

Dakwala and Communications in Bhutan: A Narrative Study of *Dakwalas* of Pemagatshel

SONAM DARJAY¹ & DORJI WANGCHUK²

Abstract: *Dakwalas* have been crucial to the history and socio-economic development of Bhutan by connecting leaders and communities. The evolution of the communication system in Bhutan can be traced through the usage of smoke signals, conches, shot-through arrows, and carrier messengers to the later use of modern technology. The role of *Dakwalas* in the communication sector has been vital for the central government in implementing and executing developmental policies. The transition in the telecommunication system has brought considerable changes to Bhutanese society and played a vital role in how people interact, today in comparison to the past. Thus, this article documents the development of the communication system in Bhutan through a narrative study conducted in Pemagatshel. Since the subject area is related to historical findings, the two *Dakwalas* of Pemagatshel were interviewed about their role and experiences.

Keywords: *Dakwala*, Post, Mail, Communication, Telecommunication, Messenger, Postal service, Technology.

Introduction

Bhutan's rapid development was significantly dependent on the development of communication networks across the country. This started after the inception of the first Five Year Plan (FYP) in 1961. For instance, the construction of roads in 1962 improved the communication system within the country and with neighboring India. In addition, the Post Office was established in Phuntsholing under the Ministry of Communication and was then called the Department of Posts and Telegraphs. The institution of communication network throughout the country was initiated a year later in strategic locations such as in Paro, Thimphu, Samdrup Jongkhar and

¹ BA in Bhutanese and Himalayan Studies, College of Language and Culture Studies, Lead author: sonamdarjay16@mail.com

² BA in Bhutanese and Himalayan Studies, College of Language and Culture Studies

Trashigang.

Communication has been difficult for a landlocked country like Bhutan, especially during the pre-modern period. However, the traditional communication networks between regions, leaders, and peoples have been in place since ancient times. For instance, the story of Legendary Garp Lungi Khorlo [Unstoppable Wheel of Wind], who had a reputation for delivering mail within a day covering long distances, has been etched in the memories of the Bhutanese people. Prior to 1960, *Dakwalas*³ were responsible to carry and deliver verbal and written messages or documents, walking arduous journeys from place to place. Dakwala Karma Jamtsho said that their work was to deliver or bring official mails and parcels. The duty of a Dakwala was risky and required a person with strong feet and stamina. However, following the start of modernization, Dakwalas did not travel long distances anymore because of the arrival of a modern transportation system. While their duty was crucial, they have been rarely mentioned in written records of Bhutan's history. In this article, we therefore relate Dakwalas as the living source of the communication history of Bhutan.

This article focuses on the Dakwalas' roles and responsibilities in the development of communication systems in Bhutan. The evolution of communication from smoke signals, carrier pigeons, telephone and email to the advancement of artificial intelligence has changed the way people communicate with each other. The modern communication channel simplified the way people interact and communicate where a message is being delivered in a click, irrespective of the receiver's whereabouts, which could have taken days in the past. Moreover, the contemporary evolution in the form of communication such as telegraphs and postal services has superseded the jobs of dakwala into a systematic and synchronized gateway. Dakwalas' sacrifices, commitments and legacies became thus reduced to oral tradition. Therefore, this study documents the contributions of Dakwalas of Pemagatshel in the socio-economic development of the region and in connecting different districts. The study also highlights the challenges and their social roles as courier messengers of Pemagatshel. Two former Dakwalas, namely Dorjan and Karma Jamtsho, were

³ This is a Hindu term which is possibly a corrupted term of 'daakiya' which means postman or mail carrier.

interviewed at length. The significance of the study lies in providing comprehensive insights into the development of Bhutan's communication system through the lens of Dakwalas of Pemagatshel in contributing to the understanding of district level governance and the linkage with central authority during their service

