

## **Development of Road Transport Infrastructure in Assam during Colonial Period**

Dr. Jogesh Kakati  
Principal  
Pandu College, Pandu  
Guwahtai-12

*Abstract: Transport infrastructure of any mode is considered as an important indicator in observing a development parameter of any state. In ancient and medieval Assam, we find many illuminating accounts of road transport infrastructure and development. As Assam is blessed with numerous big and small rivers by nature; water transport always played a pivotal role over other mode of transport throughout the period. When the colonial power arrived, they initially exploited water transport to the optimum limit. But commercial and defense strategy compelled them to develop road transport infrastructure as well. This paper is an attempt to look into the attitude of the colonial authorities towards road transport development and various agencies, funds involved in the process and also the extent of their success during colonial period.*

*Key Words: Road transport, Colonial, Commercial, Defense.*

One of the main reasons for the annexation of Assam by the British was strategic and commercial importance of the region. After the annexation of Assam by the British, strategic and commercial reason again demanded the construction of better road communication. Initially, as the river system of the state provided the cheapest mode of transport, the British rulers however seem to have neglected road development. Apart from that, the difficult terrain in the hills areas, the existence of many large rivers (Brahmaputra and its numerous tributaries), heavy rainfall and flood in the plains make it extremely difficult and expensive for the construction of roads in Assam. The construction of numerous bridges and road embankments in the plain districts only added to the list of the problems<sup>1</sup>. Unavailability of labour forces was another handicap in Assam.

As we look back to the ancient and medieval Assam, the Brahmaputra valley seems to have well connected road communication system. Reference about the route which connected Assam with the west is found mentioned in *Tabaquat-i-Nasiri*<sup>2</sup>. In 1855 when Mills visited Assam, he was awe struck by the splendid system of public road in Assam which runs through the lengths of the states, connecting all the principal towns and villages by

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subways. Some of the important roads that existed in the period include the Gohain Kamal Ali - said to have been constructed by Koch King Nara Narayan which extended from Cooch Behar to Narayanpur in Lakhimpur. Another road the Bangal Ali from north-east of Darrang to North Guwahati, Jayantia Road which connected Jayantiapur in the hills to Roha in the plains, Bar Ali which connected Kaliabor to Rangpur; the one time Ahoms' capital, Dhai Ali which connected Rangpur to Jaypur and Dhodar Ali in Sibsagar district<sup>3</sup>. But after the decay of the strong central power of the ruling dynasties, these roads were lying neglected and consequently most of them became useless and impassable.

In the Ahom days, they maintained mighty labour force for public constructions. But this system has fallen decay with the ruling dynasty. It was a herculean task for the British to re-open these roads for public utility. Unlike in the Ahom days they couldn't utilize the service of their subject after the introduction of cash in the place of physical service. Authorities ordered the petty chiefs, the Choudhuries etc. to construct and maintain public road in their respective areas, but this order was never followed in deed. Finding no alternative, the British authorities started to utilize the service of convicted and hired labour for works around the Sadar police station which was never sufficient<sup>4</sup>. Apart from that, funds allotted for road development was inadequate. To make the matter worse, William Bentinck instructed the Executive Officers at Dhaka to conduct all public works in Assam under the direction of the Military Board<sup>5</sup>. The execution of the local work was under the control of the office located in far off place in addition to the existing handicapped. The Bengal government did not pay heed to the apprehensive note of the Commissioner regarding the apparent delay and difficulties that would subject to the execution of public work if the officer in charge is located elsewhere. It was only in 1839 this handicapped come to the realization of the Bengal government. The revolt of the Khamtis endangering the security of North East Frontier served as a clarion call towards the necessity of good and speedy

communications. It was then the Military Board appraised the government to have a separate public work department in Assam. However due to several unspecific reasons the establishment of the department was delayed. Realizing the importance of communication for defense, the Governor General in Council however gave an approval for military constructions of various important and strategic outpost in 1840<sup>6</sup>. Many strategic and important roads like the Cachar-Manipur road, the South trunk road from Guwahati to Nowgong ; which later extended up to Dibrugarh via Jorhat and Sibsagar and in the western

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direction up to Goalpara was constructed under military board<sup>7</sup>. In 1853, Mills also found the North Trunk road under construction from Kuruaghat to Tezpur<sup>8</sup>. A part from military construction a private enterprise 'Assam Company' also claimed to have constructed or repaired some 2280 kilometers of public roads and around 266 bridges<sup>9</sup>. Apart from military roads, the government also started construction of roads in some places of commercial importance. In April 1854 public works both civil and military, were transferred from the Military Board to the Chief Engineer of each division of the Presidency of Bengal.

