The Informational Fabric of Eighteenth-Century India and the Middle East: Couriers, Intermediaries and Postal Communication*

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Abstract

Mundane knowledge of how information flows is essential for a proper understanding of large organisations and complex activities. It gives us valuable insights into the prevailing constraints of the era and the creative responses that enabled the demands of its cosmopolitan residents to be met. Though the sinews of communication have been a major topic of historical inquiry in recent decades, the focus has been decidedly uneven; much of the attention has been directed towards modern times and, for earlier periods, has been confined almost entirely to Europe, the western European empires and those sectors of the world's political economy in which Europeans had a stake. The rest of the world, in comparison, has been neglected, which may be seen clearly in the case of early modern India and the Middle East. This paper seeks to rectify the imbalance by offering a typology for making sense of how packages of low weight and high value were collected, transported and delivered over long distances within the region in the eighteenth century. While drawing on a wide range of sources, at the core of this analysis lies the correspondence of the headmen of a group—the Aiyangar pattamars—who specialised as couriers in pre-colonial southern India. Among the principal claims set forth are that there existed in this period two basic modes of private communication: in one, personal trust was paramount, in the other, the mode was effectively monopolised by recognised communities providing the necessary informational services within their cultural domain. These claims, if sustained, have major implications for current views on early modern India and the Middle East.

Introduction

If it is difficult to imagine everyday communication in our world today without couriers, in eighteenth-century India and the Middle East, it was inconceivable.[1] Delivering letters to far-off places before the arrival of the steam engine and the electrical telegraph has never been an easy task, even at the best of times. But according to the current prevailing wisdom, travelling long distances in India and the Middle East in the eighteenth century was especially arduous for couriers. The root cause for the additional barriers was insecurity. Much of this region was buffeted in the course of the century by a series of military conflicts and political upheavals. These were closely tied to ongoing social and economic changes that redirected power and wealth to the provinces and frontier areas to the detriment of the old imperial heartlands. The conspicuous outcome of these developments was fragmentation and reconfiguration as the Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal empires were hollowed out or replaced by a host of successor regimes.[2]

Yet, despite the purported scope and intensity of these structural changes, residents continued to correspond regularly, merchants and pilgrims still embarked on journeys lasting a year or more, and regional

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[1] I treat India and the Middle East together in this paper because they shared a great many attributes—economic, social and cultural—in the early modern period. These attributes were sufficiently widespread and formative that it makes sense to speak of 'Islamic Eurasia' as a meaningful entity in the early modern world. This idea will be developed in future papers.

[2] Though written nearly two decades ago, the best account of the interpretative paradigm that frames our current understanding of the history of India and the Middle East in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries continues to be Christopher A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780–1830* (London: Longman, 1989). See, in particular, pp. 16–63. This paradigm was a great advance on earlier interpretations dating back to the 1950s, which stressed to a far greater extent maritime Asia and the European presence as the main drivers of change in the early modern period. While many of their general conclusions are now thought inadequate, the scholarship that resulted is of enduring value for its empirical richness and detailed analyses of key sectors of the region's political economy. The major contributions to the literature include: Holden Furber, *John Company at Work: A Study of European Expansion in India in the late Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1951); Holden Furber, *Rival Empires of Trade in the Orient, 1600–1800* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976); Kirti N. Chaudhuri, *The Trading World of Asia and the English East India Company, 1660–1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); Ashin Das Gupta, *Indian Merchants and the Decline of Surat c. 1700–1750* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1979); and Ashin Das Gupta and Michael N. Pearson (eds.), *India and the Indian Ocean 1500–1800* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987).

trade in luxury and bulk goods remained a crucial part of quotidian economic life. These facts gesture towards the existence of a robust and efficient system of communication and transport. Unfortunately, however, our evidence for this is patchy. With the notable exception of sectors in which the central government or Europeans had a stake, the historical literature does not shed much light on the region's premodern informational fabric. What we have at present are isolated clusters of studies of varying quality and detail that explore select portions of this fabric. For the case of India, there are several, rather idealised, accounts of state-sponsored postal systems in mediaeval and early modern times;[3] some innovative recent work that examines the juncture between sovereign control, vernacular knowledge and social communication in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries;[4] and a few good papers on the *akhbārnavīs* and *munshī*, institutions that played a major role in gathering and communicating intelligence.[5] There is little published literature on comparable topics for early modern Iran, Iraq and Arabia. Though the situation is somewhat better for the Arab and Ottoman territories of the Mediterranean world.[6] These studies are complemented by a sizeable corpus of work on the physical infrastructure that undergirded long-distance communication in pre-modern times.[7]

[3] Usha Agarwal, 'An account of the postal system in India from 1650 to 1750' in *Bengal Past and Present*, Vol. 85 (1966), pp. 40–57; M. A. Nayeem, *The Philatelic and Postal History of Hyderabad*, 2 vols. (Hyderabad, 1970); *idem*, *The Evolution of Postal Communications and Administration in the Deccan (from 1294 A. D. to the Formation of the Hyderabad State in 1724 A. D.)* (Hyderabad, 1969); Irfan Habib, 'Postal communications in Mughal India' in *Proceedings of the Indian Historical Congress* (Delhi, 1986), pp. 236–252.

[4] Christopher A. Bayly, 'Knowing the country: Empire and information' in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 71, No. 1 (1993), pp. 3–43 and the book that extends the paper's thesis, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[5] Michael Fisher, 'The office of Akhbar Nawis: The transition from Mughal to British forms' in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (1993), pp. 45–82; Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Making of a munshi' in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (2004), pp. 61–72; Muhammad Zameeruddin Siddiqi, 'The intelligence services under the Mughals' in *Medieval India: A Miscellany*, Vol. 2 (New York, 1972), pp. 53–60.

[6] For references to this literature, see Suraiya Faroqhi, *Approaching Ottoman History: An Introduction to the Sources* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[7] Halford L. Hoskins, *British Routes to India* (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1928); Holden Furber, 'Overland route to India in the 17th and 18th centuries' in *Journal of Indian History*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (1951), pp. 105–134; Usha Agarwal, 'Roads from Surat to Agra in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries' in *Quarterly Review of Historical Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (1965–1966), pp. 148–155;

In view of the state of the literature, the present paper aims to strengthen both our conceptual and empirical grasp on this critical facet of daily life in early modern India and the Middle East. It delineates the social and material basis of *private* communication in the eighteenth century, stressing particularly the role of intermediaries and couriers.[8] At its core lies a detailed case-study of the Aiyangar pattamars, a group of specialist couriers who lived and worked in southern India, through which we gain penetrating insights into one of the two principal modes of private conveyance in the region. These insights not only enhance our knowledge of Asia's past, they also have a manifest bearing on the perennial debates concerning the relationship between state and society in eighteenth-century India and the Middle East, and the role of indigenous groups in an era of remarkable European expansion.

Success in achieving these goals depends very much on the accessibility and nature of the extant sources. While these are highly uneven in their coverage, efforts have been made to ensure the sources tapped in this paper are diverse in terms of genre, language, authorship and physical provenance.[9] Collectively, they detail the activities of merchants, bankers, clerks and agents drawn from a broad range of communities—Gujarati Shiites, Armenians from Iraq, Luso-Indians, Hindu and Jain banias, Malabari Jews and Brahmins,

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Usha Agarwal, 'Historical account of the roads from Kabul to Calcutta during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries' in *Quarterly Review of Historical Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (1969–1970), pp. 147–160; Eric Macro, 'South Arabia and the Overland Route to India' in *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies*, Vol. 12 (1982), pp. 49–60; Jean Deloche, *Transport and Communications in India prior to Steam Locomotion,* Vol. 1, *Land Transport,* Vol. 2, *Water Transport* (New Delhi: Oxford University, 1993–1994).

[8] More specifically, the focus is on postal networks and groups that operated largely beyond the purview of the state and on which private individuals and small organisations depended for long-distance communication. These networks and groups tended to be dominated by individuals that are designated in this paper in terms of their principal function, namely, 'intermediaries' and 'couriers'.

