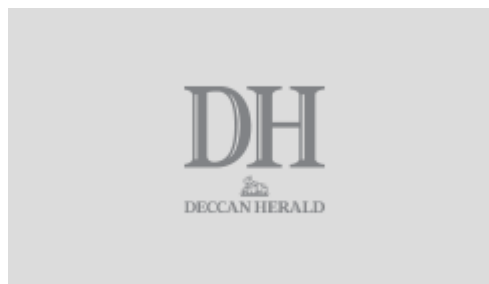


# Sign of the times

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Sign of the times



When was the last time you stepped into a post office? You probably don't even know where one is located in your area. In the age of boombox and iPod, how the heart still warms up on seeing a curio-value, out-of-use gramophone and skips beats at the clickety-clack of typewriters passing by a court complex.

Standing tip-toe, I watched father fit all he wanted to say in ten words — the minimum charge for a telegram was for ten words. Fun as a cryptogram, I pored over to see him change 'come at once' to 'come immediately'. Not that a rupee or two mattered, yet it was the done thing — reduce, save. Evolution and the need for speed necessitate change. We look back at these obsolete-for-us objects and relive the romance of bygone days.

But, there is a world beyond ours where these are still a lifeline. We have begun to take for granted that everyone owns a cell phone and the initial astonishment at the autowala or the house-help drawing out one has been spent.

Even those that you called on a PP (phone passby, nearest contact number) number after 10 pm when the STD rates were slashed to half have one, and which they use liberally too. It may be true that India has more cell phones than toilets but there is another India where people still await telegrams and money orders. With fifty per cent of our population still living in the villages, these are still the accepted and only means of urgent communication and money transfer.

Charmed, unconnected life

Today, speed is money. Everything's got to be faster than it already is. A false sense of urgency permeates our lives. If you are late by half a minute, the waiting person calls you on your cell phone to ask. The restlessness of 'where are you now?' does not allow you to

sit winding a gramophone. Even our radio hurls out frantic, high-pitched chatter that does nothing to calm us in the midst of our rushed lives.

While eighty per cent of Indian villages have at least an electricity line, not more than fifty per cent of the rural households have access to electricity. In these many one-bulb homes in our far flung villages, where electricity is unavailable or scarce, people still go to sleep at sundown, comforted by the silence of the night and watching the night sky that we in the lighted cities can never experience.

The country has 1.55 lakh post offices, out of which 1.40 lakh are located in the rural areas serving eighty per cent of the rural population. Rural families may be divided and scattered over towns and cities, but those that stay behind wait patiently for the postman to ride in on the dusty track to deliver a post card or a money order. Western Union is alien and credit cards are unheard of. Credit is still untrustworthy and, to a large extent, not very respectable too.

Innovate, preserve

Most city post offices have discontinued the service of collecting telegrams as it has become unviable to maintain the service. So, if you wanted to whet your child's curiosity about this almost relic of your past, you would probably have to go to a bigger branch, if not the General Post Office. Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL), it is believed, spends more on a telegram than it earns. On an average, the cost of one telegram to BSNL is about Rs 40. It charges Rs 3.50 for a telegram of 10 words or less. The charge for each additional word is 50 paise.

In most other countries of the world, the telegram has already acquired the dinosaur status. In the UK, the telegram is promoted as a retro form of greeting and in Sweden they are delivered under the category of 'nostalgic novelty items'. Frequently used in Japan, telegrams can be ordered online!

The typewriters are still used in the cities in courts and police stations for typing legal documents and affidavits. The advantages of typewriters in such settings would be very tough for a computer to contest. They do not require electricity or technical skills and are portable.

Jab we don't meet

Robert Frost, in the wonderful poem  
'A Time to Talk', writes:

WHEN a friend calls to me from the road  
And slows his horse to a meaning walk,  
I don't stand still and look around  
On all the hills I haven't hoed,  
And shout from where I am, What is it?  
No, not as there is a time to talk.

I thrust my hoe in the mellow ground,  
Blade-end up and five feet tall,  
And plod: I go up to the stone wall  
For a friendly visit.

Technology has a way of pervading our lives in ways that our people-to-people interaction dwindles with each advancement. In small villages, the post office serves a social purpose. It is another place for meeting and interaction between people. Everyone knows everyone else and their 'business'. We in cities prefer our closed doors.

We start to speak into our cell phones if we see a neighbour approaching so we don't have to make a conversation. We walk our babies and dogs either talking into our cell phones or listening to music, leaving them to their own thoughts. Social interaction is confined to planned meetings. Chance encounters are discouraged and frowned upon.

It is not just the gramophone that sits in the curio corner of our houses. The CD players and music systems that played out music that the family listened to together have lost their place of pride in our lives. In fact, aren't the days of listening to music together over? With music that can be stored, streamed in cell phones, iPods and other miniscule devices, everyone has their own music stuffed into their ears.

We don't pick the ringing phone and exchange pleasantries with the daughter's friend or husband's colleague before handing it to them. We don't know who the children's friends are. Everyone talks with their 'contacts' on their own cell phones. There are more SMS exchanges between members of a family than face-to-face conversations. The mother-next-door tells me how her teenage daughter sends her SMS messages from the next room.

### The great divide

These is an impressive list of the longest, largest. India has the world's largest network of post offices; is the world's fastest growing telecommunications industry; has the second largest telecommunication network in the world in terms of the number of wireless connections; and yet, not much of this trickles down to touch the lives of Indians living in remote, hilly and inaccessible areas. Whereas 50 per cent of the population uses the telephone in big cities, it reaches only two per cent people in villages.

What we have scored in the technology domain, we have lost due to infrastructure challenges. The hurdles of setting up the telecommunications networks in these areas are many. No electricity, no or bad access roads to isolated, far-flung and often sparsely populated areas, and low income customers. It was reported some time back that villagers from Karaj in the Sagar district of Madhya Pradesh walk 20 kilometres everyday to get their mobile phones charged! There is no electricity or proper roads in their village.

To overcome the electricity challenge, technology companies have tried to bring alternative cell phone chargers. Almost a year ago, a Mumbai firm launched a roll-on charger — one minute of manual rotation and three minutes of talk-time. But that path-

breaking innovation which will catch on the fancy of the users and suit their pockets too, has been elusive.

Change is inevitable. Adapting to it is wisdom. But progress that is limited to some and creates more disparity cannot amount to much beyond figuring in the list of superlatives. The old will remain useful as long as there is use for it. As long as rural India has use for telegrams, money orders, typewriters and post offices, these will exist.

As for us, we must return to the 'Search' option on our laptops and share with our Facebook friends how, with the advent of mobile telephony and the internet, the iconic red telephone booths of London were sold off to be used as shower cubicles in homes! Quick, get a money order form. In two decades, you may like to frame it to display on your drawing room walls.