As per recommendation of Military Board as early as 1838, the Public Work Department was finally established in 1868 for the construction of roads in Assam. It was after the establishment of Public Work Department that the government started giving more attention towards the construction of main roads. However insufficient funds and dearth of labour remains the major obstacle. Finding the local reluctant to engage as labour the government resorted to importation of labours from Oudh and Rohilkhand for road works. The situations in the hills remained neglected. However as commercial and defense line were the main forces that compelled the British to construct better roads, attention was given towards the commercially viable and militarily strategic roads even in the hills. One such example was a resolution taken for the construction of road from Shillong to Tura in Garo hills, which read that "there is much reason to believe that the country is rich in many natural products. Its cotton trade has always been considerable, and was known even in the days of the Moguls..... we may find here a new source of supply to Manchester .....Wild elephants are said to be very numerous and probably kheddah operations would prove profitable at an early date"<sup>10</sup>. After the Khasi rebellion in 1862, cart road was opened up to the Khasi hills as well as Jayantiapur. Road up to Tura in Garo Hills was opened even before the formation of Garo Hills district. Samaguting, the headquarter of Naga Hills was

connected both by land and water up to Dimapur and Golaghat. After the Manipur rebellion of 1891, road connection up to Imphal was also constructed. By 1900 the length of bridle road in the hills reached the marks of 600 miles in total.

Back in 1853, A. J. Mills recommended the construction of two trunk road: one connecting Bengal to Saikhowa Ghat via Goalpara, Guwhati, Nagaon, Golahat, Sibsagar and Dibrugarh along the south bank of the Brahmaputra and the second road Guwahati to Lakhimpur via Mongoldoi and Tezpur. This ambitious project however failed to draw the attention of the central government until the Khasi revolt in 1862. In February 1864 the government of India sanctioned the construction of two lines of communication: one from

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Dhubri to Sadiva and second from Chattak to Guwahati via Shillong. Finally work of the Trunk Road or Grand Trunk Road was started in 1866<sup>11</sup>. However this pace of work in this ambitious project was very slow following the rigid economy imposed by the government since 1870.

In 1880 Local Boards was also established in Assam. These boards were entrusted with the responsibility to construct roads in their respective areas and were financed by a cess on land as well as grants by the provincial Government<sup>12</sup>. The real development of road construction work in Assam at the Government level can be said to have its beginning only after the establishment of these boards. However, the pace of road transport development was never up to the marks in Assam. But despite many criticisms by the close of the 19th century the construction of Trunk road both on the southern and northern bank was completed along with the improvement of many local roads.

**TOTAL MILEAGE OF ROAD IN ASSAM<sup>13</sup>**

AGENT	1890-91	1903
IMPERIAL	293 MILES	1869 MILES
PROVINCIAL	2119 MILES	1625 MILES
LOCAL FUNDS	3095 MILES	4483 MILES
TOTAL	5507 MILES	7977 MILES

**TOTAL MILEAGE OF ROAD IN 1903-04**

PROVINCIAL			LOCAL BOARD		
DISTRICT	METALLED	UNMETALLED	METALLED	UNMETALLE	TOTAL
KAMRUP	16	160	-	371	547
DARRANG		165	-	420	585
NOWGONG		154	-	192	346
SIBSAGAR	-	237	-	705	942

LAKHIMPU	20	211	6	516	753
TOTAL	36	927	6	2204	3173

#Data Courtesy: Priyam Goswami, Assam in the 19 Century: Industrialization and colonial penetration.

