

Ashok Ogra

For more than 160 years, lives across India and indeed the world have been upended by the knock of the Khaki clad worker with a telegram. Messages of joy, sorrow and success came in signature yellow envelopes. Families used to announce births and deaths, their departure and arrival timings when travelling. Most appointment letters or transfer orders came by telegram. It served as a messenger for the troops stationed on the border and the remote people. Telegram receipt has also been presented as evidence in court.

There were few lighthearted telegrams too that were exchanged. George Bernard Shaw, cable to Winston Churchill: "please attend first night my new play. will hold two tickets for you. bring friend if you have one."

Churchill's reply to Shaw: "Impossible attend first night. Will attend second night if you have one."

"Dakiya Daak Laya", a much-awaited call for the thousands of cities and villages across India is immortalized in a song by Kishore Kumar in the 1977 film Palkon Ki Chhaon Mein. The postman (Rajesh Khanna) on his cycle was an iconic figure in India in an era before the Internet, carrying news of friends, family and the single most powerful connection with the outside world:

Dakiya Dak Laya, Khushi Ka Payam, Kahi Kahi Dardanak Laya, Indar Ke Bhatije Ki Sali Ki Sagai Hai, Mama Aapko Lene Aate Magar Majburi Hai, Dakiya Dak Laya, Dak Laya.....

As early as 1935, UK Post Office sponsored a documentary 'NIGHT MAIL' - a classic of its genre. The documentary with W.H.Auden's poetry portrays the journey between England and Scotland of a postal train during the night - while in one of its carriages staff sorts out the mail for delivery the next day.

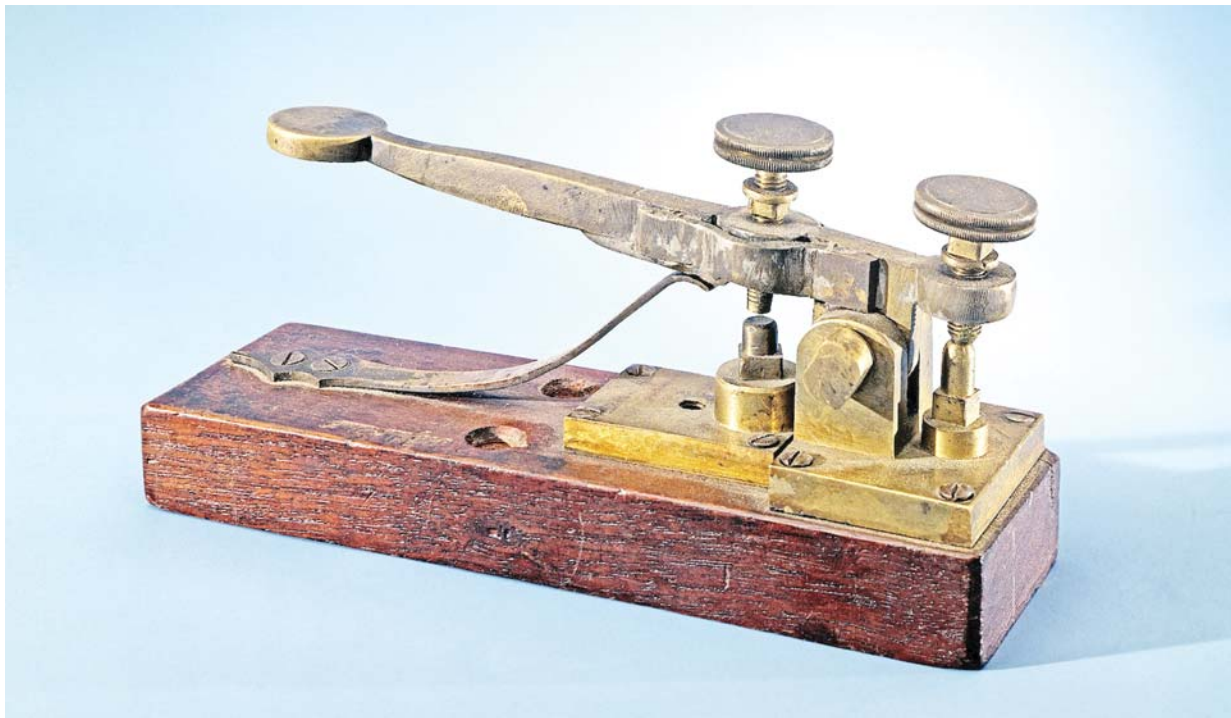
Like the Internet of today, the telegraph changed how business and industry was done, because of the speed of communication and the lack of physical barriers. At the same time the telegraph intensified the carnage in warfare as countries were able to direct their armies in near real-time using the technology. Also similar to today, the telegraph allowed news from all over the world to flood into newspapers, overwhelming them with

