98), many village offices were opened in different places under the charge of local school masters. Letter cards were introduced in 1074 M.E. (1898-99). In the next year, the Nadacooly system was abolished. In 1077 M.E. (1901-02) Money Order system was

introduced in Travancore. A provision was made on the money order form for the payee to communicate anything with the remitter. This was a privilege which was not allowed in the British Indian Postal System. The Money order system was known as 'Anchal Hundi'. The Hundi branch of the department deals with the inland and foreign hundies, revenue hundies, government revenue remittance hundies, state life insurance hundies, pension payment hundies and vehicle tax hundies. During the year 1078 M.E. (1902-03) the design of the stamps was changed from Shankha (couchshell) to the portrait of Maharaja Sri Mulam Tirunal. In 1079 M.E. (1903-04) there were 150 Anchal offices and 179 letterboxes. Anchal wrappers were abolished in 1081 M.E. (1905-06). Service Anchal stamps were issued for the use of government institutions. In 1088 M.E. (1912-13), Anchal department started savings bank business. The savings bank Anchal Master is responsible for all the money received in the Anchal office. In offices there is a clerk solely for performing savings bank business. Each day's report must be submitted to the Anchal master before the closing of office. He is also responsible for the entries in the passbook. All the books, documents and records related to savings bank accounts were maintained accurately. The state was divided into 8 Anchal divisions in 1095 M.E. (1919-20). Each of these divisions comprised of several Anchal offices and letterboxes in the rural areas. The total number of Anchal offices and letter boxes at the end of the year was 225 and 307 respectively. The later years witnessed the emergence of pictorial stamps including the portrait of the Maharaja and also of important centres of attractions in Travancore. In 1120 M.E. (1944-45), the total number of Anchal offices in the state was 377.

The Maharaja of Travancore issued a Royal Proclamation on 28th June 1949, demonetising Travancore currency and made Indian currency legal throughout the state as of 30th June 1949. The Travancore Anchal rules were also modified on the same day. The postage rates of the Anchal were changed from Travancore currency to Indian currency and made them equal to those that existed in Cochin as of 1st July 1949. On 1st July 1949, the United Kingdom of Travancore and Cochin which later came to be known as Thiru-Kochi, was formed by the integration of the native states of Travancore and Cochin. Consequently, the Anchal stamps of the independent state of Travancore which were expressed in Travancore currency became obsolete. Travancore Anchal was merged with the Indian Posts and Telegraph on April 1, 1951. At last, the Anchal service of the independent state of Travancore came to an end.

Kerala Postal and Telegraph Circle was formed on July 1, 1961. With effect from 25th February 1965, Kerala postal circle was upgraded into a major circle. The functional bifurcation of the Post and Telegraph circles in the year 1974 took place in Kerala also. Accordingly, on 1st September 1974, Kerala Postal Circle came into existence. Kerala Postal Circle comprises of the Kerala state, Union Territory of Lakshadweep, Mahi, and Pondicherry. Presently, there are 14 districts in the state of Kerala. Kerala have a total number of 5058 post offices spread across the state. Each post office has a unique pin code. The Chief Postmaster General controls the whole

Postal System of Kerala. The headquarters of Kerala Postal Circle is located at Trivandrum, the capital city of Kerala. From Anchal to the present Kerala Postal Circle, the department has been helping people to communicate mails even to the remotest area of the state, overcoming all hindrances on the way.

Conclusion

A Postal System helps people to send letters or parcels nationally or internationally. In this modern era, with the help of internet and other technological facilities, messages can be sent to any part of the world within seconds. Though this poses a serious threat to the traditional postal service, postal system still has the advantage of sending parcels and written documents which reach even the remotest and isolated regions where technology has not yet reached. Anchal can be identified as one of the finest institutions that Kerala history has ever produced. It had a unique structure of its own and the way of handling mails was unimaginable. Anchal Postal System throws light on the methods used for the utilisation of transportation facilities for postal communication. It even had separate sorting offices and stamp department. Anchal was identified as a threat even to the British Indian Postal System in ways of efficiency and competence. Anchal not only points out the administrative efficiency of the Princely states of Travancore and Cochin but also shows how effectively it bonded the rural-urban gap. After independence, it merged with the Indian Posts and Telegraph and later formed the Kerala Postal Circle. The Anchal Postal System which had once competed with the British Postal System now competes among the 22 postal circles of India and ranks top in matters of postal delivery. Thus, in all ways Anchal can be identified as the skeleton of the modern Kerala Postal Circle.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 **21:5 May 2021**

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