[9] The sources of greatest value have proven to be: the records in English of the eighteenth-century Mayor's Court in Bombay; the personal correspondence in Arabic and Persian, dating from the 1740s, of Armenian and Shiite merchants and their families based in southern Iraq and Bengal, whose ties spanned much of India and the Middle East; the private and official papers in Portuguese, French and Arabic, dating from the 1750s to 1770s, of a French merchant-official based on the Malabar coast who maintained relations with a wide range of merchants and officials across maritime Asia; the private papers in Portuguese and French, dating from the 1760s to 1790s, of a Hindu family firm based at Goa, with longstanding agricultural, financial and commercial interests in western India and territories under Portuguese and French control on the Arabian Sea littoral.

European private traders and the merchant-officials of the East India Companies. These individuals were all involved in making possible the circulation of men, ideas, objects and knowledge within the region in the early modern period. Though the historical record is far more forthcoming about their activities as intermediaries than as couriers, we do have a few sources that tell us a great deal about the latter in specific contexts.[10] The extended case-study in this paper is based on one such source. This is a small collection of correspondence exchanged in the 1760s and 1770s between the headmen of the Aiyangar pattamars of southern India and their French employers and clients in Mahe and Pondicherry.[11] What makes this collection of particular note is that the letters were written by the headmen themselves. Thus, they document *in their own words* their thoughts and feelings in the context of their everyday working lives. It is rare to be privy to information of such intimacy for any group from the region before the nineteenth century.

The paper opens with a stylised account of the logistics of dispatching, transporting and delivering packages of low weight and high value in early modern India and the Middle East. There follows an analysis of the terms that were used to refer to couriers by local residents at the time. This philological interlude gives us a general

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[10] This asymmetry in the historical record arises from the fact that an intermediary's relationship with the author of the document (often his employer, client or partner) tended to be of longer duration and encompassed a wider range of duties and expectations. An intermediary was seldom just a *poste restante* or sorting office. Though important, this was usually one of a cluster of interrelated services he undertook for his principal. In contrast, the relationship between a courier and his principal was generally confined to supervision of the package during transport and ensuring its delivery to the right address. Occasionally, this was supplemented by the courier supplying his principal with recent news picked up about the places through which he had travelled. As any special instructions regarding the conveyance of packages tended to be given orally to the courier, it is rare to find information on these comparable in detail and scope with what is available for intermediaries (special instructions for whom were generally written down). It is sometimes possible to gain insights into how couriers were organised and managed by examining receipts given in return for the packages entrusted to them and by looking out for stray references to them in the documents that they were carrying. The picture that emerges on the basis of this material is, however, fragmented and lacklustre—hence, the special value of the few documentary collections that are forthcoming about couriers.

[11] Though the entire collection is in French, the letters from the headmen were originally composed in Tamil or Malayalam. They were translated into French or Portuguese by local interpreters commissioned or employed by their French recipients. The translated versions were preserved while the originals appear to have been either discarded or lost.

sense of contemporary views on the arena of activities of which couriers were a part. Many of the points raised in the preceding two sections come into play once again in the third which examines the structure and activities of a group of Aiyangar pattamars in eighteenth-century southern India. The conclusion discusses the findings of this paper in the broad context of communication in early modern Asia, before linking them up to the ongoing debates on the relationship of the region's indigenous scribal and mercantile groups to the state and to the signal political developments of the era.

I

The system for delivering packages over long distances in early modern India and the Middle East depended on individuals who performed two distinct roles: *couriers*, responsible for manually transporting the packages entrusted to them; and *intermediaries*, who generally resided at settlements of spiritual, commercial or political significance that lay at the juncture of several land- and sea-routes. Unlike couriers, intermediaries were usually associated with an array of functions. The most important, for the purposes of postal communication, was to monitor the progress of the courier and his charge. Beyond this, the intermediary bore the main responsibility for redirecting the package on to the next stage of its journey, perhaps with another courier, or for keeping it in his possession while awaiting further instructions.

Within the sphere of communication, intermediaries and couriers may be differentiated in terms of their relationship to the sender of the package.[12] On this basis, there were two classes of intermediaries. On the one hand, there were those for whom there was no barrier in principle to achieving social or economic parity with the sender. In this case, both intermediary and sender occupied transient positions on a spectrum, enabling them to act as intermediaries for each other without any fear of compromising their social standing. On the other hand, there were permanent employees and agents whose relationship with the sender was marked by an insurmountable asymmetry in terms

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[12] For examples from eighteenth-century India and the Middle East of the various classes of intermediaries and couriers discussed in this paragraph, see British Library, London/Lansdowne/1046; Département des Manuscrits, division occidentale, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris (hereafter MssOcc)/N. A. F./ 8992-9114; Xavier Centre Of Historical Research, Alto Porvorim, Goa/MHR; Tamil Nadu State Archives, Chennai /Persian Records/109–114.

of authority and rank. Equitable reciprocity was not possible in this situation. Similarly, among couriers were those who could aspire to the same status as the sender, and those who were separated by an unbridgeable gap. There was, in addition, a third class of courier with no counterpart among intermediaries. These were commissionaires engaged to deliver packages in return for a payment that covered their fees and expenses. The distinctive feature of this third class was that the sender and courier were normally strangers in a non-hierarchical association, grounded in convenience, the expectation of monetary gain, and the prospect of ongoing collaboration.[13]

It was not easy for a would-be courier acting on his own to gain a foothold in this occupation. Senders and forwarding intermediaries generally had established couriers that served them perfectly well. And in situations where a need did arise for a courier, the choice was largely determined by prior attitudes towards risk and the degree of familiarity with the service on offer. This conservatism heavily favoured incumbents. Despite this, there were entrepreneurial individuals, mostly foreigners, who persisted in trying to capture some of this business. At a time when advertising in public fora was uncommon, such entrepreneurs made themselves known to potential clients through conversations, referrals and personal letters.[14] In return for delivering the package to a destination on their proposed itinerary, they were paid a fee, which was a welcome, though relatively minor, addition to their overall income. Departing friends, family members or associates also undertook to deliver such packages.[15] As this was usually deemed a personal favour, they expected no more than the extra costs that it might entail.

Once the mode of transport had been selected, the package was handed over to the courier with any special instructions to aid its delivery. If there were instructions for the intermediary, these might be given orally to the courier to be passed on to him or put down on paper and delivered to him together with the package.[16] Muḥammad

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[13] Such couriers may be thought of as precursors to a scheduled, fixed price mail service that was open to all who could afford it. However, there was to be a lengthy gestation before its tentative realisation, beginning in India, at the turn of the nineteenth century.

[14] MssOcc/N. A. F./09001, 3–5.

[15] MssOcc/N. A. F./09008, 133.

[16] British Library, London /Lansdowne/1046, doc. 68; Maharashtra State Archives, Mumbai/Misc/HCR/MRC/031, 373; MssOcc/N. A. F./09009, 62; Xavier Centre Of Historical Research, Alto Porvorim, Goa/MHR/Correspondence (incoming)

Adīb, for example, stranded in Cochin in 1748, opted to send written instructions. These were to help his correspondents in Hugli ensure that his colleague's letter—enclosed with his own—got to its intended recipient. 'By all means [at your disposal]', he wrote, 'deliver the letter of the *kirānī* Sayyid Thanāʿ Allāh to his home (*khānah*). Either hand it to Shaykh Bāb Allāh or give [it] to Shaykh Dīn Muḥammad Jīyu. By all means delivery [it]. His [Sayyid Thanāʾ Allāh's] son's name is Sayyid Gharīb Allāh. [The name of the] place [where he lives] is Gharībah, next to the house (*havīlī*) of Ḥājī Hidāyat Allāh.'[17]

Information on postage costs in eighteenth-century India and the Middle East is not easy to find.[18] Nevertheless, records show that, if their contents merited it, residents were quite willing to spend large sums on sending letters. Manakji Limji and Ramseth Ganbaseth, Gujarati merchants who freighted a ship in 1766 on a venture from Bengal to Jidda, impressed upon their supercargoes the importance of sending them as soon as possible the current local market prices for Bengal and Surat goods. Such was their need for this 'intelligence', they were prepared to spend anything up to Rs. 100.[19] Though Manakji and Ramseth gave their supercargoes the freedom to choose whatever route and method they considered best, their preference was for the letter to be carried by express courier to their broker Narotum in Masqat.[20] In anticipation of this, they gave Narotum warning of the

[5 December, 1777]; Xavier Centre Of Historical Research, Alto Porvorim, Goa/MHR/Correspondence (incoming) [15 February, 1789].

