

QUICK MAIL SERVICE OF THE INDIAN POST OFFICE

By. L.G. SHENOI

I THE BACKGROUND

The Quick Mail Service (QMS) is one of the great innovations adopted by the Indian Post office in recent years to facilitate quick transmission of inland mail. This service was inaugurated on 15th April, 1975.

Quick transmission and delivery of mail throughout the length and breadth of this vast sub-continent has always been the zealous mission of the Indian Post office. From time to time, and with the notable developments in the requisite infrastructure, they had ushered in new schemes for this purpose. Institution of air mail for inland letter, with a suitable surcharge, and of the Express delivery system, again with an extra fee, had been measures attuned to this purpose. The zeal to move mail fast and thus render more efficient service to the public gathered fresh momentum since independence.

It would appear that the Government did some self-inspection in this regard. For example, what the rationale for levying a surcharge for air lift of inland mail? The development of air flight was but one stage or facet in developing faster communication. When the railways started carrying mail at faster speeds than those of existing means of transportation, no surcharge was levied for mail carried on trains. So why should airmail rates be charged for inland mail? This seems to have been the trend of thought which led to the abolition of air mail surcharge in 1949, and acceptance by the Government of the principle that the conveyance of mail by the fastest means feasible is its fundamental responsibility, subject to the dictates of current economy. From October 1950, therefore, air lift of first class mail on a large scale without any surcharge commenced. This was the celebrated "All-Up" (Night Air Mail) Scheme. Nagpur provided the most convenient spot for the meeting of night planes from Delhi, Calcutta, Bombay and Madras, and for interchange of mail loads. The planes reached their terminal stations in the early hours of the morning.

A look at the map of India will convince any one of the enormous saving in transit time this Night Air Mail Scheme brought about. When the HS-748 fleet was grounded by the Indian Airlines for technical reasons, the Airlines were forced to

Close down this night service and this resulted in this virtual discontinuance of the all-up scheme from September 1973. The poor Post Office was left to hold the baby and carry it by slower steps.

The Express Delivery scheme did not ensure quicker transmission, as such mails were forwarded with the regular mails; the only difference was that they were sent out for delivery through a special messenger immediately on receipt of the mail at the office of destination. The scheme was abolished on 1st November, 1974.

In the meanwhile the Post office was struggling to find an effective solution to the bottleneck problem presented in mail sorting. Since independence there had been an enormous spurt in letter writing. By 1972, the postal Department was handling 6,100 million unregistered mail, 188 million registered articles 102 million money orders and 16 million insured parcels. The problems created by these mountains of mail, particularly in sorting, was aggravated by the casual and indifferent manner in which many letters were addressed. Although such vague and long-winded addressing as "To Pittu whose real is name is *Pitamber, living in the compound next to that os Somu who holds music classes every Sunday evening under a peepul tree in the front of the temple in the village of Sampangi in the district of Srinagar," Had mostly disappeared, incomplete and incorrect addresses were still rampant. This considerably slowed down sorting and routing.

With a view to improving the speed of sorting, and of course transmission, the Post office introduced the PIN (Postal Index Number) Code on 15th August, 1972. Under this system, the whole country has been divided into 8 zones.

All the delivery Head and Sub Post Offices in these zones have been allotted 6 digit code numbers, which identify these post offices. The first digit in the code represents the Zone, the second the sub-zone and the routing, the third digit pin points the sorting district and the last three digits indicate the specific post offices included in the sorting district. Special provision was also made on post-cards and inland letter sheets to indicate PIN in the address.

The PIN system was well conceived, as it facilitated the handling of mails with increased speed and efficiency. But as it happens with any new system, it took time for the system to be adopted by the public, and that too in the correct manner.

As a result of these, the transit time for mail started increasing as compared to the previous years. Private mail agencies cropped up in various places; public complaints and grievances at the inordinate delays in mail transit and delivery began to mount; these found expression in the country's Parliament also in 1974. With the increase in telex and teleprinter rates, the dissatisfaction about the delays in letter mail became all the more intense. Something had to be done, and done quickly to improve matters.

