

# Telegraphs and Communication Revolution in British India A Tool of Empire and Administration

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**Abstract:** The introduction of the electric telegraph in British India marked a watershed moment in colonial administration, governance, and control. Initially constructed for military and administrative convenience, the telegraph rapidly evolved into a vital instrument for political surveillance and economic integration. This paper examines how the British utilized telegraphy to consolidate imperial power while simultaneously laying the groundwork for technological modernization in India. Drawing upon archival sources from the India Office Records, official government reports, and contemporary newspaper accounts, this study highlights how communication networks transformed the spatial and temporal dimensions of colonial governance. The research also explores Indian participation in the telegraph workforce and the socio-political implications of technological dependency. The analysis demonstrates that, while the telegraph symbolized progress and modernity, it primarily functioned as a tool of empire—enabling swift decision-making, suppressing dissent, and reinforcing the hierarchical structure of colonial rule.

**Keywords:** Telegraph, British India, Colonial Administration, Communication, Empire, Modernization.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The mid-nineteenth century witnessed one of the most transformative technological innovations in India—the introduction of the electric telegraph. Initially installed in 1851, it was envisioned as a symbol of progress and imperial efficiency. Yet, the telegraph's role extended far beyond mere communication; it became an essential component of British surveillance and control. This paper investigates the dual nature of telegraphy in colonial India—both as an instrument of modernization and a mechanism of domination.

### 1.1. Objectives

1. To examine the political and administrative motives behind the establishment of the telegraph system.
2. To analyse its impact on governance, military operations, and public administration.
3. To understand how telegraphy shaped India's integration into the global communication network.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous scholarship has addressed the economic and technological aspects of telegraphy, yet few works have thoroughly examined its administrative and imperial dimensions.

- Daniel Headrick [1] (1981) in *The Tools of Empire* discussed telegraphy as a critical technology of control within global empires.
- Deep Kanta Lahiri Choudhury [2] (2010) explored how colonial communication networks transformed political spaces in India.
- Clive Dewey [3] and Tirthankar Roy examined infrastructure's role in economic modernization under British rule. However, most studies treat telegraphy as either a neutral technological advancement or an economic facilitator. This paper adopts a socio-political approach, positioning telegraphy as a strategic instrument of empire.

### 3. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND



Figure 1. *Telegraph Lines in British India, 1909.* Source: *Imperial Gazetteer of India (Public Domain).*

The telegraph was introduced in India under the supervision of **Dr. William O’Shaughnessy** in 1851. Initially, experimental lines connected Calcutta and Diamond Harbour. By 1854, the network expanded to major administrative centers such as Delhi, Bombay, and Madras. After the **1857 Revolt**, telegraphs proved their strategic value by enabling rapid military communication—allowing the British to suppress uprisings effectively. By 1900, India possessed over **82,000 miles of telegraph lines**, integrating even remote areas into the imperial grid.

### 4. TELEGRAPHS AS A TOOL OF EMPIRE

#### 4.1. Administrative Control



Figure 2. *Telegraph Office, Bombay, 1874.* Source: *Victoria & Albert Museum*

The telegraph revolutionized the speed and efficiency of decision-making. Messages that once took weeks now reached London within hours. This rapid exchange strengthened bureaucratic supervision and reduced local administrative autonomy.

### 4.2. military and political surveillance

During the 1857 Revolt, telegraph lines became lifelines for military communication. Dispatches from Delhi, Lucknow, and Cawnpore coordinated troop movements. Later, telegraphs were used to monitor border activities and suppress nationalist agitation.

### 4.3. Economic and Strategic Utility

The telegraph also facilitated economic exploitation. It allowed instant transmission of commodity prices and shipping news, strengthening British commercial control. Telegraphic integration with global submarine cables (via Aden and Suez) tied India's economy to Britain's imperial trade network.

## 5. INDIGENOUS INVOLVEMENT AND LOCAL RESPONSES



Instrument room of a large telegraph office (Delhi C.T.O.) showing Telegraph Signallers at work

**Figure 3.** *Indian Telegraph Operators, c. 1890. Source: Delhi Central Telegraph Office Archive*

Though the telegraph system was a colonial enterprise, Indians played significant roles as operators, linemen, and clerks. This engagement provided early exposure to scientific technology, nurturing a generation of technically skilled Indians. However, racial hierarchies persisted—European officers held supervisory posts, while Indians faced wage disparities. Instances of sabotage during nationalist movements revealed growing resentment toward telegraphic dominance.

## 6. SOCIAL AND CULTURAL IMPACT

The telegraph altered perceptions of time, distance, and connectivity in Indian society. Telegraph offices became symbols of modern authority, while local populations often viewed the technology with awe and suspicion. In literature and newspapers, the telegraph appeared as both a harbinger of progress and a mark of imperial intrusion.

## 7. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The telegraph's impact must be understood within the framework of *colonial technopolitics*—where technology served as an extension of empire. While India benefited from infrastructural modernization, the British maintained control over knowledge production, access, and policy. This paper contends that the telegraph reinforced imperial hierarchies under the guise of modernization, illustrating how technology can function simultaneously as a means of progress and domination.

### 8. CONCLUSION

The telegraph fundamentally transformed colonial India's administrative and communicative landscape. It enabled efficient governance, strengthened surveillance, and symbolized imperial modernity. However, its establishment and operation underscore the unequal power dynamics of colonial rule. The communication revolution thus became a paradoxical legacy—laying the foundation for India's modern information infrastructure while perpetuating dependence and subordination.

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