Sadly, the era of the telegram is gradually coming to an end. Germany is the latest country in the world to close down its telegram facilities only a few weeks ago. After 162 years of connecting people, India disbanded the world's last major telegram service and its legions of cycle-borne postmen in 2013.

In the days before mobile phones and the Internet, the telegram network was the main form of communication, with 20 million messages dispatched from India in 1947 alone, and reaching 50 million in 1980s.

However, by 2013, the number of telegrams dwindled to 40,000 and most of them were by Indian gov-

End of Tar Era



Original Telegraph key used for sending messages

ernment departments conveying administrative messages to remote parts of the country.

Telegrams disappeared in the UK as early as 1982. The advent of new telecommunication technologies and social media, this service of sending telegram has become a relic in 21st century.

Samuel Morse, inventor of the Morse code, sent the first telegram from Washington to Baltimore on May 26, 1844, to his partner Alfred Vail to usher in the telegram era that displaced the Pony Express. It read "What hath god wrought?"

Morse code originally had only capital letters and no punctuation. This generally was not much of a problem, but during the First World War when telegrams were widely used in the military, a misunderstood message could be disastrous. The custom arose of using the word STOP between sentences in military telegrams so that any ambiguous phrases would not be misinterpreted. The custom caught on with the public. Even after punctuation was introduced, people continued fashionably using STOP between sentences in telegrams even though they didn't have to.

The birth of the telegraph meant that the possibilities of communication exploded; by the mid-19th century one could go to a telegraph station and have a message sent further and faster than had ever been possible. The whole idea of what was "beyond earshot" changed inexorably.

Telegrams reached their peak popularity in the 1920s and 1930s when it was cheaper to send a

telegram than to place a long distance telephone call. Telegrams were used to announce the first flight in 1903 and the start of World War I. During World War II, the sight of a postman was feared because the War Department used the telegram to notify families of the death of their loved ones serving in the military.

The shortest telegram exchange on record is Victor Hugo's with his publisher: "?", he telegraphed when inquiring about sales of his latest book. The publisher replied "!"

John F Kennedy joked during his 1960 presidential campaign that he had received a telegram from his father:

Dear Jack: Don't buy one more vote than necessary. I'll be damned if I pay for a landslide.

The first telegraph message in India was sent from Kolkata to Diamond Harbor on 5 November 1850 - a distance of 50 kms- on experimental basis. In the year 1853, the first telegraph service in the country started between Agra and Kolkata. In addition to sending messages and sending documents by the British government, telegrams were also demanded from abroad by putting submarine cables in the sea. Agra was Asia's largest transit office when Telegram service started. The British East India Company used the Telegram and in 1854 the services were opened for public after telegraph lines were laid across the country.

Taar was the fastest mode of communication in India bringing urgent messages. Since 1850 to 1902, the telegrams were sent through cable lines, but in



1902, the Indian system went wireless.

The British also used telegram to crush the spirit of our revolutionaries. It is recorded in history that when our troops from Meerut left for Delhi in the revolution of 1857, the Lothian Road Office of Delhi got its prior information by telegram. Due to this telegram, the revolution was crushed.

