

Case Study



Farewell to Telegraph Services in India – A Case Study

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Nudged out by technology SMS, emails, mobile phones the iconic service gradually faded into oblivion with less and less people taking recourse to it. The 163-year old telegram service in the country the harbinger of good and bad news for generations of Indians is dead. Once the fastest means of communication for millions of people, the humble telegram was today buried without any requiem but for the promise of preserving the last telegram as a museum piece.

Started in 1850 on an experimental basis between Kolkata and Diamond Harbour, it was opened for use by the British East India Company the following year. In 1854, the service was made available to the public. It was such an important mode of communication in those days that revolutionaries fighting for the country's independence used to cut the telegram lines to stop the British from communicating. Old timers recall that receiving a telegram would be an event itself and the messages were normally opened with a sense of trepidation as people feared for the welfare of their near and dear ones.

For jawans and armed forces seeking leave or waiting for transfer or joining reports, it was a quick and handy mode of communication. Lawyers vouched for the telegrams as they were registered under the

Indian Evidence Act and known for their credibility when presented in court. Bollywood was not to be left behind and immortalized the service with many sudden turns in films being announced by the advent of the 'taar'.

Pockets of rural India still use the service but with the advent of technology and newer means of communication, the telegram found itself edged out. "The service will start at 8 am and close by 9 pm on 15th July 2013," BSNL CMD R K Upadhyay said. State-run telecom firm BSNL had decided to discontinue telegrams following a huge shortfall in revenue. The service generated about Rs 75 lakh annually, compared with the cost of over Rs 100 crore to run and manage it.

Telecom and IT Minister Kapil Sibal had said last month that "We will bid it a very warm farewell and may be the last telegram sent should be a museum piece. That's the way in which we can bid it a warm farewell." There are about 75 telegram centres in the country, with less than 1,000 employees to manage them. BSNL will absorb these employees and deploy them to manage mobile services, landline telephony and broadband services.

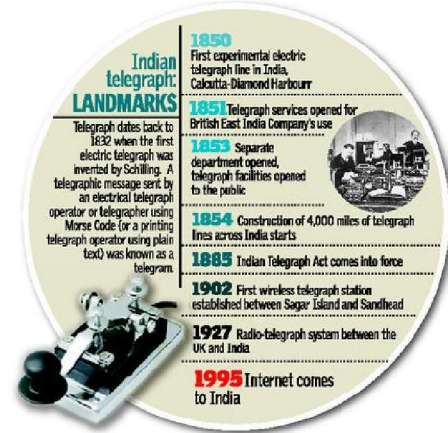
Faced with declining revenue, the government had revised telegram charges in May 2011, after a gap of 60 years. Charges for inland telegram services were hiked to Rs 27 per 50 words. Within a short time of BSNL handling telegram services in 1990s, the PSU had a rift with the Department of Posts following which telegrams were accepted as phonograms from various villages and other centres from telephone consumers.

Types of telegraph devices used:

- Formatted Terminal
- Electronic Keyboard
- Store Forward Telegraph
- Store Forward Messaging System

Telegraph Services in India: Past to Present

History of the telegraph in India, began in 1833. An unlikely pioneer in 1833, a young Irishman of meager means was sent to India as an assistant surgeon in the East India Company. At the time, it was unusual for someone like 24-year-old William Brooke O'Shaughnessy, a doctor from a poor family in Limerick, to be picked for the plum assignment. His greatest contribution to the annals of Indian history was to come in 1850, when he was appointed by the Company to string up the country's—and indeed Asia's—first telegraph line between Kolkata (then Calcutta) and Diamond Harbour in the city's suburbs. At a length of just 27 miles (43.5km), the line might seem like a humble beginning. But remarkably, the “official” Kolkata-Diamond Harbour line had been preceded, a decade earlier, by O'Shaughnessy's own private and experimental line of 21 miles. Sitting in a corner of the country, thousands of miles away from Samuel Morse in the US and English telegraph pioneers William Cooke and Charles Wheatstone, the doctor had developed a telegraphy system of his own.



Success was instant. By 1856, the network had expanded to 46 receiving stations. “The First War of Independence in 1857 failed because of this telegraph technology. Lord Dalhousie once said that the telegraph saved India,” says C.V. Gopinath, who retired as senior deputy director general of telegraph services. Gopinath, one of the first qualified engineers to join the department, is proud of the service rendered by the telegraph network. “After the war in 1857, and even after the telephone system was launched in India in 1882, the telegraph remained the most popular system of communication.” Gopinath reckons that this was because the telegram was cheap—to this day, a telegram can be sent for as little as Rs3.50—and more reliable than the telephone system. There was a time, he says, when the acronym STD, which stands for subscriber trunk dialing, used to be referred to as “subscriber, trying and dying”.

According to David Arnold's book *Science, Technology and Medicine in Colonial India*, by 1939, India had 100,000 miles of telegraph lines carrying 17 million telegraphic messages a year. Arnold says in the book, which was published in 2000, that while the system was adopted early on by the colonial military, “by the early twentieth century neither government officials nor nationalist politicians seemed able to function without a daily diet of telegrams”.