[17] British Library, London/Lansdowne/1046, doc. 13.

[18] Though more information is available on the costs of sending packages on official business by some of the provincial states and great chartered European companies, this is still limited and difficult to interpret before the turn of the nineteenth century. Probably the best documented example is the system administered by the English East India Company. We possess several estimates from the end of the eighteenth century of the costs for transporting mail between India and London by various routes across the Arabian Sea and over Eurasia. See IOR/G/17/6, 442–446, 469–481; and John Taylor, *Considerations on the Practicability and Advantages of a more speedy Communication between Great Britain and her Possessions in India* . . . (London, 1795). For details about the political and economic context in which these discussions regarding the 'overland' mail routes were taking place, see Halford L. Hoskins, *British Routes to India* (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1928); Holden Furber, 'Overland route to India in the 17th and 18th centuries' in *Journal of Indian History*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (1951), pp. 105–134; and Eric Macro, 'South Arabia and the Overland Route to India' in *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies*, Vol. 12 (1982), pp. 49–60.

[19] Maharashtra State Archives, Mumbai/Misc/HCR/MRC/031, 367–369.

[20] The Gujarati merchants thought that commissioning an express courier for this stretch of the journey should not cost more than 200 cruzados. Maharashtra State Archives, Mumbai/Misc/HCR/MRC/031, 373. For conversion tables between

package's impending arrival, directing him 'to forward it safely to us [in Bengal] with all possible speed', by way of Sind and northern India. The supercargoes were not to worry if the expense on this latter stretch of the journey amounted to 'twenty or thirty rupees'.[21]

This example allows us to place upper limits on what merchants were willing to pay for dispatching an important letter from Jidda to Bengal. In particular, it seems that the cost of shipping a letter across the Arabian Sea between southern Arabia and the western coast of India in the 1760s was a significant fraction of Rs. 20. It is possible that this was the case for much of this century. In 1777, for example, a pair of Gujarati merchant-brokers in Mocha, Yemen's chief port, advocated paying a similar amount. Wanting their French principal in western India to send them his recent news by the quickest means, they suggested that, if a French vessel was not available, he use instead one of the Malabari ships that sailed regularly between Mocha and India's west coast, even at the cost of '5 or 6 rupees'.[22]

These accounts suggest that, when packages were conveyed on a commission basis, the sender or intermediary who employed the courier had the main responsibility for paying him.[23] In situations where the recipient shouldered part of this cost, the usual arrangement was for the courier to be given some of his fees by the sender, the remainder supplied by the recipient once the package was safely in his hands.[24] For specialist couriers and for intermediaries in permanent employment, payment usually took the form of a wage. This was on top of any expenses incurred in making the delivery. Agents, for whom dealing with their principal's correspondence was merely one of their several duties, could also be paid wages and expenses. Alternatively, the sums due to them would be noted in their principal's current account and settled at the end of the financial cycle. As already mentioned, couriers who were close associates, personal friends or kinsmen seldom received direct payments, save perhaps expenses. The unstated rationale for this was the expectation of future reciprocity.

the main currencies in the Arabian Sea region in the seventeenth century, see Rene J. Barendse, *The Arabian Seas: The Indian Ocean World of the Seventeenth Century* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2002), pp. 501–502.

[21] Maharashtra State Archives, Mumbai/Misc/HCR/MRC/031, 373.

[22] MssOcc/N. A. F./09005, 64–67.

[23] MssOcc/N. A. F./09011, 154.

[24] Xavier Centre Of Historical Research, Alto Porvorim, Goa/MHR/Correspondence (outgoing) [2 April, 1778].

A courier setting off on his journey, say, from Basra to Aleppo had available to him two kinds of travel options. *General* modes of conveyance, commonly merchant ships and caravans, carried a wide variety of items between many different places for any client who could afford the charges. *Specialised* modes of conveyance, in contrast, were confined to the transport of correspondence, gems, bullion and other high-value items of low weight, normally within a specified 'cultural domain'.[25] These latter were patronised by a select clientele, who usually took care of their upkeep and costs. Until the turn of the nineteenth century and the arrival of scheduled mail services, specialised modes of conveyance did not extend across large bodies of water or continents; their scope tended to be provincial or local. Furthermore, neither of the two modes operated according to a fixed timetable with predetermined prices. As a result, the terms of most deliveries were negotiated individually.

From the technological standpoint, general modes were able to use a greater number and range of routes—the types of ship and caravan they had in service were larger and more robust and offered more security.[26] When economic factors are taken into account, however, specialised modes enjoyed more flexibility in their choice of routes, albeit over shorter distances. By their very nature, general modes were constrained by the need to maintain positive cash flow and avoid a financial loss. Thus, as a route's turnover and profitability were the prime considerations, they were effectively confined to popular routes already well-established due to trade or pilgrimage. Specialised modes, which operated on more modest scales, were limited to routes on land and along the coast. The conveyances available to them were of the humbler sort: travelling alone on foot, in small convoys or on small vessels (known as 'dhoneys' off the coast of southern India).[27] But as cost was frequently of lower priority than security and speed, specialised modes had, in practice, more latitude in selecting the route to follow. At the same time, the differences between these two

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[25] This is the area of which well-defined groups of specialist couriers had extensive personalised knowledge and experience. They seldom operated outside its bounds. The notion of a cultural domain is elaborated below, by studying in detail the specific case of the Aiyangar pattamars at work.

[26] Xavier Centre Of Historical Research, Alto Porvorim, Goa/MHR/Correspondence (incoming) [15 June, 1777].

[27] This is a Tamil word, properly transliterated as thōṇi. In contemporary European sources, it is spelt variously as 'tone', 'tony', 'tona', 'doney', etc. MssOcc/N. A. F./08993, 72, 85, 108; MssOcc/N. A. F./09010, 119; MssOcc/N. A. F./09011, 69. For more details about this type of vessel, see Henry Yule and A. C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson* (London: J. Murray, 1903), p. 323.

modes should not be exaggerated. In both cases, the choice of the type of courier, the physical conveyance and the route was ultimately a function of the same basic factors: the mode's availability, cost and the (potential) gains from increasing returns to scale, together with the minimum levels of secrecy, reliability and speed required by the sender and recipient.

II

Whatever their mode of conveyance, there were a number of terms used to refer to couriers in the principal languages of early modern India and the Middle East. The most common appear to have been *qāṣid*, *sā'in*, *harkārah*, *payk* and pattamar (and their cognates). These terms are rooted in one or more of the region's principal languages and, though all were in widespread use, some had greater currency in certain linguistic arenas than in others.[28] Where the sources are wanting, an analysis of the vernacular repertoire tapped by those familiar with couriers can be invaluable. In particular, we stand to gain insights (that would otherwise not be possible) into general attitudes regarding couriers and their role in everyday communication.[29]

The term with the most expansive reach linguistically—and, thus, physically—was *qāṣid*. Arabic in origin,[30] it formed part of the early modern Arabic, Ottoman Turkish, Persian and Hindi lexicon.[31] In all four languages, it meant '(foot-) messenger, courier, express, postman, letter-carrier'.[32] But in Arabic and Persian specifically, *qāṣid* had the

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[28] Even residents who were ignorant of the dominant regional language would often borrow the term from it and integrate it into their native language or the local *lingua franca*.

[29] In order to carry out this analysis of the vernacular repertoire, reference is made to the great dictionaries compiled by European orientalists in the nineteenth century. These works are a good source for gaining a sense of the meanings attached to the repertoire of terms in the early modern period. Another good source are dictionaries compiled in this period by scholars indigenous to the region, who generally worked in Arabic, Persian or Ottoman Turkish. But I have yet to examine the latter in any detail for the purposes of this section. For a broad overview of these dictionaries, which include citations to the major studies on them, see the entries under '*Ḳāmūs*' in *Enclycopeadia of Islam* (new edn., Leiden, 1954) and under 'Dictionaries' in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (London, 1982).

[30] Grammatically, *qāṣid* is the active participle of the verb *qaṣada*, 'to strive', 'proceed directly', 'intend towards'.

[31] For this period, 'Hindi' refers to the closely related cluster of northern Indian languages spoken by both Hindus and Muslims. Modern-day Hindi and Urdu developed out of this cluster.