Maharaja Hari Singh sent cables to the Pakistan government asking it to stop raiding bands from entering his princely state. But he was snubbed as Pakistan launched an all-out strike.

Ties gone sour: Bose with Gandhi. Strangely, shortly after hearing of Bose's death in Taipei, Gandhi fired off a telegram to Satish Chandra Bose, Netaji's eldest brother, saying, "Don't Perform Shraddh."

Many prominent Gandhians including Gandhi's son Manilal sent telegram to government of India seeking clemency for the Mahatma's assassins. They pointed out that Gandhi wanted to abolish death penalty.

During the 1965 war, the Johnson administration conveyed a tough message through telegram to Pakistan for it should not portray itself a victim, for which it itself was to be blamed: "We must view India's attacks across Border overall context and events Past few weeks stop It is Clear from un Secretary General report that Immediate crisis Began. With Substantial Infiltration From Pakistan Side."

Fortunately, it is not quite the end of telegram services. This heritage services continue in many places and telegrams are still used for specific purposes in some countries (in Argentina, you are supposed to resign from your job by telegram) - but the final STOP is looming. What a tragedy.

The question is can WhatsApp / messenger texts ever capture the air of urgency and excitement that a TAAR did in its reign of over 160 years.

I doubt.

And don't we miss the hilarious telegrams that got exchanged like this one: A Junior Commissioned Officer of the Indian Army who was not too familiar with English language sent a telegram to Gen Krishna Rao when he assumed the office of the Army Chief in June, 1981: "Sir Sending My Heartiest Congratulation alongwith my Wife."

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Of Monk Nagsen and Nagseni

Ashish Chouhan

In the preceding two centuries before Christ, when the Mauryan Empire's influence was declining in the Northwest, waves of tribes from Central Asia invaded India. The ground for this movement was provided by the constant flux of nomadic tribes called Scythians in Central Asia. They posed a serious threat to the settled empires of China and India. The then-Chinese ruler, Shih Huang Ti constructed the Great Wall of China to shield his empire from the forthcoming danger. But Ashoka who was busy spreading the message of Buddha across the length and breadth of the subcontinent took no strict action to guard the mountain passes in the northwest.

At the time of this threat, Bactria, north Afghanistan of today, was ruled by the Indo-Greeks. Unable to sustain power in the area they started their movement toward India. The successors of Ashoka were too weak to stem the tide of foreign invasions. Exploiting the opportunity, Indo-Bactrians succeeded in establishing sway over northern India. The most prominent Indo-Greek king who extended his kingdom up to the Ganga-Yamuna doab was Menander. Also known by the name Milinda he established his capital at Sagala, modern-day Sialkot which is currently a city in Pakistan. Accompanied by the 500 Indo-Greek soldiers and two of his counsellors Demetrius and Antiochus his persona was awe-inspiring. Also a polymath, he had good knowledge of many philosophical schools developed at the time in India.

It was also a time when Theravada Buddhism was at its zenith in the subcontinent. Furthermore, the passes of the Himalayas were a practising ground of Buddhism in this era. Many Buddhist Gurus and scholars used to roam in these passes of the middle Himalayan belt practising and spreading the message of Buddha. Monk Nagsen was one such philosopher known to history. Born in a Brahmin family in the then Kajangal village of the modern Galigad area of Kishtwar District he was a scholar of great intellect. He learnt the knowledge of Vedas from a Brahman teacher at a very tender age. To quench the thirst for knowledge further he joined Arhat Rohan and went to Vattania Ashram. Arhat is a Sanskrit word that means a being who has attained a state of perfection in Buddhism. Nagsen joined the Buddhist fold along the way at Rakshittal. Subsequently, the chief of the Buddhist order, Arhat Assagud sent him to Pataliputra, today's Patna, for further studies. Here he studied all three canonical texts viz. Sutta, Vinaya, and Abhidhamma Pitakas of Buddhism in a brief time.