II THE NATIONAL QUICK MAIL SERVICE

The Quick Mail Service (QMS) was the solution offered and adopted by the postal Department to hasten transit and delivery of mail. Initially the experiment was confined to mail transmission by air between Delhi-Bombay, Bombay-Madras and Madras-Delhi. This scheme took advantage of the night air service which was still operating between Bombay and Madras. The scheme was inaugurated on 15th April, 1975. The following were the highlights of the scheme:

- (i) Only letters bearing the PIN Code of the office of delivery will qualify for this service.
- (ii) There will be no extra charge for this service.
- (iii) Special letter boxes painted with five strips in yellow luminous paint and the letters 'QMS' just below the will be installed at selected places.
- (iv) Only letters posted in these boxes will get the benefit of the service. However, articles which could not be posted in these boxes because of their size, franked articles, articles posted under the system of 'pre-payment of post-age in cash' and articles under certificate of posting pre-sented at the counter in the post offices where the special letter boxes are placed will also be afforded QMS facility if PIN is indicated in the address.
- (v) The postings in the special letter boxes would be cleared by a special dispatch rider, brought to the central point, sorted out separately and a separate bag closed. The label of the QMS bag will be distinct from the ordinary ones. The postings in QMS letter box should not be allowed to get mixed up with the normal postings cleared from the street letter boxes.
- (vi) Mails not complying with the requirement of QMS service but found in the special letter boxes will be picked up and transferred to the RMS offices for disposal in the normal course.

In order to avoid complaints about delay in delivery at a later stage and to ensure the genuineness of the complaint, it was decided to have a special cancellation of the QMS mail. PMG's were advised to procure locally improvised stamps with "QMS" also inscribed there-on till regular stamps were received. In case it was difficult to have movable types, the cancellation was to involve two operations, i.e. one with the normal stamp and the other with 'QMS'.

The post office plan to enlarge the QMS network was soon put into operation. The aim in the first instance was to bring into the network all the State capitals, taking advantage of the air service network connecting Delhi to all these places. Soon Hyderabad, Bangalore, Calcutta, Ahmedabad and Visakhapatnam were brought into the network.

The concept of QMS and the rationale of its operation can be well appreciated from the foregoing. To quote the words of Shri Daljinder Singh, Member (Postal Operations), P & T Board:

"The studies revealed that a large bulk of the mail related to postal articles for transmission and delivery between the larger cities and the capitals of the states. It was felt that if the mail for the capital cities was separated and given distinctive treatment from the rest of the mail, it would result in providing an expeditious mail service for the larger cities and the rest of the mail could also be cleared, sorted and routed in a more satisfactory manner. The Quick Mail Service provides the facility of later clearance and next day delivery in most of the capital cities. Special letter boxes are provided and special clearances, transmission and sorting arrangements are made. By utilising the quickest and earliest plans services through a proper routing appraisal a most efficient and expeditious service is provided." (DAKTAR, January 1977).

The department also concurrently, activated the system of Test Letter Runs to monitor and assess the quality of transmission on each route. TLR's were carried out concurrently in two areas: one within the Circle (CTRL) and other on a national basis (NTLR). Within the Circle, the PMG would designate routes linking important places in the Circle to Circle Headquarters. He would also designate the officers at the distant ends (Divisional supdts./postmasters) who will mail the test letters and the officer in the Circle office to whom they will be addressed. The letter would be in charge of recording the test results. The routes for the NTLR were designated by DG, P & T.

The Test Letters would be mailed once a week on Monday or the following working day if Monday happened to be a holiday. In the case of CTLR, the letters would be from the distant end to the Circle office. In the case of NTLR, a letter will originate from each of the Circle offices to every other Circle offices as well as to DG, P & T.

The Test Letters would be posted on due days in Street/Office letter boxes. For each route, the normal transit time would be determined in advance by the PMG in the case of NTLR and by the Directorate for the national routes. Each letter would be scrutinised for delay. No Sundays or holidays will be excluded for this purpose. The qualitative service will be assessed on the basis of penalty points for the delays involved. The penalty will be one point for a days delay, two for two days, four for three days, eight for four days etc. in geometric progression.

The results tabulated for each month will be reviewed by the PMG to assess the quality of transmission on each route. Where frequent or persistent delays are observed on any route, a quick investigation was to be made covering the Various stages through which the letter passes and suitable corrective measures adopted. In the Directorate, the DDG Mails would undertake the scrutiny. Where the delays are observed on inter-State routes, he will arrange for investigation and co-ordination.

The importance given by the postal Department to the efficient operation of the QMS should be quite apparent the preceding account of the extension of the NQMS centres and the special efforts made to see that the mail was speeded up to the extent feasible. Simultaneously, the special QMS boxes available for posting of letters were increased in number in large cities so that the public could utilize the facility easily.