[32] Reinhardt P. Dozy, *Supplément aux Dictionnaires Arabes*, 2 vols. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1881); J. G. Hava, *Arabic-English Dictionary for the Use of Students* (Beirut: Catholic Press,

additional meanings of 'ambassador', 'delegate' or, more broadly, 'traveller'.[33] Alongside *qāṣid*, Arabic had a second common term in *sā'in*.[34] This referred to a 'messenger, courier, postman, runner'.[35] Though similar in meaning to *qāṣid*, its use was more circumscribed, restricted largely to Arabic speakers.

In areas influenced by Indo-Persian culture, especially Iran and northern and central India, the term *harkārah* was commonplace. A compound term made up of two Persian words meaning 'each, every' (*har*) and 'work, affair' (*kār*), it was found in both early modern Persian and Hindi and was invoked in several different contexts.[36] At its most general, it referred to a factotum, or servant, employed to carry out errands outside the home or office for his master. Particularly in India, *harkārah* could also be an attendant upon men of rank. In these two senses, there is no obvious bound upon the kind of work expected of such individuals. The *harkārah's* function is more clearly elaborated in its other senses. The most common of these were a 'running footman', 'messenger', 'courier', or 'peon', which overlapped with its more specialised meanings of a 'spy' or 'emissary'.

Another widespread Indo-Persian term was *payk*. With variants found in Sanskrit, Persian and Hindi, it occupied two distinct semantic ranges.[37] In one, it had the meanings of a 'footman', 'foot-soldier', 'armed attendant', 'inferior police' or 'revenue officer', 'guard', 'watchman'. This stresses the *payk's* role as a guardian of, or enforcer for, a sovereign body. The other range of meanings included a 'messenger', 'carrier', 'harbinger'. Here, the focus is on the *payk's* role in communication and transport.

The last in this list of terms is 'pattamar'.[38] Though its etymological origins are obscure, it appears to be a composite of words from one or

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1899); James W. Redhouse, *A Turkish and English Lexicon* (Constantinople: Printed for the American mission by A. H. Boyajian, 1890); Francis J. Steingass, *A Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary* (London: W. H. Allen, 1892); John T. Platts, *A Dictionary of Urdū, Classical Hindī, and English* (London: Oxford University Press, 1884); Henry Yule and A. C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson* (London: J. Murray, 1903).

[33] *Steingass, Persian-English Dictionary*; Dozy, *Supplément*.

[34] Grammatically, *sā'in* is the active particle of the verb *sa'ā*, 'to walk', 'move forward', 'strive', 'proceed'.

[35] *Dozy, Supplément*; Hava, Arabic-English Dictionary.

[36] *Platts, Dictionary*; Steingass, Persian-English Dictionary.

[37] *Platts, Dictionary*; Steingass, Persian-English Dictionary.

[38] For details about the various spellings and possible etymologies of this term, see the entry under 'pattamar' in the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford, 2006) and under 'pattamar' or 'patimar' in Yule and Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson*, p. 687.

more Indic languages. In the early modern period, it was frequently invoked in two different senses. Especially in southern and western India, a pattamar meant a 'foot-messenger, running footman' or, more generally, a 'courier'. In its other sense, it originally referred to an 'Indian dispatch boat'. With the passage of time, however, the word ended up denoting a fast-sailing, lateen-rigged vessel with up to three masts. This change paralleled the increasing popularity of such vessels in the coastal trade of western India from the eighteenth century.

This sketch of the etymology of the words commonly used to refer to couriers by the residents of early modern India and the Middle East raises several interesting points. While their meanings are wide in scope, the terms all embody, albeit in differing proportions, three main ideas: mobility, information-gathering and menial service. These basic associations suggest that those for whom such terms were part of their daily lexicon did not think of couriers solely as servants, employed merely to undertake the physical transport of their packages. They also understood couriers as figures central to the provision of intelligence and mediation in the mercantile and political spheres. It appears that popular views on circulation and exchange were intimately tied to popular views on knowledge and diplomacy. This vernacular mindset coincided with realities on the ground, which lie at the focus of the following account of a group of specialist couriers.

III

In this section, the world of couriers and intermediaries is thrown into sharp relief by studying in detail a particular branch of the Aiyangar community of southern India. By examining how this branch—known colloquially as 'pattamars'—organised, managed and executed the delivery of small packages in the middle decades of the eighteenth century, light is shed on the dynamic links between major elements of southern India's informational fabric. The documents on which this case-study is based give details on the pattamars' activities and views, and provide insights into the structure of the larger community of which they were a part. We learn about the social and material infrastructure that made it possible to deliver mail at the time. But this is not all. We also learn about a host of complementary informational services that the community's headmen provided for their employers and clients. These facets of communication in southern India will be considered towards the end of this case-study.

It was common practice for merchant houses, state institutions and wealthy individuals based in southern India to employ or commission specialised couriers. These pattamars were used mainly for delivering their correspondence within this area. Many (if not most) of these pattamars were Aiyangars, a community whose roots lie in Tamil Nadu.[39] They journeyed frequently between the towns and ports of the peninsula, from Valapattanam on the Malabar to Chennai on the Coromandel.[40] They constituted a major channel of communication between many of the leading figures in the kingdoms and petty states of the time, which included Nair officials and the kings of Cochin and Coimbatore. Despite its politically fragmented nature, the pattamars treated southern India as a single cultural domain. This was an area of which they had intimate experience and personalised knowledge. And within this area, the existing infrastructure and prior arrangements with the relevant 'big men' and power-brokers allowed them to travel quickly and in security. Pattamars were essential for those who had a large network of correspondents and placed a premium on reliable and swift communication, but who did not want, or were unable, to operate their own stable of couriers. They were, however, of little use for delivering packages to places outside their cultural domain. Those needing such a service were forced to look to other types of courier and means of conveyance, which tended to be less institutionalised and more dependent upon affective ties.

Each major settlement in southern India was home to a group or community that exercised a monopoly over the overland and coastal transport of small packages within its cultural domain. These specialist couriers were usually members of the same caste or extended family and, even if much of their lives were spent elsewhere due to the dictates of their work, they were always considered residents of their country of origin and subjects of its ruler. In southern India in the eighteenth century, the Aiyangars, a community of Tamil Brahmins, were well-known as a source of pattamars.[41] Communities of this type

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[39] For more details on the Aiyangar (or Iyengar) community, see Edgar Thurston and K. Rangachari, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, 7 vols. (Madras: Government Press, 1909). Note, however, the discussion is heavily filtered through a colonial perspective.

[40] Other ports and towns mentioned in the documents include: Alanghat, Calicut, Cochin, Coimbatore (on the Madras-Calicut road, commanding the Palghat Gap to the west coast), Mahe, Patiate, Pondicherry and Trichur (Thrissur, in central Kerala, formerly part of the princely state of Cochin).

[41] The dozen pattamars employed by the French authorities at Mahe and Pondicherry in the 1770s were named (with the current standard

seem to have been defined primarily by *jāti* and residence, and only their members had ready access to work as pattamars.[42]

While there is insufficient evidence to specify precisely how each community sustained its local monopoly, we know in broad terms the strategies used to deter outsiders from becoming pattamars, which, in turn, helped preserve the community's inner cohesion. The world-view that framed early modern Indian society sanctioned the dominance of particular occupations by named and endogamous social groups. Usually called *jātis* within the Hindu tradition, these groups embraced a characteristic style of life within a ritualised and hierarchical system. Though this social cosmology was never static, its internal boundaries were well entrenched, publicly demarcated and actively policed. Blurring or transcending these boundaries was a slow, charged and uncertain process. Thus, an outsider attempting to gain employment as a pattamar would ordinarily have been viewed a deviant and very likely ostracised by his kinsmen and local society.

Such cultural and social barriers were reinforced by strict controls on access to the specialist knowledge, facilities and personal ties that enabled pattamars to deliver packages to their destination efficiently, safely and without being compromised. By denying would-be

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transliteration following in square brackets) as: Souba [Suba, Shubha], Annawayen [Anaraiyan], Koupen [Kuppan], Tirmelayer [Tirumalaiyar], Walamelé [Valamalai], Virasamy [Virasami], Narayen [Naraiyan], Shiniranen [Srinaraiyan], Vengatrayen [Venkatarayan], Apadgy [Appaji], Kischna [Krishna], Rama Samy [Ramasami]. MssOcc/N. A. F./o8996, 85. In the absence of additional biographical details it is impossible to state with certainty the community to which these individuals belonged. Their names are, however, consistent with those widespread among the Hindu Brahmin population of southern India. Furthermore, the name of one of the pattamars' headmen is given as Venkatachalam Aiyangar. MssOcc/N. A. F./o9038, 1–2, 16–17, 19, 21. Taken together, this is strong evidence for these pattamars all being Aiyangars.