Historical Significance of *Dakwala*

In the absence of a modern postal system, it were dakwalas who connected peoples. In so doing, they played a pivotal role politically, historically, and economically in the regions. Their role in shaping the Bhutanese political system and society has been often overlooked, however. The system of sending a person to dispatch messages or parcels has prevailed since time immemorial. For instance, the local king of Bumthang sent a messenger to invite Guru Padmasambhava to Bhutan in the 8th century. In addition, the king of Cooch Behar is said to have become Zhabdrung's patron upon receiving a letter from a merchant. Karma Ura's book, *The Hero with Thousand Eyes* (1995), mentions that a messenger from the court arrived in Ura, Bumthang, to take Dasho Shingkar Lam and his brother as retainers. The system of appointing Garp or other officials from the court prevailed until the introduction of modern postal service in the country. Jichen (2015) states that systematic telecommunication services started with the country's planned economic plan in 1961. The establishment of the Postal Service on 10th October 1962 at Phuentsholing resulted in recruiting regular postmen. Since then, other regional post offices have been established across the country.

According to the biography of Chakhar Gyalpo, a local king of Bumthang known as Sinda Raja was inflicted by a local deity, Shelging Karpo, due to his defilements and mistreatment towards the deities. A messenger was sent to invite Guru Padmasambhava to Bhutan in the 8th century to cure his deteriorating health (Dargye, 2009). For centuries, it has been apparent that communication depended solely on an individual carrying messages, either through spoken language or written documents. During the time of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (Dharma Raja) in the 17th century, messages were delivered by his followers. Padma Narayan (ruled from 1626-1665), the king of Cooch Behar, became a devoted patron to Zhabdrung Rinpoche upon receiving a persuasive letter of a merchant from Chapcha (Booth, 2021).

Another early record of Bhutan's communication system can be traced back to the era of Zhabdrung in the 17th century. A person from the court was sent to dispatch messages or parcels in times of need. The *Choe-sid Nyiden*, or the Dual System of government, headed by *Desi* assigned *Boe-Garp* to deliver messages and parcels. For instance, a legendary man known as 'Garp Lungi Khorlo' is said to have traveled from Trongsa to Punakha and back in a day. The myth mentions Garp Lungi Khorlo as the fastest messenger in Bhutan's history. The then messenger is referred to as the *Garp* or attendant of the court. Karma Ura (1995) specifies that communication during the reign of the third king was made possible by courtiers who were sent whenever and wherever the need arose. There was no specific person as a messenger in the court, however. It is obvious that an able-bodied man was chosen to deliver mail of any kind.

Bhutan Postal Museum states that Thrimpoen, random travelers, or Garp from the court, were responsible for delivering official mails and parcels. Dakwala Dorjang recounts that he had seen *Drungpa* distributing official mails in Pemagatshel. Consequently, individuals known as Dakwala were appointed as postal runners and provided with salaries. However, only basic services such as mail, postcard and parcel delivery were offered. Nevertheless, this system of appointing a Garp or Dakwala prevailed until the introduction of the postal service in the country. Since then, the government established regional post offices to enhance better connectivity between leaders to foster rural development.

The Postal Service was formally established on 10th October 1962 at Phuntsholing (Zylinski, 2018). Additionally, two post offices were opened in Paro and Thimphu that same year. Other regional post offices were set up in Trashigang and Dewathang in Samdrup Jongkhar in Eastern Bhutan. Other regional post offices throughout the country were established notwithstanding the difficulties posed by rugged terrain and extreme climatic conditions. In light of this, a fleet of vehicles was assembled run the mail services, and employees from Bhutan were chosen and trained to manage the new post offices. Following that, *the Kuensel Newspaper* was launched as an international and national news outlet on the eve of the second FYP (Zylinski, 2018). Subsequently, the communication network then gradually developed into the system it is today.

Dzong-Dak System

A *Dak* is a Hindi term referring to a transport or post by relays of men and horses. Dak includes every type of written communication such as letters, telegrams, interdepartmental notes, files, wireless message, telex, fax message, emails, which were received by post, messenger or by other means. Therefore, the system of exchanging multiple written communications is called the Dak System. The Dak System was operating as the communication network among different district administrations strategic to Bhutan. The Dzong was operating as the office responsible for distributing mail, newspaper, and postcards. Therefore, it was known as the *Dzong-Dak* system. Consequently, Dzong-Dak is a network of systems operating from the district administration.

