

Dak Roads, Dak Runners, and the Reordering of Communication Networks*

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SUMMARY: With the expansion of its territory in India in the first half of the nineteenth century, the British East India Company increasingly felt the need to widen postal networks and speed up communications. This essay looks at the crucial role of the *dauriya* (mail runner) in the development of postal networks by exploring the narratives around popular images of this “traditional” communication worker. Accounts of the lives of mail runners were interwoven with stories of their extraordinary physical strength and the dangers they negotiated along the way, their encounters with tigers, and their commitment to carry the imperial mail through rain and flood. Behind such narratives lay a history of regulations, a story of the making of a “modern” postal system. This entailed an effort to rationalize the system, calculating the speed of running, ensuring regularity, projecting estimated times of travel, and enforcing contracts. This essay aims to understand the logic of these changes, and the implications of these regulations.

The early history of postal communications in India is intimately connected with the figure of the runner, the courier who carried mail from place to place. The *dauriya*, or the runner, is in many ways a familiar figure in nineteenth-century travel writing and literature. Kipling’s lines about the imperial mail being carried dutifully through rain and flood resonate in many stories about runners in the nineteenth century.¹ A well-known story

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1. Is the torrent in spate? He must ford it or swim.

Has the rain wrecked the road? He must climb by the cliff.

Does the tempest cry “Halt”? What are tempests to him?

The Service admits not a “but” or and “if.”

While the breath’s in his mouth, he must bear without fail,

In the Name of the Empress, the Overland Mail.

Rudyard Kipling “The Overland Mail”, *Kipling’s Poems: Plain Tales from the Hills and Others* (1899; 2004), p 120.

dramatically recounted in histories of the post office in colonial India, concerns a tragic encounter between a *dak* (mail) runner and a tiger. The runner, we are told, knew there was a man-eating tiger on the prowl, yet he braved his way and set out with his mailbag. He was killed just two miles away from his last halt. The story does not end at this point, however – it goes on to recount how the village *chowkidar* (watchman) was able to successfully retrieve the mailbag ... and deliver it safely to its destination.²

What we see in stories like this is the connected history of communications and labour. Cast in a heroic mode, Kipling's poem celebrates the heroism and commitment of the runner, the problems and dangers he encountered in fulfilling his duties. The romanticization of the *dauriya* becomes at the same time an assertion of confidence in the "imperial" *dak*. There is a certainty that the mail will reach its destination – whatever the obstructions that may come its way.

In what follows, I will examine other narratives behind these stories, to understand the system of communications that was so crucially dependent on road runners. In the early nineteenth century, when the East India Company was expanding the frontiers of its territory, the widening of postal networks and speeding up of communications became important topics of concern. The mechanisms through which official and private agents tried to regulate the movement of runners provide important insights into the processes through which communication networks were established, and how these impinged on the lives of *dauriyas*.

WHO WERE THE DAURIYAS?

Runners were quite literally people "who ran for their living", carrying public and private mail to distant places. Traditions of running as couriers existed among castes like the *Kahars* in north and east India, *Pattamars* in the south, and *Mahars* in the west. Runners who were drawn from such groups had precise knowledge of routes, and an ability to negotiate difficult terrain. The *Pattamars* in south India were known for preserving their monopoly over routes through closed-shop practices, denying interlopers access to the knowledge necessary to enter the field.³

Dauriyas from certain regions, like Oudh and Mewat, had a reputation for speed and endurance.⁴ The ability of *dauriyas* to run long distances acquired legendary status, even as officials charged them for neglect of duty, and

2. Geoffrey Clarke, *The Post Office of India and Its Story* (London, 1921), pp. 4–5.

3. On the skills and traditional networks of *Pattamars* in South India, see: Gagan D.S. Sood, "The Informational Fabric of Eighteenth Century India and the Middle East, Intermediaries and Postal Communication", *Modern Asian Studies*, 43 (2009), pp. 1099–1100.

4. Taylor to Postmaster General, Home Public, A, 30 January 1839, no. 35. See also, C.A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 63–64.

attempts to short change the Postal Department. The body of the *dauriya* became an object of interest for medical researchers investigating questions of health and life. An important tract, the *Code of Health and Longevity* by John Sinclair Bart, for example, carried the results of an enquiry conducted among “a class of men who perform long journeys on foot”.⁵ In popular magazines, the endurance and speed of the Indian runners and palanquin bearers were subjects of discussion. In one such essay, their constitution was celebrated as infinitely superior to that of educated young men, who were unused to exercise and labour.⁶ Stereotypes drawn from ethnic categories, characterizing certain groups as “good” or “bad” runners were important to the self-representations of runners. Professional runners themselves, it seems, acquired a pride in their ability, saw running as an art, a skill that was learnt over generations.⁷ The skill and training necessary for long-distance running was underlined to define a sense of self, and to negotiate possible competition when the market of the job expanded.

In the early nineteenth century, the increasing demand for courier services threatened the monopoly of specialized *dauriyas* over routes and services. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, reports of postmasters and magistrates “impressing” peasants to provide services as runners were common. They were usually mobilized from social groups at the bottom of the caste hierarchy in the village, those classified in official records as “village servants” and “menials”. Government officials advocating liberal ideas of rule in the 1820s and 1830s tried to distance themselves from such forms of coercion;⁸ informally, however, forcible methods to mobilize runners and palanquin bearers for the expanding needs of the East India Company continued to be used.⁹

5. John Sinclair Bart, *Code of Health and Longevity or Concise View of the Principles Calculated for the Preservation of Health and the Attainment of Long Life Being an Attempt to Prove the Practibility, of Condensing, within a Narrow Compass the Most Material Information Hitherto Accumulated Regarding the Benefits of Arts Sciences or any Particular Branch Thereof*, II (Edinburgh, 1807), p. 107.

6. In a study published in 1910 in *The Popular Science Monthly*, the *dauriya* was an object of scientific investigation, focusing on the impact of long distance running on physical longevity and vitality. The study valorized the physical attributes of the *kahar dauriya*, contrasting his physical stamina with that of young college students engaged in cross-country running; C.E. Hammett, “Middle and Distance Running”, *The Popular Science Monthly*, 27 (July–December 1910), p. 40.

7. Stories about them described how they were initiated into their profession by doing stationary running in shoes of lead (!). See Irfan Habib, “Postal Communications in Mughal India”, in *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* (Amritsar, 1985).

8. “The Post Office is a profitable establishment and ought in my view of the subject pay fairly for any service required in aid of it”; W.L. Mcville, Magistrate, to Bayley, Chief Secretary to Government, 18 July 1821, Home Public, 17 August 1821, no. 18.