[42] By canonical tradition, Hindus are divided into four *varṇas* and numerous *jātis*. The *varṇas* provide the system of values in Hinduism, *jātis* (the local, endogamous occupational groups) Hinduism's functional organisation and practice. Specific *jātis* were identified, for example, with trading either because of their *varṇa* or through long association with the occupation. It is important to stress, however, that the terms *jāti* and *varṇa*, as well as caste (a Portuguese loan-word), have had different meanings ascribed to them by different people at different times. Quotidian usage was often at considerable variance from their meanings in the orthodox literature. These terms are ambiguous and protean, which reflects a basic feature of the society in which they were rooted. For more details, see André Béteille, *Caste, Class and Power: Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village* (2nd ed., New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 45–46, 188–189. Despite being dated in several respects, the classic study by Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: Essai sur le Sysème des Castes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), remains influential.

interlopers access to this social and physical capital, incumbents enjoyed an overwhelming advantage over others who might wish to offer a comparable service. They also benefited from the structural uncertainties of pre-modern times, which encouraged a conservative outlook. Actively seeking to manage and, if possible, lower risks, those who needed specialist couriers naturally favoured pattamars belonging to communities with recognised expertise in the field.

Each group of pattamars was organised hierarchically. At the top were 'chefs' (or headmen),[43] who belonged to the same close-knit group as the pattamars. These headmen conducted their affairs either from their permanent residence, usually in their community's home settlement, or on the move, often while accompanying their pattamars doing their rounds. Thus, Venkatachalam and Tirumalai, the headmen of the pattamars employed by the French authorities in Pondicherry in the 1770s, organised affairs so that one would remain in Pondicherry and the other would travel with his pattamars 'when necessary' (*au besoin*).[44] In terms of age, social rank and function, headmen were quite distinct from pattamars. They tended to be relatively advanced in years. Venkatachalam is a case in point. Though he began his working life as a pattamar in the 1720s, it was not until many years later that he became a headman, most probably in his forties or fifties.[45] This promotion would have been marked by a drastic change in his rights, duties and privileges. Whereas pattamars had the immediate responsibility for ensuring the package actually reached its destination, it was the headmen who dealt with the logistics, making arrangements for their pick-up, transport and delivery. But the headmen's work did not stop there. Many also undertook for their principals a wide range of additional services relating to intelligence, diplomacy and commerce.[46]

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[43] 'Chef' is the term invariably used in French documents to refer to the individual who presided over the pattamar group. In other languages and places, variants on the Arabic term 'muqaddam' were often used. I translate these as 'headman'. In so doing, I make no prior or implicit judgement. I consider 'headman' appropriate because it expresses clearly the relative status of 'chefs' and pattamars in the institution of which both were part. Ideally, I would have adopted one of the terms used by the Aiyangars themselves in their native tongue. Unfortunately, the Malayalam or Tamil originals of the letters on which this case-study is largely based no longer survive; we are limited to the French and Portuguese translations that were made at the time.

[44] MssOcc/N. A. F./08996, 85.

[45] MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 19 [9 September, 1768].

[46] The documents do not shed light on any structural distinctions among the pattamars themselves. This may be interpreted as reflecting the fact that those

Pattamars were either permanently attached to a single individual or organisation, or engaged on the basis of short-term commissions.[47] This is exemplified by the French authorities in India, who, in constant need of secure and reliable channels of communicating for official business, maintained a retinue of pattamars. Twenty-six of them were dedicated to carrying 'correspondence between Pondicherry and Mahe' until the mid-1770s, when an official audit concluded that this number was 'far too many and [that they were too] expensive [to maintain] given the circumstances'. As a result, they were reduced to twelve, with 'four for Pondicherry and eight for Mahe'.[48] Pattamars in such circumstances could remain in the service of a single employer for many years, even decades. Venkatachalam was one of the *Compagnie des Indes*' most loyal employees. He started working for it in the 1720s as an ordinary pattamar. By the late 1760s, having transported for his employer 'ten to twenty thousand letters by land', he had become a headman of the Pondicherry pattamars and even counted several French officials among his friends.[49]

Though the primary loyalty of pattamars in salaried service was to their employer, there were slack periods during which there was insufficient work to go around. At such times, they often sought one-off clients, with or without their employer's consent. This, however, brought them into direct competition with other pattamars who earned their living principally by serving customers on demand. It appears to have been normal to find constellations of such 'free' pattamars in each settlement of any consequence. This allowed organisations which depended upon specialist couriers and yet, like the French,[50] were mindful of their cost, to be strategic in their use of pattamars. As a general rule, they employed a sufficient number of pattamars to meet their average requirements; at times of exceptional need, this number would be augmented by drawing on the available pool of unattached pattamars. Based on this reasoning, French officials

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engaged as pattamars were all of equal standing. However, without further evidence, this can be no more than a conjecture.

[47] It is not clear how the terms of employment were formalised. In the absence of any evidence for the existence of written contracts, it is assumed that the employment of pattamars was based on oral agreements, perhaps secured against a personal bond or property guarantee.

[48] MssOcc/N. A. F./08992, 121. This decision, and the rationale for it, is stated again in MssOcc/N. A. F./08996, 84.

[49] MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 19 [9 September, 1768].

[50] MssOcc/N. A. F./08992, 121.

in Mahe in the mid-1770s were told by their superiors that, if they required 'for urgent dispatches' (*pour quelques expéditions pressantes*) more than the eight pattamars which had been assigned to them, they were to let them know and appropriate steps would be taken to ease their situation.[51] Organisations thus made efficient use of their serving pattamars and kept their labour costs down to manageable levels. At the same time, this policy did entail additional costs. There was a heightened risk that the package would be compromised by pattamars with whom the employer was unfamiliar. This concern was partially assuaged by their headmen, who acted as their bondsmen. Furthermore, this strategy was predicated on a buyer's labour market. But such a market could not be guaranteed. There were occasions, especially at times of high general demand, when there were too few dependable pattamars available for short-term hire. The potential costs, be it the surcharge or those due to disruption to communication, could be very high indeed. Many organisations, however, judged that these were sufficiently rare to be acceptable; for them, the higher associated potential costs were more than adequately compensated by the long-term gains promised by their employment policy.

Both for single commissions and permanent service, pattamars were not engaged directly but through their headmen. Thus, a French official in Mahe, in sudden need of pattamars, turned to one of their headmen to help him out, requesting that he 'send me half dozen of them, all faithful people'.[52] This highlights the role of headmen as labour brokers for their community. But this was merely one of several roles that they performed in this arena. In their other roles, they acted as their pattamars' foremen, as their advocates when accused of a misdemeanour, and as mediators between them and their employers and clients. At other times, the behaviour of headmen was similar to entrepreneurial chief executives of a corporation whose stakeholders—especially its shareholders and workers—were predominantly members of their own community. There will always be uncertainty over how best to designate headmen because of gaps in our knowledge regarding their community and the specifics of the relationship between them and their pattamars. Nevertheless, even at this stage of research, we can be in no doubt that headmen were the central linchpin in the arena of postal communication within their cultural domain.

[51] MssOcc/N. A. F./08996, 84–85.
[52] MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 21 [3 June, 1769].

Once the decision had been taken to deliver the package using a pattamar, the sender and the headman would negotiate the terms of the agreement. The sender would then notify the recipient, provide details such as the pattamar's name, the route he was to follow and his expected date of arrival, to help identify and authenticate the pattamar on arrival.[53] The packages he was to carry would typically be made up of letters,[54] medicine,[55] money[56] or seasonal fruits.[57] His headmen determined the route he would follow and the physical means of conveyance (essentially a choice between walking on roads or sailing on the dhoneys[58] or corvettes[59] that hugged the coastline). The headman was also responsible for arranging provisions and accommodation for the pattamar during his journey. The specifics of all this depended, of course, on the best available news about security in the territories through which the pattamar would be travelling. It appears that the sender (whose personal knowledge of the pattamars' cultural domain was often threadbare) had no influence over such matters, save in negotiating and agreeing to the overall cost of the venture, the bulk of which went towards paying the pattamars. Those in permanent service received income from two sources: wages and the expenses incurred in making the delivery. Pattamars who worked the Pondicherry-Mahe route in the 1770s, for example, could expect in the region of Rs. 5 for their expenses per single trip.[60] This was paid either when picking up the package or on its successful delivery. Similarly, payment to pattamars, hired for a single commission which included fees and expenses, was made either before they set off[61] or at the end of their journey.[62] Unfortunately, the documents do not

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[53] Xavier Centre Of Historical Research, Alto Porvorim, Goa/MHR/Correspondence (incoming) [15 June, 1777].