Dakwala Dorjang recounts that a Drungpa was there to deliver mails, parcels and official documents to schools and health units prior to his recruitment as the Dakwala of Pemagatshel. Drungpa was the first official in Pemagatshel in the Dzong-Dak System. It is also obvious that Karma Jamtsho and Dorjang were also recruited under the Dzong-Dak system as they were both recruited before the establishment of the postal service in the country. Moreover, he said that there was no designated office space since there was no Dzong until 1980. It is also notable that the Dzong-Dak System was the earliest system of courier network prior to the institution of Postal service.

Dakwala: The Postman on Foot

The legendary story of Garp Lungi Khorlo notwithstanding, recorded history highlights the figure of the Dakwala in delivering messages and connecting peoples. Since postal service was not readily available in most parts of the country, Dakwalas played the role of delivering messages to distant places across the country. Mails were delivered to schools, agriculture offices, and basic health units in rural areas of Bhutan by postal runners (Acharya, 2020). Therefore, the initial service provided by the Dakwala was basic service delivery which was either official mails and documents or parcels. Dorjang recounts that the regional post office at Samdrup Jongkhar was responsible for the management and efficient service delivery in the

region. He also said that the general postmaster in Samdrup Jongkhar looked after the subsidiary branch at Pemagatshel and Trashigang. Jichen (2015) mentions that there was frequent delivery of official mail and documents in these eastern districts.

The term Dakwala (Dak- mail, wala- person) was a person who ran for their living carrying public and private mail to distant places. Dakwala was a transmuted term of Hindi word "*Daakiya*" which means "mail-runner". According to Joshi (2012), the tradition of running as couriers existed in northern and eastern India among castes like Kahars, Pattamars in the south and Mahars in the west. He also states that early in the 19th century India saw an increased demand for courier service to meet the demand of the East India Company (EIC). Running as a courier existed before the road system was constructed. The dakwalas were strong and able-bodied runners who had precise knowledge of the areas and routes for their easy access. Contrary to retaining only strong and active runners by postal authorities in India to meet EIC's increasing demand for courier service (Joshi, 2012), Bhutan's mail couriers were much older on average. The two dakwalas of Pemagatshel were in their late twenties when they were recruited. The study found that much older men were recruited in the following years owing to their genuine interest and commitment to the service.

The Hardships Limiting Courier Service

The Dakwalas often had to deliver mail with trepidation, never knowing what could happen along the way. If delays or losses occurred, they were often accused of neglecting their duties or of being dishonest (Joshi, 2012). Accusations like these were not altogether fair. Dakwala Dorjang recalls that they had to travel to Mikuri from Pemagatshel, which was the farthest place. They recounted that it was a one and half day journey to Mikuri and back to Pemagatshel, which was approximately 90 kilometers.

Maintaining the required speed to dispatch the mail on time was challenging and at times risky. Dorjang narrated further that walking towards Tshelingore-tri junction was not peaceful as the densely forested area posed a common threat to couriers and travelers alike. Encountering wild animals was a concern and the office would recommend a companion, usually a family member, to accompany the Dakwala.

Dorjang narrated his encounter with a bear at Tshelingore gate. Dakwala Karma Jamtsho shared that the five Dakwalas in Pemagatshel walked in turns to deliver or fetch mails in different directions. It was crucial for them to reach in time for the bus traveling to Samdrup Jongkhar from Trashigang. Although the branch office at Pemagatshel knew of the bus arrival at the Tri-junction, they did not know when the mail would arrive at the regional post office at Dewathang. For instance, Dorjang shared that he had to walk by early morning or would miss the bus traveling to Samdrup Jongkhar from Tashigang.

Moreover, Dakwala Dorjung also shared his daunting experience of traveling to Tshelingore gate. He discussed an incident while carrying and delivering the monthly salaries of schoolteachers. During the journey, his fear of being killed and ransacked almost became a reality as he encountered individuals who seemed intent on robbing him. However, being suspicious he refused their offer to help him. Further, the Dakwalas often traveled with empty stomachs to fulfill their duty. Dakwala Dorjang narrates that he would only be served a meal if he reached by the time the host was having their meal. If not, they would only be provided with local *bangchang* or *ara*. He also recounted a personal experience in which he could not make it to Thonphu from Mikuri on time for lunch. Despite this, he said that the lama of Thonphu served him a cup of *ara* and continued his journey to Tsebar where he spent his night with the host. The monsoon rains and slippery paths did not comply with the weekly dispatch and fetching of mails, parcels and other documents. Those dangers and obstacles had to be confronted to make communication effective and efficient. It was also about the Dakwalas' commitment to public service and making communication possible all year round.