9. On this, see also my paper on “Palanquin Bearers, Travellers and the Rules of the Road”, presented at the International Workshop on “Space, Capital and Social History in South Asia”, Göttingen, 24–26 June 2010.



Figure 1. The almost legendary status of runners as a people with remarkable endurance and speed is graphically reaffirmed in representations like this. The strong, muscular bodies of the runners are foregrounded, conveying both a sense of power and dedication to their mission. Illustrated London News, 20 February 1858; p. 196; Issue 904.

The emphasis in official writings in the 1840s was on the need for “able-bodied” runners: postal authorities were advised “to retain in the service only strong and active runners”.¹⁰ Plagued with competition from other *daks*, officials saw the efficiency of Awadh *dak*, in terms of its method of selecting runners. In Awadh, in contrast to Company territories, they pointed out: “Great care has been taken [...] to select proper runners. The situation is sought after and it is always given to the best runner, who has to run a long race, in good time, and to beat all his competitors”.¹¹ A system which had its origins in selecting skilled runners for the King’s *dak* was seen, in this discourse, as characteristic of the region as a whole.

What did “working for the Company” mean for *dauriyas*? Carrying mail in the name of the Company was important to the sense of identity of *dauriyas*. To be seen and recognized as a “*Company ka dauriya*” was

10. Bushby, Secretary, Government of India, to Oldfield, Officiating Postmaster General, 23 September 1840, Home Public, A, 23 September 1840, no. 41.

11. Taylor, who was surveying *dak* routes in Awadh, proposed longer stages for Awadh than in British territories: “I do this, because it has been already proved that in that province the men can run and run well too, such long stages”; T.I. Taylor, Office of Agent for Conducting Post Office Enquiries, to Postmaster General, Home Public, A, 30 January 1839, no. 35.

empowering, especially in regions outside Company control. *Dauriyas* demanded various privileges: they expected food, fuel and other provisions gratis, in their position as runners for the Company. In a petition addressed to the British Resident in Indore, Shahamut Ali, a village headman pointed out: "It is a notorious fact that the *burkarra* speaking generally do receive fuels etc. [...] without payment in almost every village within the limits of native states."¹² Using the name of the Company was also a way of clearing the passage, and forcing compliance from groups hostile to the entry of *dauriyas*. In April 1832, *dauriyas* travelling through Sumbulpur tried to ward off attacks by Kol tribal people, announcing their identity as "*Company ka dauriya*".¹³

On important routes, like the Calcutta–Bombay route, especially in the forest tracks, it was difficult for new entrants to displace the virtual monopoly of established runners, even when they demanded almost double the prevailing rate of wages.¹⁴ The expanding network of "*Company dauriyas*" was dependent on the services of runners who were familiar with routes that ran through the dense forest tracts bordering Bengal and the Central Provinces region. Strikes by "jungle runners" paralysed the movement of mail on the route.¹⁵ Runners played on the fear of the jungle, terrorizing new *dauriyas* with stories of tigers and other predatory beasts. In jungle tracts in particular, the ability to negotiate dangers was important to the self-representation of *dauriyas* – a representation that became part of folklore, and proved useful in the market for jobs.

SPEED, TIME, AND THE MAIL CONTRACT

The consolidation of East India Company power in the early nineteenth century was marked by an assertion of control over networks of communication. This also involved attempts to subordinate local posts to its authority. These efforts were continuously challenged by rival agencies carrying *dak* for rulers in neighbouring territories. Merchants and bankers argued that mail delivered by private establishments could ensure greater speed and safety than services provided by the Company.¹⁶ Seasoned runners were valued for their speed and knowledge of routes. Often, private

12. A letter signed by a local *patel* (headman), Shahamut Ali, to C. Hamilton, Resident, 9 June 1853, Home Public, 22 July 1853, no. 68; (*burkarra* = courier).

13. Copy of petition from Bishonauth, writer of Chokey Seersah, 10 April 1832, to C.L. Babington, Deputy Postmaster, Sambhulpoor District, Home Public, 24 April 1832, no. 41.

14. Babington, Postmaster, Sambulpore, to Oldfield, Postmaster General, 19 August 1840, Home Public, B, 23 September 1840, no. 31.

15. *Ibid.*

16. See, for example, Cox to Minto, Governor General, 7 November 1807, Home Public, 1 January 1808, no. 30; Postmaster General to Thomas Brown, Chief Secretary, 17 June 1807, Home Public, 2 July 1807, no. 34.

agencies poached runners working for the Company to conduct their own business.¹⁷ These transactions were done through the agency of *dak moonshies* (clerks) employed by the Company, who accumulated private profits through such deals. Efforts to control and regulate the speed of runners have to be understood against this background.

Within the new regime of governance, efficiency was seen as intimately linked to speed. Commercial information, revenue and police dispatches, all required speedy services. In the 1830s, demands for a speedy post were also related to the new overland route opened between India and Europe via Egypt.¹⁸ Mail leaving by the “overland” route had to be on time for the steamers departing for the Suez from Bombay.¹⁹ Company officials were anxious that there should be no delays in transporting the “overland” mail. Kittoe, superintendent of the Raipur post road, suggested that contractors should be warned to keep runners along the route ready for the overland mail: as people could not be expected to read or write, they might be made to understand when the mails were expected, by a small piece of red cloth fastened to a thin stick about a foot long, to be passed from stage to stage by the express runners.²⁰

The claims to superior efficiency of Company post were asserted by incorporating many signs of modernity. Regulations were written up and elaborated. Terms under which contractors conveying mail were to function were specified and fixed.²¹ A format was devised for formal contracts. Contracts for the East India Company mail were held by postmasters, doctors, army officers, private merchants, and others.²² The period for which

17. See, for example, correspondence around “Bustee Ram, an overseer of the Govt runners on the Kurnaul road, having been accused of being the principal partner in a firm of native *dak* masters carrying on business between Delhi and Jeypore”; James Ranken, Agent Post Office Enquiries, to Secretary to Governor General, North Western Provinces, 16 March 1839, Home Public, C, 24 April 1839, no. 41.

18. On the overland route, see Daniel Thorner, *Investment in Empire: British Railway and Steam Shipping Enterprises in India 1825–1849* (Philadelphia, PA, 1950), pp. 22–43; see also John K. Sidebottom, *The Overland Mail: A Postal Historical Study of the Mail Route to India* (London, 1948), pp. 52–72.

19. The date for the steamer’s departure was advertised in advance and mail had to reach Bombay in time for that; G. Alexander, Postmaster General, to H.T. Prinsep, Secretary, Government of India, 5 September 1839, Home Public, B, 18 September 1839, no. 6.