[54] MssOcc/N. A. F./08993, 85, MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 21 [3 June, 1769].

[55] Xavier Centre Of Historical Research, Alto Porvorim, Goa/MHR/Correspondence (incoming) [20 July, 1778].

[56] MssOcc/N. A. F./08999, 74; Xavier Centre Of Historical Research, Alto Porvorim, Goa/MHR/Correspondence (incoming) [3 March, 1790].

[57] Xavier Centre Of Historical Research, Alto Porvorim, Goa/MHR/Correspondence (incoming) [26 May 1778].

[58] MssOcc/N. A. F./08993, 72, 85, 108; MssOcc/N. A. F./09010, 119; MssOcc/N. A. F./09011, 69.

[59] Xavier Centre Of Historical Research, Alto Porvorim, Goa/MHR/Correspondence (incoming) [15 June, 1777].

[60] MssOcc/N. A. F./08992, 121, MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 34 [23 May, 1777].

[61] MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 21 [3 June 1769].

[62] Xavier Centre of Historical Research, Alto Porvorim, Goa/MHR/Correspondence (incoming) [26 May, 1778].

tell us how this income was distributed among the pattamars, their headmen and other members of their community.

After the pattamar had set off on his journey, a prime duty of the headman was to keep the sender informed about the pattamar's current location and the state of the package in his care. This was a relatively simple task if, like Venkatachalam in the 1760s,[63] the headman accompanied his pattamars on their journey. Otherwise, he kept abreast of their progress through regular messages sent by the pattamars themselves, his agents who met them en route, or his fellow headmen travelling in their company.[64] Thus, Venkatachalam acquitted himself of this duty in 1766 by telling the sender that 'the pattamars who left Mahe with me were dispatched to Pondicherry the same day...we reached Calicut. As soon as I arrived at this place, I delivered a letter to the king of Coimbatore'.[65] This shows that, in the absence of unexpected difficulties, the updates provided by the headman typically commented on the whereabouts of the pattamar and his package. These were occasionally supplemented by brief remarks on the journey to date and plans for its next stage. Upon delivery of the package, the sender generally received written confirmation which named the recipient and stated the delivery date.

This was the case in an ideal scenario. But life was seldom so predictable and unforeseen developments often disrupted the delivery of packages. On being informed of a delay, the headmen would generally relay the news to the sender. But this was not always done at once. In 1777, the headman Lakshman learnt that several of his pattamars had had the packages in their care plundered while on their way from Pondicherry to Mahe. Not wanting their recipients to find out about this loss, the pattamars, on reaching Mahe, chose not to tell them that they were coming from Pondicherry. They evidently believed that they would be held responsible for this and consequently punished. As Lakshman explained afterwards to their employers, it had been 'fear which prevented them from admitting this'.[66]

This example shows that theft was a major reason for packages failing to reach their destination. Losses also resulted from carelessness on the part of the pattamars. But a more common

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[63] MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 1 [29 September, 1766].
[64] MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 34 [23 May, 1777].
[65] MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 1 [29 September 1766]. For a similar message, sent by the headman Lakshman in 1777, see MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 34 [23 May, 1777].
[66] MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 35 [8 June, 1777].

problem faced by pattamars was for their packages to be seized and opened by local officials, sometimes for reasons of personal gain, sometimes at the behest of their superiors. If this threat was recognised early enough, the approved course of action was for the pattamars to hide the packages in a secure place, to be retrieved at a later date when it was safe to do so.[67] Packages were lost on occasion because the pattamar died while en route. This could happen because of natural causes. But fatal accidents or even murder were not unknown. Indeed, this was the tragic fate of a small group of pattamars who left Pondicherry for Mahe in 1767. Four months after their departure, one of their headman wrote to the governor of Mahe: 'We have learnt that they have still not arrived at your place; [nor] have those people yet returned here. If they had been able, they would not have failed to appear at your place or here.'[68] So much time had elapsed since they had last heard from them that they now believed 'they are dead.'[69] The consensus was that they had been killed in the Malabar area by Ḥaydar ʿAlī Khān, 'one year after the outbreak of war'.[70] He noted that, when the headmen used to make this journey themselves 'a long time ago, no such bad luck [ever] happened to us'.[71] Since then, however, the 'ongoing wars' had increased the dangers.[72] 'It is with great difficulty that, in these times of conflict, pattamars travel to you. This is why I ask you to show them compassion'.[73]

In the event of such unexpected difficulties, it was in the employer's own interest to help the headmen overcome them if he was in a position to do so. Of course, the more valuable the package, the more likely it was that assistance would be forthcoming. Bernard Picot de la Motte, the official French representative on the Malabar coast, had considerable experience in handling such matters. On 15 April 1777, two pattamars, on the way to Pondicherry from Mahim, were detained at a place called Anjallão and the letters they were carrying for the French authorities were confiscated on the orders of the local Nair officials. When news of this reached the French agent at Calicut, he issued an appeal for help to Picot de la Motte. Stressing the 'great friendship that the nawab [Ḥaydar ʿAlī Khān] has with our king

[67] MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 16 [22 Oct 1767, 3 December, 1767].
[68] MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 16 [3 December, 1767].
[69] MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 16 [3 December, 1767].
[70] MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 19 [9 September, 1768].
[71] MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 16 [3 December, 1767].
[72] MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 16 [3 December, 1767].
[73] MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 16 [3 December, 1767].

[Louis XVI]' (*grande amizade que o Snör Nababo tem com nosso Rei*), the agent urged him to use his influence to recover the letters. These, so he claimed, 'are of importance' to the French 'nation'. He suggested that Picot de la Motte might help by nominating 'a trustworthy person' (*hua pessoa de confiança*) to accompany the two Brahmin mediators that had already been dispatched to parley with the Nairs on their behalf.[74]

Such aid was only possible in territories where the pattamar's employer or client exercised a measure of authority. Elsewhere, the headman alone was responsible for the secure and timely delivery of the packages entrusted to his pattamars. If there were unanticipated delays, he was the one expected to take the necessary steps to mitigate them. In cases of packages being seized or concealed, the headman would use his experience and personal ties to those wielding influence locally in order to retrieve them swiftly and then either get them delivered to their intended recipients or have them returned safely to their senders. When the French governor of Mahe learnt in October 1767 that the pattamar he was awaiting from Pondicherry 'had failed in [his] duty and hidden the letters' in his charge, he ordered their headman 'to recover the stray packets . . . and inform me about the fate of these letters'.[75] The headman, who had already received news of this mishap, replied that the pattamar in question 'had taken care to hide [the packets] under a rock when, along the way, he fell into the hands of the Nairs.' By taking this action, the pattamar 'had thus saved these two packets'. The headman assured his employer that 'he will not fail to return these packets to you'.[76] As there is no further mention of this affair in succeeding letters, it may be surmised that the headman was indeed able to keep his word. Much the same situation arose a decade later about which we have more details. The headman Lakshman, on a mission to Alanghat in 1777 to find several packages that had been stolen while in transit the previous year, visited Cavalpai Nair, an influential landlord and local official. After having 'told him the story of the theft of the packet of letters that took place in his country', Cavalpai agreed to help. He drew up an order which authorised his agent to arrest and interrogate 'two or three people whom we suspected' were responsible for this crime.[77] Despite carrying out detailed investigations over the weeks that followed, progress towards

[74] MssOcc/N. A. F./09003, 104 [26 March, 1777].
[75] MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 16 [22 October, 1767].
[76] MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 16 [3 December, 1767].
[77] MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 34 [23 May, 1777].