The Dakwala system was based on a complex web of rules and regulations. Those recruited had to sign the terms of agreement. The agreement instructed Dakwalas to fulfill their assigned duties without negligence. Moreover, terms such as payment of fines or ultimately managing out the recruits were also included in the agreement. Nevertheless, limited manpower in the sector left any shortcomings of Dakwalas readily unnoticed. Due to lack of manpower, no penalty was ever imposed but a minimal amount of salary was deducted. Dakwala Dorjang recalls that the monotonous nature of the task was unappealing and attracted only a few individuals. Some Dakwalas remained as mail couriers for more than 20 years, however.

Conclusion

The importance and the urgency of communication can be seen through the historical figure of the Dakwala. The Dakwalas were crucial in Bhutan's turn to modernity because it was them who connected leaders and communities across vast and difficult terrains. The Dakwalas thus contributed to the development of the nation as they carried important mails related to nation-building. However, they rarely figure in historical reconstructions. Many in fact may not have heard about their existence. They should be credited for their work as they struggled to serve the nation.

People were reluctant to work as Dakwalas as it required the workers to dedicate their time and strength to the work. Even if their children and wives were sick, they had no option but to continue with their work. There were times when they had no meals for days. On top of that, the daunting weather and mountainous terrain were a hindrance to their journey. There were also times when the Dakwalas could not deliver the message on time due to the hindrances mentioned; when that happened, they were subjected to complaints and reprimands. Dakwalas embody the history of Bhutan's communication system, and while much has changed in communication technology, neglecting their stories of hardship and their role in socio-economic development would be unfair.

Acknowledgment

We express our sincere appreciation to all those who contributed and provided help to us. Most of all we are grateful to the dakwalas who we interview.

References

- Booth, J., & Chophel D. (2021, November 16). Love, Hate and Tragedy: A Three-Part History of Bhutan-Cooch relations. *Kuensel*.
- Bhutan Post. (n.d.). *History*. Retrieved from Bhutan Postal Corporation Limited: <https://www.bhutanpost.bt/history/>
- Dorji, T. (2018, January 29). Bhutan Post- Evolving with Change. *Kuensel*.

- Dargye, Y. (2009). *Life of king Sinda [chakhar gyalpo] and the clear mirror of predictions*. Thimphu: Kuensel Corporation.
- Fisher, M., H. (1994). The east India company's 'suppression of the native dak'. *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/001946469403100303>
- International Telecommunication Union & Development Cooperation Directorate-Universal Postal Union. (2008). *E-Services through Post Offices in Bhutan*.
- Joshi, C. (2012). Dak roads, dak runners, and the reordering of communication networks. 169-189. doi: 10.1017/S002085901200017X
- Kratz, J. (2018). Unsung heroes of World War I: the carrier pigeons. National Archive, United States.
<https://prologue.blogs.archives.gov/2018/01/08/unsung-heroes-of-world-war-i-the-carrier-pigeons/>
- Law Insider. (n.d.). *DAK definition*. Retrieved from lawinsider.com:
<https://www.lawinsider.com/dictionary/dak>
- Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). *Dak*. Retrieved from Merriam-Webster.com:
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dak>
- Ura, K. (1995). *The hero with thousand eyes*. Thimphu: Reproman.
- Thinley, J. (2015). *History of internet in Bhutan*. Fukuoka, Japan.
- Wangdi, S. (n.d.) Myth, Legend and History Surrounding Dungsam. *Journal of Bhutan Studies*. Thimphu, Bhutan.
- Żyliński, S. (2018). Traditional Bhutanese media on social media. Uniwersytet Warmińsko-Mazurski w Olsztynie