20. Kittoe, June 1840, Home Public, 6 January 1841, no. 26.

21. A notice circulated in 1810 inviting contracts for mail between Bombay and Monghyr, for example, specified the number of *chowkies* (posts), distances, and terms for contractors; Postmaster General, 29 January 1810, Home Public, 9 February 1810, no. 31.

22. Sometimes postmasters who started with *dak* contracts for the Company, left Company service and set up their own independent courier services. For contractors, working for the Company meant many restrictions; yet carrying official *dak* also gave them access to routes and special privileges. On this, see Michael H. Fisher, “The East India Company’s Suppression of Native Dak”, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 31 (1994), pp. 311–348.

dak contracts were held could vary from twenty months to three years.²³ One crucial term of the contract was the speed of mail: contractors had to guarantee that runners employed by them maintained the required speed through the period of the contract. Non-compliance with the terms of agreement, by the contractors meant the payment of fines and ultimately a cancellation,²⁴ or non-renewal of the contract.

How was speed calculated? Speed was initially a nebulous concept. Officials, contractors and *dauriyas* had different notions of what could legitimately be defined as the expected speed of postal delivery. A variety of opinions were expressed, and conflicting views persisted even when certain terms became part of the official axiom, codified and specified through authorized regulations and instructions. The renewal of each contract involved negotiation over the basis on which calculations were made. The continuous discussions over the terms of contract reflect official efforts to evolve standardized rules according to the new demands for precision and uniformity.²⁵ Through the debates and conflicts that ensued, we see the notion of an “average speed” being gradually defined.

Attempts to introduce new standards of measurement in the late 1830s were resented by contractors. Earlier, the custom in most regions was to calculate the speed of mail on the basis of a monthly average rate. Contractors complained against the imposition of new rules by which they were accountable for the speed of each individual mail transaction.²⁶ There was also an effort to remove factors that could introduce uncertainty in the calculation. Earlier, contractors were allowed remissions for delays in mail for rain, flooding, and poor roads on the production of certificates from village headmen establishing the reasons for detention.²⁷

23. Contractors were usually given a fixed monthly remuneration calculated according to the distance they covered. For example, Luckeenarain [*sic*] Chatterjee was given a fixed monthly sum of Rs 280 for carrying mail between Calcutta and Jessore in both directions.

24. To cancel a contract before the stipulated term, the government was required to give a notice and pay an agreed amount as compensation. See, for example, the contract with Moorlee Dhur for the Benares-Delhi road, Home Public, 11 August 1841, no. 3.

25. For a useful discussion on quantification and questions of governmentality, see Ian Hacking, “How We Should Do a History of Statistics”, in Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (eds), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago, IL, 1991), pp. 181–196; see also Theodore M. Porter, *Trust in Numbers: the Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life* (Princeton, NJ, 1996), pp. 17–45.

26. Luckeenarain Chatterjee, who signed a contract for mail between Calcutta and Jessore, promised to the following terms: “I agree to convey the mails not exceeding in weight 1 maund and 10 seers by means of foot runners at the rate of 5 mile per hour, during 8 months in the year, i.e. from October to June, and at the rate of 4 miles per hour, during the remaining 4 months”; document signed by Luckeenarain Chatterjee, 31 July 1842, Home Public, 7 September 1842, no. 12.

27. Contractors had to give documentary proof from heads of villages if mail was delayed, because of bad weather or bad roads; Rungaswamy Moodaliar, late mail contractor, Home

Standardized rules of contract enforced in the 1830s gave no remission for rain or flood, or any other obstacle. Contractors pleaded for allowances to be made for crossing flooded rivers, and for poor roads.

In many regions *dak* contractors resented the attempt to impose a common standard of a daily average rate of travelling. Contractors in Central India for instance, argued for a continuation of the monthly system, which was the “usual custom” in the region.²⁸ On the Calcutta–Rungpore road, an agreement for horse *dak* with Bashford, a mail contractor, was cancelled because he did not provide a daily average speed of 5–6 miles per hour. Bashford argued for a lenient view. The Hooghly–Rungpore stretch, he explained, was intersected by rivers at several points. It was impossible, he stated, for horses or even runners to ford the rivers on this route. The mail had to be ferried by boat. The terms of his contract however, did not take into account the time taken in traversing such difficult routes. Bashford pressed for a remission in fines, and more flexible rules that calculated the speed of *dak* on the basis of a monthly average rate of travelling and not on an average daily rate. Postal authorities considered such demands not only unreasonable but “an abrogation of one of the fundamental rules under which contracts are now allowed to be accepted”.²⁹

Conflicts over determining the average rate reveal some of the problems of fixing universal standards of speed at which mail runners had to travel. The search for averages was a perpetual problem: the assumption of average conditions was difficult when runners had to traverse varied landscapes, and continuously faced unanticipated hurdles. Quite simply, conditions often did not exist for the anticipation of “average” conditions. It was commonly acknowledged that an average daily rate of 5 miles an hour over a long stretch was difficult for a runner to maintain. Postal officials themselves recognized this problem. Babington, a postmaster, who also held contracts for mail in the Midnapur and Sambulpur regions, pointed out that an average rate of 5 miles an hour over the whole distance between the two posts was a “fair” rate when the weather was fine. But he

Public, B, 3 November 1841, no. 30; Rungaswamy Mudaliar, late mail contractor, Nagpore, 11 August 1841, to Secretary, Government of India, General Department.

28. R. Moodaliar, contractor for the Nagpore to Rypore road, drew attention to the fact that “in all Provinces the rates of travelling are allowed to be calculated monthly”; a monthly rate, Moodaliar pointed out, was also the practice, until recently, in the Nagpur post office; from R. Moodalliar, to Secretary, Government of India, 2 June 1841, Home Public, B, 3 November 1841, no. 26.