recovering the packet proved glacial. In his final letter on the subject, though still hoping for 'some clarifications (*éclaircissements*) within three or four days', the headman consoled himself by the thought that, if success did ultimately elude them, it would not have been through 'lack of diligence and in order to save our pains'.[78]

The last of the common reasons given for packages getting waylaid was that the route to be followed by the pattamars had been rendered impassable due to insecurity. Efforts would initially be directed towards finding an alternative. Where this was not feasible, headmen would then seek to negotiate a safe passage with local rulers or employ *sipāhs*, or guards, to accompany their pattamars and protect them. After Lakshman had met Cavalpai Nair in 1777 to discuss the theft of his pattamars' packages and the security situation in his territories, he informed his principal: 'it appears to me that when our people come here, they will let them pass without any encumbrance'.[79] This, however, had no bearing on the state of the roads elsewhere. In fact, due to the 'many obstacles' remaining on the main road from Alanghat to Mahe, he had recently stopped two of his pattamars from continuing with their journey until a secure convoy could be arranged for them.[80]

From the employer's perspective, once the package was safely in the pattamar's hands, the main concerns were that the information relayed by the headman be accurate and relevant, and that the package be delivered on time without being compromised.[81] Enforcing this was a tricky balancing act because the employers knew that they were ultimately dependent on the goodwill of the headmen and their community. In other words, they were not fungible. Employers, who tended to view the claims of the headmen with a degree of scepticism that sometimes bordered on paranoia,[82] possessed several powerful inducements in their armoury. If they were sensible and judicious in their use, they were usually able to rely on their pattamars. The most obvious—and bluntest—penalty that they could impose was to withhold payment for services rendered. This might be coupled to threats of collective dismissal from the organisation's service or a refusal to use or recommend them in future.[83] Such threats were taken seriously by pattamars and headmen because theirs was a

[78] MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 35 [8 June, 1777].
[79] MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 34 [23 May, 1777].
[80] MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 35 [8 June, 1777].
[81] MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 16 [22 October, 1767].
[82] MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 17 [10 December, 1767].
[83] MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 17 [10 December, 1767].

lucrative occupation that they were loath to endanger. Hence, it was common for a headman to profess his loyalty to his employers, assuring him he 'may be convinced that I will never fail in my duty'.[84] Employers, in turn, were quick to capitalise on this, reminding headmen that 'it is in your interest to show your attachment to the service of the *Compagnie* [*des Indes*]'.[85] Indeed, at times, employers treated their headmen and pattamars as if they were on indefinite probation, each new commission being another test of their loyalty.[86] These penalties, threats and warnings were complemented and buttressed by contingent promises of future rewards. For as long as headmen remained faithful, a principal was happy to avow he would 'do everything in order to favour' them[87]: he might provide assurances of continuing employment, 'protection'[88] and 'support';[89] he might undertake to give his superiors a glowing account of their services; and he might offer to refer them to his personal friends and associates, dangling before them the prospect of extra income. Finally, wherever possible employers tapped alternative sources of information to double-check the veracity of what they were being told by the headmen. These were commonly friends, agents or partners who happened to be present at settlements through which the pattamar was passing. The information they provided was usually in the form of a brief statement, often nestling inside a letter dealing principally with other subjects, giving the date of the pattamar's arrival or departure, to which were sometimes added remarks on the items in his possession and his itinerary.

Another of the headmen's key responsibilities was to keep their pattamars in order. If the employer or client demanded punishment because of an alleged misdemeanour, it would be the headmen who meted it out on his behalf. But this required their acquiescence. In response to complaints that his pattamars had failed to deliver the packages entrusted to them by the promised date, Venkatachalam told his French employers in 1767 that, having 'assembled all the Brahmin pattamars of the *Compagnie* [*des Indes*] . . . , we rebuked some of them and dismissed some from the service. . . . If from now on the pattamars do not obey you, we will discipline them as soon as you inform me

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[84] MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 19 [9 September, 1768].
[85] MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 19 [14 July, 1768].
[86] MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 16 [22 October, 1767].
[87] MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 19 [14 July, 1768].
[88] MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 16 [22 October, 1767].
[89] MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 19 [14 July, 1768].

of it by writing'.[90] This is not to suggest, however, headmen were merely unquestioning subalterns; if they felt circumstances warranted it, they would put up a spirited defence of their pattamars in the face of the accusations levelled against them. On another occasion in 1767, Venkatachalam rebutted his French employer's criticism by explaining that the pattamar had been forced to hide his packets en route in order to prevent them being seized by the Nair officials, an outcome that would have been far worse for the French.[91] For this reason, he urged him 'to have the goodness to forgive [the pattamar] this mistake'.[92] This was the headman playing the role of advocate.

Backed up by their store of knowledge and experience, and the many ties cultivated during long years of working as pattamars in their youth, headmen undertook a suite of related services for their principals beyond postal communication. These bolstered their position as influential power-brokers and valued intermediaries within their cultural domain. Venkatachalam, for example, in addition to his duties towards his pattamars, acted variously as his principals' emissary, spy and mediator in the courts and estates of the fragmented polities of eighteenth-century southern India. He ranged across this shifting conjuncture of roles with practised ease. Venkatachalam knew this part of the world intimately, having criss-crossed it for decades in his youth as a pattamar. Over time, he had developed friendships and strategic relationships with many of its officials, landlords, merchants, bankers and rulers. These headmen were rightly viewed as experts on this arena—their cultural domain—enjoying direct access to the men of rank and means who could get things done within it. This made headmen especially attractive to arriviste merchant-officials who sought to gain commercial and political influence.

The relation of the *Compagnie des Indes* to its headmen in southern India exemplifies many of these points. Venkatachalam, for example, a long-serving employee, agent and roving ambassador for the *Compagnie*, played an important role in arranging credit and loans for it, and in mediating between it and its principal suppliers. Indeed, he claimed to have 'suffered' personally in order to advance the *Compagnie*'s financial and trading interests.[93] Consider the situation in

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[90] MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 16, 17 [3 December, 1767].
[91] MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 16 [3 December, 1767]. The initial complaint may be found in MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 16 [22 October, 1767].
[92] MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 16 [3 December, 1767].
[93] MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 19 [9 September, 1768].

the mid-1760s. At the time, he was heavily involved in organising the official French trade in pepper in the Malabar area. Acting on behalf of the *Compagnie*, he negotiated an agreement for the purchase of Rs. 10,000 worth of pepper from the king of Coimbatore.[94] In keeping with this, the king sent the French governor in Mahe a bill of exchange for Rs. 10,000 with his agent, Chandra Chetty. On receipt of this bill, its face-value was to be handed over to him. Once the money was safely in the king's treasury, the pepper would then be shipped to Mahe in two instalments, with Chandra Chetty to receive a commission of Rs. 2 for each candy, a standard weight, successfully delivered.[95] The *Compagnie* also valued Venkatachalam's advice on the commercial or political strategy it ought to pursue. This is why in 1766, in light of the fact that 'the English have advanced Rs. 50,000 for the trade in rice and coconuts', he could tell his French principals quite openly that 'if we are [only] prepared to give Rs. 10,000, [then] there is no advantage for us to act in this way.'[96] Finally, in situations where information was deemed too sensitive to be written down or where a grandee had to be given special treatment, officials of the *Compagnie* would employ trusted headmen as their personal emissaries and charge them to transmit their message orally. Lakshman was on occasion engaged in this role. He gestured to this when he confirmed to his employer in 1777 that, after having delivered the letter to the king of Cochin, 'I . . . told him all that it was necessary to tell him'.[97]

Conclusion

India and the Middle East in the eighteenth century were spanned by an extensive and dense network of land- and sea-routes. These were used by an array of couriers and intermediaries acting in concert to deliver mail efficiently and reliably. The service they provided was essential for sustaining personal, business and official relations, and for organising and managing activities from afar. Perhaps, surprisingly, the record suggests that the state had almost no presence in this arena—it stepped in only when obligated to ensure

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[94] The former kingdom of Coimbatore is in present-day Tamil Nadu, near the border with Karnataka and Kerala. Historically, it sat astride the main road between Madras and Calicut.

[95] MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 2 [29 September, 1766].

[96] MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 2 [29 September, 1766].