He returned to Rakshittal thereafter and propagated the teachings of Buddhism there. At the time when his influence was growing in the middle Himalayas, King Menander in his kingdom was firing salvos at the contemporary intellectuals of the time with his mind-bending philosophical questions. He defeated many scholars of the time which bolstered his confidence and he said "The whole of this land has become devoid of scholars and intellectuals. There is no scholar who can dare to face me. Answering my questions is a far-off matter". To save the fraternity from further shame many

great Buddhist scholars at that time cajoled Monk Nagsen for the task.

Taking the responsibility onto his shoulders Nagsen went to the capital of the Indo-Greek king, Sagala. Assembly was convened at the palace of King Menander and discourse started. Menander bit the dust finally at the hand of Monk Nagsen and became Milinda, a follower of Buddhism for life. This entire discourse was compiled later in the form of a book called Milindapanho or The Questions of Milinda, thereby becoming a major semi-canonical text of Buddhism for the times to come. Written in the Pali language, Milindapanho is the only text available that talks about Nagsen and his birthplace. Some historians today are of the view that his birthplace is a modern Kunja village in District Kishtwar. In addition, its proximity with today's Nagseni Tehsil of the same district via a

mountain pass and the similarity of some other names of the said tehsil with the names of places mentioned in the text Milindapanho corroborates the point to a very large extent that Nagsen was born in the area in the vicinity.

Nagseni Tehsil of District Kishtwar today is a place of stories and myths which beg extensive research. Its name itself has historical connotations. Apart from that there are many places like Damzi, Bhattan, Saivya Draman, Vagamgadh, etc. in this tehsil where ancient relics have been found. Moreover, one can still hear the legends of Monk Nagsen and King Milinda from the locals there. Now whether Buddhism had strong roots here or it was just an experimentation ground for the Buddhist missionaries is a point of research.

Matter of fact is that Buddhism disappeared from the face of Nagseni. But this is not the story of Nagseni alone, it disappeared to a very large extent from the very subcontinent where it was born. Currently, Buddhism is the 4th largest religion in the world with over 520 million followers worldwide. Schism in Buddhism and many other developments gradually transformed this religion. Today if we talk about Jammu & Kashmir Union Territory, the Buddhist population resides only in the Paddar subdivision of Kishtwar District, some 35-40 kms away from Nagseni in the east where the great monk Nagsen once walked about 2200 years ago.

The form of Buddhism that is prevalent nowadays in Paddar is a blend of Mahayana and Vajrayana, a quite different form from the one practised by the Nagsen. Buddhists in Paddar trace their roots to the Lahul-Spiti in Himachal and Zaskar in Kargil from where they migrated. Their culture, art forms, and languages show a close affinity with the Buddhist people in these two places. Being followers of the Drukpa Lineage, they repose great faith in the journey of monk Panchan Naropa to Paldar, his blessings, and sayings. Buddhists in Paddar believe that the word Paddar has germinated from the



A still of ancient ruins of temples in Saivya Draman.

word Paldar given by Panchan Naropa meaning "The prospered Land".

Anyway, there is a total diversion from the culture that flourished in Nagseni many years ago. Today people of Nagseni speak a language that is nowhere close to the language spoken by the people in Paddar. Their culture and festivals show great affinity with the people in Kishtwar. What caused this shift and what happened to the legacy of this great scholar Nagsen?

Today there is no school dedicated to this great scholar in Kishtwar, not any statue or relic which can instill his lessons and teachings in the masses. Milindapanho has shifted into the archives. Many translated versions of this text have piled up in different libraries across the world but the place where he was born and brought glory to has forgotten it. Neither Kishtwar, Nagseni nor Paddar has emulated his lessons. No steps have been taken so far to revive the glory of this great intellectual.

Two millennia ago when Menander put before Nagsen vexing questions, he got his answers. Today our conscience is asking questions about his legacy. And I believe answers to the questions about his legacy will be the answers to the Questions of Monk Nagsen!