29. G. Alexander, Postmaster General, to Prinsep, Secretary, Government of India, Home Public, 23 October 1839, no. 31. In other regions, the system of calculating speed on the basis of a monthly average was more common. See, for example, correspondence on Rungaswamy Moodaliar, *dak* contractor on the Nagpore–Rypore road, Home Public, B, 3 November 1841, no. 26.

feared that even this speed was not possible to maintain with heavy loads over a continuous period.³⁰

The speed of the mail was intimately connected with the volume of mail the runners had to carry. To maintain speed, contractors had to ensure that the runners were not weighed down by carrying too heavy a load. This was difficult to accomplish when there was a sudden increase in the volume of mail, or a squeeze on the contractors' income. To maintain the margin of profit, contractors sought to cut costs, employing fewer runners and forcing them to carry an increasing volume of mail. Reports noted how the weight of the dispatches made it difficult for runners to maintain a good speed.³¹

NEGOTIATING THE CONTRACT

What did the new terms of contract and regulation mean for the *dauriyas*? How did the demands for increased speed and the expansion of mail networks impact on them? From the late 1790s onwards, there were frequent instances of protests by *dauriyas* who demanded higher wages and timely payment. There were apprehensions that desertion by runners would lead "to the entire stoppage of the Dak".³² In districts where the rates of pay were lower than other neighbouring territories, runners made representations demanding similar terms. In the Chupra district of Bihar, for example, they submitted a petition that their wages of Rs 2.8 per month were much lower than in the neighbouring districts of Arrah, Patna, and Tirhoot, where they were around Rs 4 per month.³³

Frightened of runners stopping work, many officials felt that district collectors and magistrates should be given greater control over the movement of post.³⁴ In contrast to postmasters who lacked effective control over runners, magistrates, it was argued, could "inspire dread": they could, with the help of the police, seize, dismiss and replace recalcitrant runners.³⁵ Magistrates

30. From Babington, Postmaster, Sambulpore, to Oldfield, Postmaster General, dated 19 August 1840, Home Public, B, 23 September 1840, no. 31.

31. With the opening of the "overland" route to Europe, the volume of mail on the Calcutta-Bombay route saw a phenomenal increase, from 450 packets to 5,260 by 1839; Home Public, 18 September 1839, no. 6.

32. From Vanderheyden, Postmaster, Benaras, to Lawrence, late acting Postmaster, Benares, 4 June 1799, Home Public, 28 June 1799, no. 22.

33. Petition submitted to W.H. Traut, Acting Postmaster of Sarun, 22 April 1814, Home Public, 27 May 1814, no. 51.

34. Bushby, Secretary, Board of Revenue was categorical that "the influence of magisterial authority will doubtless have a wholesome effect upon the behaviour of the servants and runners belonging to the different establishments so transferred"; Bushby to Lushington, dated 10 July 1827, Home Public, 1 May 1828, no. 19.

35. From Ewer, Superintendent, *daks*, to Shakespear, Secretary, Judiciary Department, Home Public, 1 May, no. 18; see also: Home Public, 22 September 1829, no. 12.

were seen as officials who could, in fact, help to “materially reduce the time [...] taken to convey the mails from station to station”.³⁶ Police officials demanded new rules giving additional penal powers to magistrates, sanctioning corporal punishment of runners who neglected their duties.³⁷ These strategies of control, however, did not become the general practice.

One petition, submitted by mail runners against Madobchunder Sircar and Russiklal Bose in July 1838, provides important insights into the ways in which relationships between *dak* contractors and their employees worked. Mail runners employed by Madobchunder Sircar and his partner Russiklal Bose complained to the postmaster of Rungpore that they had not been paid for their services. Around the same time, a similar complaint was filed against Goopeemohun Burnall to the postmaster of Bhagulpore.³⁸ Sircar and Burnall denied these allegations. The runners, they claimed, had been encouraged to make false complaints. Justifying their claims, Sircar and Burnall stated that they had receipts from *surbardars*, showing that payments had been made.

Senior postal officials admitted their helplessness, arguing that it was not possible for the government to intervene in such situations. One of them declared: “as the *servants of contractors* are not the servants of government it is totally out of my power to assist them”³⁹ (emphasis added). Others asserted that the contractors had claimed that deductions were made only when runners failed to perform their duty. Having denied the government’s right to intervene in the operation of a private contract, postal officials reaffirmed the rights of the contractor and the obligations of the *dauriya*.

A contractor engages his runners upon the same principle as he undertakes his contract. He fixes a rate of pay, to which they agree, for a certain rate of travelling with the stipulation that they are to be rewarded in proportion to the rate of celerity acquired above, and to be amerced rateably, for a falling short of the fixed rate.⁴⁰

A familiar method deployed by contractors to exercise control over runners was to withhold wages and make deductions from them. The monthly

36. Extract from letter signed Halhed, Magistrate, Moradabad, Home Public, 1 May 1828, no. 19.

37. Barwell, Police Superintendent, argued that magistrates should have the sole power to nominate runners and peons, “without reference to any Court or Board except in cases of dismissal”; Home Public, 1 May 1828, no. 21; extract from Proceedings of Governor General in Council, Judicial Department, 24 April 1828.

38. From Alexander, Officiating Postmaster General, to H.I. Prinsep, Secretary, General Department, 2 September 1838, Home Public, 12 September 1838, no. 27.

39. From G. Alexander, Officiating Postmaster General, to Thomas Leckie, Postmaster Bhagulpore, 28 July 1838, Home Public, 12 September 1838, no. 27. He pointed to instances when government employees holding *dak* contracts were dismissed. Bose, the contractor for the Jessore road, for example, was deprived of his contract before his term.

40. Alexander, Officiating Postmaster General, to H.I. Prinsep, Secretary, General Department, 2 September 1838, Home Public, 12 September 1838, no. 27 (emphasis added).

earnings of runners in the 1820s and 1830s remained around Rs 2.8, rising to Rs 4 in some regions.⁴¹ But this was not always what runners actually received. The amount paid to them was linked to the question of speed. Accusations of delay – whether they had any basis or not – became an argument for deduction in fees, and a basis of control. Fines, in fact, became a common strategy for controlling the runners' speed.

Underlining the discussion around the petitions against Sircar and Burnall is also the importance of the written "receipt" in the system of *dak* contracts. The negotiations show how the language of law was acquiring significance, and writing was becoming important in defining relations not formally regulated by a contract. Receipts, I will suggest, became an issue around which the unequal negotiations between the contractor and the *dauriya* were played out. Senior postal officials expressed their helplessness when contractors produced receipts as proof of payments disbursed.

Who signed the receipts? The record of correspondence about cases like this points quite clearly to the role of subordinates employed by contractors/postmasters. Postmasters like Sircar, Bose, and Burnall did not superintend their contracts personally. The task of overseeing the runners was sub-contracted to subordinates, at very low rates of remuneration. As the levels of sub-contracting became increasingly complex, and hierarchies of controllers emerged, the politics of payment became trickier. Both Sircar and Rasiklal Bose argued that the "full amount (due to the runners) to the last pice" had been handed over to *surbardars* [*sic*] who were in charge of disbursing payments. They claimed that they had receipts for the payment to the runners from the *surbardars*.⁴² Quite clearly the receipts were not documents by which the amounts disbursed to individual runners could be verified. These were records of the total amount distributed by postmasters to contractors, and by contractors to sub-contractors. So, the petition of the runners about non-payment of dues could be as true as the claims of Burnall and Sircar that they had in fact made the contracted payment to the last pice.