[97] MssOcc/N. A. F./09038, 34 [23 May, 1777].

the security of person and property within its domains. Otherwise, the actors in this arena were left alone to play out the cluster of roles allocated to them by tradition and by their peers, employers and clients. Importantly, these roles, and their associated institutions and practices, clearly injected enough redundancy and flexibility into the fabric of long distance communication to enable it to withstand the political uncertainties experienced throughout the region during the eighteenth century.

Before the emergence at the turn of the nineteenth century of scheduled, fixed-price postal services, this paper has argued that the choice for most residents of India and the Middle East was between two modes of private conveyance: *specialised* and *general*. In both, commissions had to be negotiated individually.[98] As we have seen, the packages were often entrusted for delivery to individuals personally acquainted with the sender and the recipient. This could be for reasons of cost—this option was usually the least expensive, if not the quickest—or because the package's final destination lay outside the normal zone of operations of the locally available specialist couriers. The casual couriers—kinsmen, friends or colleagues—commonly travelled on general modes of transport, such as caravans and ocean-going vessels, and their itineraries were not restricted to any one cultural domain. In contrast, specialist couriers, such as the Aiyangar pattamars studied in this paper, seldom ventured beyond the frontiers of the domain with which they had cultural familiarity. Within their domain, however, they performed a valuable service for which there were few, if any, alternatives.

The image that comes to mind from the perspective of casual couriers and their general modes of conveyance is of a constellation of brightly shining and distinct ports, towns and cities, linked together

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[98] Conspicuous by their absence in this arena were state-sponsored services for delivering mail, even within territories over which the state exercised full sovereign control. Despite no mention of such services in the documents, they must have existed for, if nothing else, communicating sensitive, official information. The apparent total lack of concern exhibited by individuals mentioned in this paper with the state's role in facilitating (as opposed to impeding) long-distance communication, may be rationalised in one of two ways. Due to the disruption caused by political turbulence in the eighteenth century, the states of India and the Middle East simply did not have the desire or the capacity to open their postal services to non-official business. Alternatively, the states of the region in pre-modern times have no tradition of providing such services to their subjects. Determining the correct interpretation will require much more research with these aims in mind using documentary sources that have yet to be studied.

by an intricate web of routes over land and sea in an otherwise dark background. From the perspective of specialist couriers and their specialised modes of conveyance, this image is overlain by a diaphanous patchwork of interleaving cultural domains. Each of these domains were characterised by well-defined indigenous groups or corporations that were experts in the transport and delivery of packages within their boundaries. Their role in postal communication was part of a wider involvement in the informational fabric of their domain. This feature was known—and appreciated—by sojourners and locals alike and, as we have seen, was reflected in the everyday terms that they used to refer to them.

Specialist couriers were a prominent and, arguably, the largest subset of these groups and corporations. Typically the employers and clients of these couriers were wealthy, powerful or well-connected,[99] government officials, major private traders, the European chartered trading companies and larger family firms and merchant houses. As illustrated by the case of the Aiyangar pattamars of southern India, these specialist couriers and their managers belonged to autonomous or wholly independent associations, usually defined by residence and kinship. In exchange for expenses, wages and fees, these groups ensured the secure and timely delivery of packages within their cultural domain. They were presided over by headmen who determined whether or not to accept a commission or to enter members of their community into the permanent service of an employer. These headmen were respected and honoured for their knowledge and experience. They were often well-off and enjoyed high social status. They oversaw and protected their charges and constituted the principal link between them and their employers and clients. And, as entrepreneurs, they had substantial interests in arenas beyond the provision of postal services, embracing intelligence, diplomacy and trade.

This consideration of the region's informational fabric enhances our knowledge and understanding of crucial aspects of quotidian life in India and the Middle East during this era. The findings of this paper also have a bearing on a set of broader issues that lie at the heart of several major and longstanding debates which continue to agitate

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[99] Despite repeated exhortations from superiors to the contrary, specialist couriers were frequently hired out to, or shared between, friends and associates for their own personal ends. In such cases, those ultimately responsible for funding these couriers essentially subsidised the delivery of packages for a host of interlopers.

the field. These debates pivot on: the appropriate characterisation of relations between state and society in the region's polities before colonisation; the degree of mutuality or asymmetry in early modern dealings between foreigners (especially Europeans) and indigenous social groups central to key sectors of the political economy; and on the nature of the transition to colonialism or informal empire (notably in India and the western half of the Ottoman empire) from the end of the eighteenth century.

Perhaps the most remarkable finding with respect to these debates is the near or total absence of state involvement in an arena of daily life critical for the well-being of the region's political economy. This suggests that sovereignty in eighteenth-century India and the Middle East was exercised in a *laissez-faire* manner—states of the region interfered only in those sectors of the economy and society that were necessary for ensuring the territorial and political integrity of their dominions and the flow of revenue into their coffers. Even in sectors of low priority where states wished to maintain a presence, they tended to operate through entrepreneurial, semi-official surrogates or intermediaries. Elsewhere, the state either chose not to intervene at all or was successfully kept at arms-length by its subject communities and neighbourhood corporations. A telling example is provided by this paper's account of the organisation and management of postal communication within the region, which, on the basis of the documents examined, was largely a private affair in the eighteenth century.[100]

The case-study of the Aiyangar pattamars reinforces the idea of *laissez-faire* states. It also has more general lessons for our current ideas on the region's political economy: many of its core practices and institutions—here, specialised modes of conveyance and specialist couriers—were the preserve of communities with deep roots in a particular locality or domain. In modern parlance such groups had an oligopoly over specified activities or occupations. At the same time, it must be stressed that, while these groups were best known for having the specialist knowledge and skills appropriate to the sectors they dominated, this was not a rigid designation. Subject to cultural

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[100] This picture of cosmopolitan life in the early modern polities of the region is a powerful argument for historians to pay much more attention than they have to date on arenas of thought and activities that lay outside of, or were only partly under, the purview of the state and its conspicuous elites. Despite repeated calls, now stretching back decades, for a reorientation in research perspectives, with the notable exception of sectors in which Europeans were present, scholarship on India and the Middle East in this era continues to be justified predominantly in relation to the state.

and social bounds that still allowed for a fair degree of latitude, members of these communities, notably the headmen, embraced an entrepreneurial outlook; they invariably embraced new opportunities that came their way to generate additional income, extend their authority or raise their status. It would thus be appropriate to gloss them as 'entrepreneurial specialists'.[101] As long as this remained the basic pattern underpinning cosmopolitan life in the polities of the region, the choice of outsiders—and, indeed, most locals—was limited to a relatively small number of indigenous groups for accessing informational services requiring vernacular knowledge. And so, due to the lack of any realistic alternatives, it makes little sense to think of relations between these groups and foreigners in terms of competition or market forces.[102] Rather, outside the command sectors, the cardinal attributes of these polities appear to have been a complementary division of labour enforced culturally and socially by willing participants.

This translates into a conception of India and the Middle East in the eighteenth century that diverges in significant respects from what is currently the standard view.[103] In the conception developed here, the region hosted an array of *stable* polities that were equal to the diverse needs of their residents. This stability was predicated on these residents supporting, in particular, the *corporatist* structure of their polity. Notwithstanding the upheavals that caused the region's political map to be refashioned, this support was forthcoming through to the end of the eighteenth century. At that point, however, the situation changed. The administrative consolidation of the rapidly expanding European empires in Asia—at the vanguard of which were the British and the Russians—heralded a fundamental transformation in the political economy of the territories that fell under their sway.

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[101] Structurally, there are clear parallels between these headmen and the 'portfolio capitalists' described in Sanjay Subrahmanyam and Christopher A. Bayly, 'Portfolio capitalists and the political economy of early modern India' in *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (1988), pp. 401–424.

[102] For a good survey of the decades-old debate on the relationship between Europeans and Asians in early modern times, see John E. Wills, Jr., 'Maritime Asia, 1500–1800: The interactive emergence of European domination' in *American Historical Review*, Vol. 98, No. 1 (1993), pp. 83–105 and Sushil Chaudhuri and Michel Morineau, 'Introduction' in idem (eds.), *Merchants, Companies and Trade: Europe and Asia in the Early Modern Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[103] A detailed account of this standard view may be found in Christopher A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British empire and the world, 1780–1830* (London, 1989), pp. 16–63.

This inaugurated a very different notion of how society and the economy ought to be structured and of the relationship of these spheres to the state. The consequence would ultimately be a sharp break with many of the practices and institutions that had hitherto dominated everyday life in the region's early modern past.

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