Therefore, in the early years after Independence, India had already developed into a powerhouse in terms of telegraph traffic. In 1953, on the occasion of the centenary of the Indian telegraph system, the posts and telegraph department published a book called *Story of the Indian Telegraphs: A Century of Progress*.

Authored by Krishnalal Shridharani, the book paints an optimistic view of the future of the telegraph in India. At the time, Shridharani says in a section called *The Superlatives*, the Indian telegraph department had the sixth largest inland traffic in the world and third longest mileage for telegraph transmission. And the book is confident about the system's ability to grow, improve and take its services to the citizen "to his door in the remote village".

However, the telegraph, after a flurry of activity in the 1980s, would eventually fail to live up to the promises of the first hundred years of its existence. During the golden years of the 1980s, when the telegraph service was at its peak, "more than 100,000 telegrams per day were sent and received only in the Delhi main office. Now, it's barely 100,000 a day, nationally," says Deepak Sinha, general manager, telegraph services. And even today, when the telegraph is largely overlooked as a means of communication, the department continues to innovate. In November 2006, the Web-based telegraphy message system (WTMS) was developed. In an odd case of modern-meeting-ancient. "The decline mainly started in the early 1990s, when the Internet was introduced in India, fast followed by mobile phones.

From telegrams to smart phones

At its peak in 1985, the service sent 600,000 telegrams a day across India and had a network of 45,000 telegraph offices. Countless remote towns and

villages across the country depended on the telegraph for getting news where telephones were rare. Most telegraph workers criss-crossed inhospitable terrain to deliver the messages.

But with the arrival of the e-mail and reliable landline phones, the days of the telegraph were counted. According to estimates, there are now over 850 million mobile phone subscribers and over 160 million Internet users in India. A recent study by Cisco has claimed that India has the fastest Internet traffic growth in the world, and that the number is expected to grow to 348 million users by 2017.

India is only the latest country to bid goodbye to the telegraph. In the US, the main service provided by Western Union was shut down in 2006. Over the past decade, several countries have also phased out telegraph services. The closing of the world's last major commercial telegraph service marks an end of an era.

India bids good-bye to the telegraph

Millions of people relied on it for decades. But now India's state-run telegraph service has come to an end. Authorities felt telegrams were no longer commercially viable in a fast-growing age of digital communications. It served as the harbinger of good and bad news for generations of Indians. The telegraph conveyed the birth of a child, a death, and greetings on birthdays and festivals. But the curtains finally came down on the iconic 163-year-old Indian telegraph service, on July 15th.

The service closed because of mounting financial losses and becoming redundant in an era of mobile phones and the Internet. "The losses were getting bigger. It was not practical to have kept it going much longer. We lost \$250 million US dollars in the last seven years and it was time to put an end to the service," said Shameem Akhtar, general manager at

the Bharat Sanchar Nigam, which runs India's telegram service.

Country	Year of closure	Body that controlled Telegraph
Australia	7 March 2011	Australia Post
Ireland	30 July 2002	Eircom
Lithuania	15 October 2007	Teo LT
Malaysia	1 July 2012	Telekom Malaysia
Nepal	1 July 2009	Nepal Telecom
New Zealand	1999	New Zealand Post (reinstated in 2003 for use only by business customers, primarily for debt collection or other important business notices.)
United States, Western Union	27 January 2006	
India	15 July 2013	State-owned BSNL

To commemorate the last day, thousands crammed into telegraph offices across the country to send souvenir messages to family and friends before the service passed into the annals of history. The last recorded telegram was sent to Congress vice-president Rahul Gandhi.

Assumptions

In the world of Smart Phones, emails, SMSs and many more digital communication facilities, telegraph faced too many threats. As the result of the threats posed by the new technology, operation of the same was hard for the department of Telecommunications, BSNL on financial ends. Hence, the department in consultation with the department of posts came to a conclusion of ceasing the telegraph services in the nation from 15 July 2013. The company says declining revenues forced it to end the service, which had become obsolete in an age of email, reliable landlines and ubiquitous cell phones. But the government as well as the organization has to explain for the following assumptions:

1. What mode of communication the government will choose to replace the telegram for these types of announcements.
2. In a statement issued after the 163-year-old telegram service was stopped from July 15, the forum claimed that BSNL's expenditure of Rs 100 crore a year on the service was a "myth" and the decision to close it was "in violation of the Indian Telegraph Act."
3. "Out of many counters for Internet, mobile etc one more counter is there for telegrams. No extra staff is employed.... There is not a single paise spent for the staff of telegram service alone. There is no extra maintenance charge, since it is part of the telecom services. All the telegram service centres are in departmental buildings and no rent is to be paid. In fact, more than Rs 1 crore is received by the management without any major expenditure".
4. On the argument that there were better communication services such as SMS, mobile services and Internet available to the people the forum said certain sections were still using the service before it was shut down.
5. The forum flayed the Government for not consulting or even discussing the move with these unions/associations, adding that "the telegram services are provided as per the Indian Telegraph Act 1885. Any change like closure cannot be done without any amendment to the Act by Parliament. The closure decision is completely in violation of the Indian Telegraph Act."

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