41. In the Allygurh [*sic*] division, for example, runners received Rs 4 a month, in contrast to Mynepoorie where they received Rs 3.8 a month; from Shakespear, Postmaster General, to E. Malony, Acting Secretary Board of Revenue, dated 2 October 1823, Home Public, 16 October 1823, no. 27. In 1838, Alexander, the Postmaster General, reports: "Runners pay in the Mirzapore division to be increased from Rs 3.8 to Rs 4 to bring them on par with runners elsewhere"; from G. Alexander to H.T. Prinsep, 16 November 1838, Home Public, 28 November 1838, no. 31.

42. Note, for example, a statement by Alexander, Postmaster General that "they have uniformly declared that the full amount to the last pice was remitted by them to their surberadars, who have furnished them with receipts stating to be for the due payments of their full wages to the runners"; Alexander, Officiating Postmaster General, to H.I. Prinsep, Secretary, General Department, dated 2 September 1838, Home Public, 12 September 1838, no. 27. (A pice was a monetary unit worth 1/64 of a rupee.)

New forms of control required written evidence, receipts, and proof. At every level, written evidence of payment and proof of work had to be collected. Detailed schedules charting the speed of mail on different routes also detailed the performance of runners. *Mootsuddies* (accountants) were given instructions to inscribe the time at which runners arrived on their backs.⁴³ In Bengal Presidency, the Postmaster General, Elliot proposed the introduction of watches to keep time: "It is my intention in the course of a few days to dispatch a watch with the mail from hence towards the westward as an experiment in order to see whether some more correct check cannot be obtained over the traveling of the mails than now exists."⁴⁴ Measures like these served as ways to control and penalize "defaulting" runners, standardizing time, marking pace, and producing an idea of the "average". Using watches, recording time with a new precision, also had a symbolic significance. It gave the imperial *dak* a stamp of modernity, differentiating it from other regional and *zamindari daks*.

DANGERS ON THE ROAD

The description of "rain and torrent", of "ravines and tigers", in the poem by Kipling cited at the beginning of this essay, are part of a story of the dangers and obstacles that had to be confronted to make modern communications possible. The story was also about the runner's commitment to public service. Kipling's "Overland Mail" is about the heroic runner who is integrated into the imperial civilizational project. However, we need to go beyond an understanding of this familiar imperial trope, to see what such representations tell us about the runners' journeys and their negotiations with dangers on the roads.

In official accounts, forest roads appear as spaces of danger. Forests had to be cut to make roads safe for runners.⁴⁵ Thick forests were seen as "interrupting" and "blocking" the field of vision from the roads; they were "infested" with wild beasts.⁴⁶ But clearing the jungles was an almost impossible task in many areas. Officials repeatedly complained about how

43. "Abstract Schedule of Routes and Rate of Travelling in Nov. 1825", Home Public, 2 March 1826, no. 13.

44. Elliot, Postmaster General, to Deputy Postmaster, Bancoorah, Sherghatee, Benares Allahabad, Futtehpoore, Cawnpore, Home Public, 12 April 1831, no. 76. Steps had to be taken to train supervisors to read the time. Elliot circulated a lithographic impression of a clock to teach supervisors to use the clock.

45. Bushby to Prinsep, dated 15 April 1828, Home Public, 17 April 1828, no. 27. Similar statements about the need to cut forests to make safe tracks for runners are made in a later period; officiating Postmaster General, to H.T. Prinsep, Secretary, Government of India, 9 November 1839, Home Public, B, 13 November 1839, no. 19.

46. In the Mirzapore-Saugor route, from Smith, Agent Governor General, Saugor Nerbudda Territory, to G.A. Bushby, Officiating Secretary, General Department, dated 25 March 1833, Home Public, 19 April 1833, no. 27.

it was difficult to persuade locals inhabiting the region to cut down the jungles. In the Nagpur Raepore region, there were reports that “the dislike of the country people to engage in the work” made the task of clearing particularly difficult.⁴⁷ Besides, in the forested regions of central India, the job of clearing was never over: new growth came rapidly, and covered the tracks that had been cleared. Thick forests and treacherous terrain created spaces that were difficult for the state to access. In many such regions, *dauriya* tracks provided the links, creating territories of control and empire, penetrating spaces that were seemingly beyond the reach of the state.

But there were real dangers runners had to face. Reports came in from many areas, in the 1830s and 1840s, of runners being attacked by tigers. From the Bagh Nuddee region (a spot that became famous for such incidents), eyewitness accounts recorded:

From about 12 o'clock at night of the 29th of Oct 1831 the Calcutta mail arrived. I accompanied by Mohun Singh Rajpoot aged 45 years together with two sepoy was carrying the *dak* from Baugh Nuddee to Moondipore distance 5 cos about one coss from Baugh Nuddee there is [...] a very thick jungle. From this jungle a tiger came about midnight and carried away Mohun Singh.⁴⁸

On 26 September, as one of the runners was conveying Calcutta *dak* from the Bauge Nuddee towards the Moondepore Tuppa, accompanied by a Burkundauze, a tiger sprung on the Burkundaz and carried him off; the *burkurrab* shouted, and ran after the tiger a few yards, but he disappeared in the long grass.⁴⁹

From the Kunjipur and Haldia route, there were reports that runners had threatened to stop travelling at night, because of a fear of tigers.⁵⁰ In many of the border districts of Orissa and Bengal – Sumbulpur, Lorapalli (in Ganjam), Haldia – runners refused to carry mail. In the Haldia region, runners insisted that they would not travel at night unless *shikaries* were sent out to protect them.⁵¹ In Lorapalli, it was reported: “seven out of

47. G.I. Fraser, Nagpore Residency to Major Wilkinson, British Resident, Nagpore, 31 December 1839, Home Public, 22 January 1840, no. 12. Ten months later, Fraser writes again: “The clearing of the jungle to the distance of 400 yds on each side of the road, an operation which has been twice performed, is in course of performance for the third time and which must be repeated annually”; 20 October 1840, Home Public, 4 November 1840, no. 22B.

48. Deposition of Turwar Sah Goud, aged 40 years, stationed at Chokee of Bhaug Nuddee, Home Public, 17 January 1832, no. 38. *Bagh* = tiger; *coss* = a measure of distance, approximately 2–3 kilometres.

49. Translation of the *duffadar*'s report, Gordon, Postmaster Nagpor Residency, to Postmaster General, Calcutta, dated 2 October 1831, Home Public, 17 January 1832, no. 38.

