

The Promise To Deliver

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Stamped mail is distributed through the postal lines

Despite advances in technology, the postman's job is an irreplaceable facet of Sri Lankan life.

Words Daleena Samara **Photographs** Rasika Surasena

“Neither rain, nor sleet, nor dark of night shall stay these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds...”—Herodotus’ description of the Persian courier services of his day (ca 500BC) could be adopted as Sri Lanka’s postal creed today. Blue-shirted squads of postmen disperse every morning, carrying bags full of letters to be delivered to addresses around the country, sometimes under extreme conditions and through harsh terrain.

In Maskeliya, Sathyaseela treks 2,243 metres up to the devale at the summit of Siripada. It’s his second month on the job. Jagath, who did the round before him, reached the devale in an hour and a half and took three hours to get back to base. When the monsoon sets in, it will be harder to make a delivery. Occasionally, like Jagath, he may have to take an alternative route through the forest, dodging obstacles like leeches and elephants. He’ll do it every day during the season.

Elsewhere, there are peers who brave the jungles every day. The Meemura and Morningside deliveries are particularly difficult. The postman who delivers mail in Meemura in the Matale District walks 16 kilometres along a narrow road bordered by jungle every day. If he chances upon a herd of elephants, he’ll duck into the forest until they pass. Morningside, in the eastern section of Sinharaja Rainforest, is another rugged beat. But the letters get delivered, as they did in the war zones during the 30-year conflict against separatism and in the coastal areas in the aftermath of the tsunami.

In an era of instantaneous communication, it’s hard to imagine this alternative reality. But it happens. The duties of the country’s faithful postal delivery men, a vital service loved by many, plays out daily. “There’s always someone waiting for you,” says M D Chandrasiri, a senior postman who has been with the postal department for 34 years. This line of work struck him 34 years ago, as he waited for a postman to deliver his letter of appointment to his home.

His beat is the crazily busy Colombo 11, bazaar-like with narrow store lined streets, colourful crowds and traffic. He delivers mail with a smile. Everyone seems to know him and he always draws a warm welcome. He has been on the beat for 25 years. He takes pleasure in his job: Colombo 11 is culturally rich, he says. “I get to meet many people from many communities every day.” The best part of his beat is the colourful saree bazaar. He makes sure it’s his last stop.

Sri Lanka’s postal service has taken great strides since it was established three centuries ago, when the maritime provinces were under the Dutch rule, says

Muditha Karunamuni, an instructor at the Postal Training Institute who played a key role in setting up the National Postal Museum. The Dutch established a postal service in 1789 with five post offices in the maritime districts under their rule—Galle, Colombo, Mannar, Jaffna and Trincomalee. The letters shipped from Holland would take about a year to reach Ceylon at the time. The mail was distributed in the city by the Lascareens, a military unit of Malay soldiers.

In 1797, the Island became a British Crown Colony. The British reorganised the postal services and in 1802, set up the first Post Office. For the first time, postal services were made available to the public. Overseas mail was also made possible by various shipping lines. By 1836, there were 12 post offices with clerks, and 30 with post holders, growing to 112 post offices over time. In time, the postal services expanded to other areas such as the display of public announcements, sending telegrams and offering telephone facilities and a banking service.

Various modes of transport were used to transport mail to the General Post Office in Colombo. A mail coach service was set up between Colombo and Kandy in 1832, and a year later, between Galle and Colombo. Horse carriages, bullock carts and rickshaws were also used.

Where humanity and technology could not provide speed, birds provided a solution. Lake House Newspapers set up a pigeon post between Galle and Colombo between 1850 and 1858. Manuscripts carrying news, hot off the ships that docked at Galle Port, were attached to the feet of these winged messengers. It took a relay of four pigeons flying a total distance of 72 miles, to get the messages in Colombo.

The pigeon post harked back to pre-colonial times when the country had its own methods of communicating. The ancient kings of Sri Lanka used pigeon post, along with a variety of other methods, like the runners and andabera karayas, drummers who would precede royal edicts with the cry “asaw asaw” (hark ye, hark ye). The andabera karaya was around until the 20th Century, to announce government notices, important dates, and availability of medical clinics.

In the early days of the postal service, postal runners were employed to traverse difficult beats like jungle tracks. Often they were armed with a spear-like weapon with a big and loud bell called the minigediya. The minigediya was carried as recently as the early 1900s when it was discontinued. A pity because the weapon may have saved the life of one unfortunate runner who disappeared while on duty in 1924. Bits of his uniform, and his hair and teeth were found in the belly of a

leopard known as “the man-eater of Punani”. He was its twelfth and last victim.

Today, the hardy postmen continues to go the extra mile, up peaks and through jungles to deliver the post. The postal services have grown, and we all know the ubiquitous thapal mamas (postal uncles). Today, the Department of Postal Services employs 19,000 staff, and offers a wide range of services including mail delivery, banking and financial, social obligatory services, philately, and communications services through 4,712 post offices across the country. Its history is well documented in the National Postal Museum, located in Colombo 10.

The Postal Training Institute ensures that its postmen are up to speed on essential skills including written and verbal communication in Sinhala, Tamil and English. Postmen also receive years-long on-the-job training before taking on a beat.

Will communications technology make postmen obsolete? It seems unlikely. Chandrasiri says modernisation has increased his workload.

“When I started there were ten market complexes in the district. Now there are 40. Each has many shops, and so there are more addresses to deliver to. Some postmen climb as many as 1,500 steps a day to make a delivery in a single mall.” Monetary deliveries must be made in person.

In the past, Chandrasiri delivered a dozen or so mobile phone bills, but today, he delivers thousands because everyone has a mobile phone. Electoral forms, promotional mailers, and bills make up a large part of his post load along with letters and cards, money orders and parcels.

There’s more to postmen than what meets the eye. Alert and observant, a postman has a good memory for places and people. Thus, postmen are often approached for character references of people on their beats. It’s an unexpected result of the job.

What about bad weather days? The postman’s unwritten creed applies. Neither rain nor storm shall stay the postmen from the swift completion of their appointed beat. If a letter addressed to you arrives at the post office, expect the postman at your door any day soon, even if you live in the middle of a jungle.