50. From Alexander to Prinsep, Secretary, Government of India, Home Public, 28 August 1839, no. 43.

51. L.L. Rousseau, Postmaster Kedgerree (Khejuri), to W. Moore, Deputy Postmaster, dated 25 August 1839, Home Public, 28 August 1839, no. 43.

twelve [...] deserted immediately after receiving their pay which has caused a delay in the receipt of the Bombay mail [...] of 24 hours".⁵²

Postal officials responded to such reports with a sense of alarm and disbelief. In official discourse, the *dauriya*'s refusal to run because of a fear of tigers appeared almost incredible. In these official writings, *dauriyas* are seen as people who inhabit the jungles: their bodies are inscribed with the marks of the wilderness they traverse. A history of the Post Office (1921) by Geoffrey Clarke, a civil servant, described them thus: "Postal runners are largely drawn from the less civilized races of India, many of whom are animists by religion. They will face wild beasts and wandering criminals, but will go miles to avoid an evil spirit in a tree."⁵³ Little credence was attached to stories of encounters between runners and tigers. When Mohan Singh was killed by the tiger on the Bagh Nuddee, the postmaster insisted that the Resident at Nagpur establish clearly that Singh was taken away by tigers:

[...] it is unlikely that a tiger which had possession of a body for so long a time as is described should have only taken a little of the breast and have carried off the head of his unfortunate victim, that being the last part of a human body I should suppose a hungry animal would carry away.⁵⁴

In this case, for example, officials attributed no credibility to the statements of witnesses. They insisted that there was no verifiable proof that Mohan Singh had been killed by a tiger.

In an official discourse that placed increasing emphasis on the need for "proofs" and "evidence", even fatal encounters with tigers had to be proven. And, as mentioned, the idea that *dauriyas* should stop running for fear of predatory beasts seemed incredible to postal officials. To develop modern communication, all hurdles had to be confronted and overcome. Mail networks could not be disrupted by the forces of nature. Officials typically suggested that reports on tigers and other dangers were attempts to extort compensation or ways of avoiding running at night. Officials mistrusted the claims of runners, demanded "proof" of tiger attacks, and feared that the *dauriyas* were using tiger stories to bargain for better wages, and negotiate the pace of running. Highlighting the dangers of the road, it appeared, was a strategy to negotiate the terms of labour.

Forest areas like Midnapur and Sambulpur, to give some specific examples, were areas with a history of resistance to outside intrusion and to the opening of a *dak* route through the region. Officials in charge of

52. Babington called for urgent measures: "I fear there will be no possibility of replacing the men who have deserted especially as I have no power either to punish them or compel others to serve"; Babington to Moore, 6 October 1842, Home Public, 12 October 1842, no. 15.

53. Clarke, *Post Office of India*, p. 5.

54. From: Elliot, Postmaster General, to G.A. Bushby, dated 7 January 1832.

postal communications in this stretch were convinced that the dangers of tigers were greatly exaggerated. Stories about predatory animals, officials believed, were circulated because of local opposition to the opening up of *dak* routes.⁵⁵ In other areas, the Singhbhum region, for instance, the jungles were seen as hideouts for *dacoits*. Reports about tigers, officials warned, were used by locals as a ploy and given the “specious appearance of being forwarded in truth”.⁵⁶ Yet delays in mail and the refusal of *dauriyas* to run created anxieties in official circles. Thus, the postmaster at Sambulpur wrote: “I have no power to punish the men and if I dismiss them it will be utterly impossible to replace them; of the latter circumstance they are well aware.”⁵⁷ On the Bombay and Calcutta route, where the runners had to be in time for the arrival and departure of ships carrying the overland mail, reports of attacks by tigers caused serious concern. In March 1828, when the Calcutta mail was over fifteen hours late, Babington, the official in charge, sent out a party of armed peons, offering “a reward of twenty five rupees, on event of their bringing the head of the tiger”.⁵⁸

It is clear that postal officials both suspected and reaffirmed stories of runners and tigers on the road. They could not get away from the evidence of death in the jungles. Yet the networks of Imperial mail could not be sustained through a politics of suspicion. Officials had to ensure that runners did not desert. Running had to continue, and the fears of runners had to be allayed. A sense of security had to be created, and compensation and rewards had to be granted in case of death and injury. In agreeing to give lump sums to the families of runners who were killed, the state informally validated the principle of giving compensation to workers killed during work.⁵⁹ Stockwell recommends “a boon” of rupees Rs100 for the widow of the deceased who fell victim to the tiger while on duty as a “public servant”.⁶⁰

The fear of tigers played a part in the calculations of contractors mobilizing runners. They demanded concessions from the state: extra allowances for employing *burkandauzes* (guards), for the supply of pistols and firearms, and for carrying *mussals* (torches) to accompany runners. Postal officials conceded many of these demands, arguing that this would allow runners to travel fearlessly at night.⁶¹ The state thus had to make concessions, especially

55. On local opposition to the intrusion of *dak* runners, see also Fisher, “East India Company’s Suppression of Native *Dak*”, p. 325.

56. Major N. Jackson, to Prinsep, Home Public, 13 April 1830, no. 56.

57. Postmaster, Sumbulpore, to W. Moore, Deputy Postmaster, 3 October 1842, Home Public, 12 October 1842, no. 15.

58. Babington to G. Stockwell, Postmaster General, dated 26 March 1828, Home Public, 17 April 1828, no. 27.

59. From Elliot, Postmaster General, to Saunders, Officiating Secretary, General Department.

60. From Stockwell to Bushby, dated 23 January 1828, Home Public, 7 February 1828, no. 22.

61. From Captain Charles Johnson, Postmaster Khandesh, to Elliot, Postmaster General, Bombay, 17 April 1839, Home Public, 17 July 1839, no. 17.

if the terrain was particularly inaccessible, and if *dauriyas* and their contractors could bargain from a position of strength.

But were dangers of the jungles only a bargaining ploy? Runners also had real fears of predatory beasts which official representations tended to misrecognize. They feared running alone, especially at night. Lieutenant Kittoe, in charge of constructing a *dak* road, described:

The runners generally travel in pairs both night and day and at night, sometimes three together, one carrying the wallet, and the other two, hoolahs and fire brands made of split saul poles 10 to 12 feet long, tied with grass which at once give a vivid light and frightens wild animals particularly bears. Single men sometimes venture in the daytime where the country is comparatively plain.⁶²

Travelling through regions like Nagpur-Seonie, Sambulpur, Ramgurh or the Bagh Nuddee area was always precarious. *Dauriyas*, like others who inhabited the region, had practices and rituals to propitiate deities who, it was believed, could protect them from wild beasts. In the Sundarbans area, there were many stories of Dakhin Rai, the vengeful tiger god and the nurturing figure of Bonbibi who protected village folk and others against attacks by predatory beasts.⁶³ Those entering jungle areas sought the help of fakirs and others known to possess special charms which could keep away predators, and protect travellers in the forests. Humans themselves, it seemed, could not acquire the power to confront the dangers; divine mediation was necessary.

With regard to central India, Sleeman recounted fabulous stories about tigers with magical properties or “men turned into tigers” who targeted human prey with a vengeance – stories that seem to reaffirm the idea of human vulnerability and helplessness.⁶⁴ *Dauriya* demands for an allowance to make offerings to “an old woman” (believed to have special powers against wild jungle beasts) should be understood against this background. Widows, as we know, occupy a liminal space, in between the normative and the non-normative, the human and the extra-human. Undisturbed by the mythic world that such stories open up, postal officials sanctioned the sum demanded, but recorded it as an amount given to an “old woman”. The postmaster regarded this practice as an important concession to runners: “operating as such belief does, as advantageously in preventing delays in the transit of the mails, by inducing the runners to travel in confidence at times when they might otherwise be afraid to proceed”.⁶⁵

62. Home Public, 6 January 1841, no. 25.

63. On this, see Annu Jalais, *Forest of Tigers: People, Politics and Environment in the Sundarbans* (London, 2010), pp. 70–74, 157–164.

64. Sleeman, for instance, refers to tigers with magical properties in the Jabalpur-Mirzapur region: W.H. Sleeman, *Rambles and Recollections of an Indian Official* (London, 1844), pp. 161–167.

65. Officiating Postmaster General, Nagpur Division, to G.A. Bushby, Secretary, Government of India, 23 June 1842, Home Public, 6 July 1842, no. 5.

WHAT HAPPENED TO HORSE DAKS?

A question often raised is why horse *daks* were not used in the first half of the nineteenth century. In principle, contractors were free to use any mode of transport, provided they delivered mail at the required speed.⁶⁶ There were sporadic attempts to introduce horse *daks* in the 1830s and 1840s. Yet these experiments remained localized, and never completely displaced the existing system of runners. What happened to the horse *daks*?⁶⁷

In official discussions, there was a constant attempt to rationalize the continued use of foot runners for carrying mail, as against horse-drawn vehicles. In negotiations between mail contractors and postal authorities, the relative speed of *dak* and the costs of a horse establishment were crucial. In taking tenders for horse *daks*, contractors had to guarantee a minimum average speed of 5–6 miles per hour – i.e. a speed higher than the average of 4–5 miles per hour for runners – and they had to agree to pay fines for any delays.⁶⁸ In official calculations, however, this increase in speed had to be weighed against the additional costs of a horse establishment. Did the gain in average speed justify the additional costs involved? This question was repeatedly raised.

Moorleedhur, a jeweller, was given a contract for horse *dak* on the Benares–Delhi route.⁶⁹ On the Cawnpore–Allahabad stretch of the route (a distance of 129 miles) the average speed of his horse *dak* was between 8–9 miles per hour; giving a total gain in speed of 10 hours over the 129-mile stretch.⁷⁰ The gain in speed, in official calculations, was undermined by the increased cost of the establishment. The total expense on horse *daks* over the 477 miles between Benares and Delhi, at Rs 12,000, was estimated to be three times more than the expense on the existing establishment of runners. The Governor General's office was unwilling to sanction the increased expense. The postal receipts on the route, they argued, did not compensate for the expense.⁷¹

66. Advertisements inviting tenders for mail contracts did not specify the mode of transport to be used. Contractors were free to use any mode, provided they delivered mail at the required speed. See, for example, the copy of the contract signed with Moorlee Dhur; I. Rankin, Postmaster General, North West Provinces, to I. Thomason, Secretary to Government, North West Provinces, 12 July 1841, Home Public, 11 August 1841, no. 3.

67. See also Bayly, *Empire and Information*, p. 65.

68. The fines were on a graduated scale according to the time lost. See, for example, the contract with Bishumbar Dey for horse *dak* between Calcutta and Midnapore, dated 15 June 1842, Home Public, B, 13 July 1842, no. 25 and KW.

69. Moorleedhur, like many other Indian merchants, managed the contract for a European speculator who was a Company employee.

70. The extra expense involved in the horse *dak* establishment for the stretch of 129 miles between Cawnpore and Allahabad was Rs 1,700 a month.

71. From Bushby, General Department, to Hamilton, Secretary, North Western Provinces, dated 23 March 1842, Home Public, A, 23 March 1842, no. 7. Similar considerations were

Contracts for horse *dak* were often discontinued, because of a failure to maintain the terms of speed specified in their contract. Why did horse *daks* fail to keep up speed? To maintain good speed, especially at night, horses required tracks that were clear of trees, stumps, and other obstacles. The post horse system in Tokugawa Japan, or in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, functioned efficiently in regions where an elaborate network of roads and bridges had been built.⁷² In India, by contrast, *dauriyas* were preferred in most regions, because they could move fast through forests and difficult terrain even in the absence of proper tracks. Horses, particularly when they had to pull carts and *ekkas* (one-horse carriages), averaged a slower rate than foot runners.⁷³

For contractors, investing in horse *daks* was a risky proposition. Unlike a runner establishment, investment in horse *daks* involved a larger outlay of capital and greater possibility of loss. When contracts were cancelled it meant a double loss: a loss of capital invested in horses, carts, and other equipment, and on their future earnings. Moodalliar, who introduced a horse *dak* on the Nagpore to Raepore route, purchased fifty-eight saddle horses, thirty-four pairs of bullocks, and eight carts to transport the “overland mail”. Mudaliar’s contract was terminated shortly before his twenty-month term, from May 1839 to December 1840, was over. In addition to losing the contract, he had to pay a fine of Rs 9,000 (a third of the total amount due to him for twenty months). Investment in horses was also risky, since horses were frequently seriously hurt in negotiating difficult terrains. Babington, who had a contract for horse *dak* in Orissa, complained that seven of his horses became lame whilst negotiating the difficult tracks in the Phooljur area.

Another reason why contractors were reluctant to continue with horse *daks* was the system of payments in arrears. The practice of “payment in arrears”, they complained, forced them “to borrow to provide for their support”. Beauchamp, the deputy postmaster of Gaya, who managed the contract for the *ekka dak* in Bancoorah saw this as an important reason for the collapse of the *ekka dak* in Bancoorah.⁷⁴ The practice of withholding

involved in overruling horse *daks* on the Calcutta–Meerut route in the 1830s; see Home Public, 1 June 1830, no. 52.

72. See, for example, Robert Hall, “Tokkaido Road and Region”, *Geographical Journal*, 27 (1937), pp. 353–377; Constantine Vaporis, “Corvée Labour and Peasant Contention”, *Monumenta Nipponica*, 41 (1986), pp. 377–414.

73. “The fact of mails travelling no faster on horse[back] than one would suppose would be attainable by foot runners naturally appears strange to those who are unacquainted with present state of the roads”; Postmaster General to Prinsep, Home Public, 1 June 1830, no. 52.

74. Like many other *dak* contracts, Beauchamp managed a contract which was officially run by a local man, Mirza Sarafraz Allie; see Home Public, 12 May 1829, no. 27.

wages and deducting fines – commonly used as disciplinary methods – made investment in horse *daks* unattractive for *dak* contractors.⁷⁵

Finally, in looking for the missing horse *daks*, we need to recognize also the resistance of local communities to new modes of transport. *Dauriyas* with long experience in a region were familiar with the routes and with people in neighbouring villages. Networks connected with *dauriyas* were entrenched in local communities, and these were usually opposed to the entry of horse *daks*.⁷⁶ Postal establishments often acted in collusion with these interests. Dak contractors in Bengal pointed to the enormous problems they faced in running horse *daks*, against which, “the natives particularly the whole body of the Post office subordinates are greatly prejudiced”.⁷⁷ In Bancoorah, reports described how a contractor who introduced an *ekka dak* soon had to abandon the project because of intense local opposition.⁷⁸ The *ekka* drivers who were brought in from Patna were terrified of travelling through the jungles of Ramgarh. Local runners displaced by the new *ekka* service worked on these fears, terrorizing the *ekka* drivers with exaggerated stories of tigers and wild beasts. Many *ekka* drivers, we are told, fled in alarm.⁷⁹

Such opposition to new technology and resistance by local interests, is known to have been common in many parts of India. However, among postal officials such stories were woven into a narrative that vindicated the postal establishment. Failed horse *daks* were attributed to local opposition, and not to non-payment of contract dues.

IN CONCLUSION

Clocking the runner’s speed was, as I have pointed out, part of the process of creating a public post marked by its difference from existing postal systems. Calculating speed, ensuring regularity, and projecting estimated time of travel was part of building a “modern” postal system, even when it was sustained by traditional *dauriyas*. Within the new system, the *dauriya* operated with the signs of colonial modernity; they were subjected to new rules and regulations, new systems of written contracts, new documents, and receipts. Speed was clocked and recorded. The number of stages, and

75. For horse *daks* to work efficiently, Stockwell, the Postmaster General, recommended that special measures be taken for contractors to be paid “at the close of every month”; Stockwell to Bushby, 16 April 1829, Home Public, 12 May 1829, no. 27.

76. On practices by which traditional runners deterred the entry of outsiders into their profession, the *patnamars* in south India for example, see Sood, “The Informational Fabric of Eighteenth Century India and the Middle East”, p. 1099.

77. To G. Alexander, Postmaster General, Calcutta, from F. Bashford, 9 October 1839, Home Public, 23 October 1839, no. 31.

78. *Ekka* = a carriage drawn by one horse.

79. Postmaster General, to Bushby, Home Public, 12 May 1829, no. 27.

the rate of travelling were noted down, and the runner's body was marked with the time taken to reach a particular destination. The point is not to see whether these efforts produced the intended results but to understand the concerns that underlined the framing of such regulations.

Tracking the runner's speed, marking the stages where runners and palanquin bearers were changed (*dak chowkis*), were also part of a new politics of spatialization. The term *dak*, in fact, is derived from the term "post" – that is, the stages at which relays of couriers or other modes of communication were stationed.⁸⁰ Establishing stages and *dak chowkis* became a way of charting territory, and marking the boundaries of colonial rule. Runners could travel through all kinds of terrain, through deep impenetrable forest where the state could not easily enter. *Dauriya* tracks were important in connecting and creating the territories of control and empire, penetrating spaces that were seemingly beyond the reach of the state.

And finally the question: where were the *dak* roads? New road networks moved away from the more familiar routes, and cut through forest, often taking steep ascents to cut down distance. However, these roads could not reach all places, or penetrate all forests. Large stretches of roads were literally created by the footfalls of the *dauriya*. Continuous running created a path, and charted a route.⁸¹ In many places, however, even these mud tracks were not present. In jungle terrain in particular, the official concern was more with removing the stumps of trees, to make smooth running possible.⁸² *Dak* roads, in a sense, were present in their absence. In many places, the runner *was* the road. The modern networks of postal service were built on their backs.

I began my story with Kipling's image of the runner. Let me end with another, popularized by the Bengali poet Sukanto Bhattacharya, in a poem called "The Runner".⁸³ Written with a deep empathy for the runner, it seeks to capture the heroic and tragic, the moments of joy and pain, the

80. "[I]t is interesting to notice that the vernacular words (*dak* in Northern India and *tappal* in South and West) are derived like the English word from the stages at which relays or other methods of conveyance, were stationed"; *The Imperial Gazetteer of India, III: Economic* (Oxford, 1908), p. 418.

81. Statements like the following were often made: "On stretches of road like the Raepore road, where the rains fell at intervals, the route of the mail runners by running along the same path created a route which even if not good was passable"; Home Public, 14 October 1840, no. 6A.

82. Home Public, B, 6 January 1841, no. 28. It was important that routes like the Calcutta–Bombay route remained operational all the year round, yet the costs of the roads were calculated in terms of their usefulness to the carriage of mail: "it is very questionable whether the heavy expense of forming such a road would ever be compensated either by the gain of lines in transmission of public mails or by any increase to traffic towards Sumbhulpore and Nagpore [...]. The advantage gained (above alluded to) would be the transmission of the mails at the same or very nearly the same rate of speed the whole year round"; Fraser, Postmaster, to British Resident, Nagpore, Home Public, 4 November 1840, no. 22 B.

83. Sukanto Bhattacharya, *Sukanto-Samagra* (Calcutta, 1970), pp. 77–79.

proximity and distance from the burden the runner carries on his back. Beyond these usual tropes of radical poetry, we see other images. What is particularly striking about the runner in this poem is the continuous motion of the runner: villages slip by rapidly, as he speeds towards his destination. Tired and hungry, worn out with fatigue, the runner cannot rest at night; he has a long distance to go before the break of dawn. The story of the runner is linked to the oppression of a new time regime, and the constitution of a set of new ideals: principles of speed and regularity, of the idea of public commitment and public good. What I am doing in this paper is to explore the small stories behind such popular images, to understand the system within which the runners worked and lived.