The year 1926-27 can be termed as the turning point in the history of road transport infrastructure development. It was in this year that the 'Assam Provincial Road Board' was constituted. A separate 'Tea Rates Road Fund' was also created by imposing additional rates on the tea land for improving roads in the state. The amount earned out of these additional rates was utilized for improvement of local roads. Road in the state were then divided into three categories —metalled, graveled and unsurfaced

In the year 1929-30 two more funds were created at national level for the development of road. For this purpose an additional tax of two *annas* a gallon on motor oil was imposed. Out of this additional tax, two-fold funds were created: I) Special Reserve fund and II) General Road Development Fund. Nearly one-fifth of the fund was reserved for the first fund, which were utilized for the road of all India importance and the rest allotted to the states on the basis of the consumption of motor oil by the respective states. In 1929-30 a road project costing over 97 lakhs was recommended by Assam Road Board and approved by the government of Assam. Between 1937-38 a total of Rs 21.8 lakh from Central General Road Development fund and Rs 36.9 lakh from Special Reserved fund was spend in Assam<sup>14</sup>. As many as 27 projects included in the first Road Board meeting of 1926-27 were completed by 1931-32. Again in 1931-32 a gigantic road development programme of Rs 107 lakh was prepared but only 27 lakhs was allotted by the Government of India from Central Road fund<sup>15</sup>.

When the world war came nearer many roads of military importance got speedy improvement. The South Trunk Road from Goalpara to Saikhowaghat, Siliguri to Joghghopa, Dimapur to Imphal; via Kohima, Makum Lekhapani road etc. got special attention. But during the war period non-military roads were lying neglected. On 4th June 1946 the 'Assam Road Communication Board' was established with Hon'ble Minister in charge of PWD of Assam Legislative Assembly as its Chairman<sup>16</sup>, This Board was

entrusted with the responsibilities of looking into the entire works of road development including implementation of Centre and Local road funds, progress of the works and recommendation for new road project and scheme.

**EXPENDITURE INCURRED (DIVISION WISE) IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF ROADS UNDER P.W.D. DURING THE YEAR 1945-46<sup>17</sup>**

ROAD DIVISION	AMOUNT IN RUPEES
Lakhimpur Division	32,31,854/-
Jorhat Division	9,49,532/-
Nowgong Division	17,47,676/-
Western Assam Division	14,30,799/-
Lower Assam Division	13,06,458/-
North Kamrup Division	4,74,805/-
Central Assam Division	4,30,429/-
Khasi and Jantia Hills Division	18,76,304/-
Shylet Division	18,76,304/-
Maulivi Bazar Division (Shylet)	23,29,179/-
Cachar Division	6,46,758/-
Garo Hills Division	2,05,600/-
Lushai Hills	2,15,862/-
Naga Hills	85,794/-
Sadiya Frontier Tract	3,33,653/-
Balipara Frontier Tract	60,813/-
Tirap Frontier Tract	60,813/-
Kohima	76,334/-

**STATUS OF DISTRICT AND VILLAGE ROAD -1946 TO THE END OF 1947<sup>18</sup>**  
(Works in Progress)

Sadiya Frontier Tract	67 1/2 MILES
Jorhat Division	138.17 MILES
Nowgong Division	167.45 MILES

Central Assam Division	22.25 MILES
Lower Assam Division	30 MILES
North Kamrup Division	153.2 MILES
Western Assam Division	157.35 MILES
Khasi and Jaintia Hills	31.1 MILES
Cachar Division	17 MILES
Total	789.25 MILES

After the war, vigorous scheme for road development programme under 'Post War Development Scheme' was prepared. But many development programmes including the central and local funds practically came to a standstill till the time India got independence and the First Five Year Plan took its birth. By the time India got her independence, the total length of motorable road in Assam was only 2,610 miles of which 2,040 were in the plains<sup>19</sup>. One can sum up by saying that the development of road transport infrastructure was never the priority of the colonial government in Assam. Whatever work or project they executed in the field of transport and communication including roads was purely commercial and military centric. It is a different story that the local people also availed the benefit of transport infrastructure which can be best described as 'blessing in disguise' because the development of the local people was never the goal of the colonial government.

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<sup>1</sup>Goswami.Priyam, *Assam in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Industrialization and Commercial Penetration*. p.145.

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<sup>2</sup> Sen.Debasis, *Road System in Ancient and Medieval Assam*. Proceeding of the 8<sup>th</sup> NEIHA Conference, Kohima, 1986, p.157.

<sup>3</sup> Barpujari, H.K. *Comprehensive History of Assam*. Vol-VI.,p291.

<sup>4</sup> Barpujari, H. K. *Assam in the Days of the Company*. 1826-1858, p. 218.

<sup>5</sup> Bengal Judicial Proceeding 1835, 8 December, file No. -109-10.

<sup>6</sup>Opcit, Barpujari, p.220.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid. p.221.

<sup>8</sup>Mills. A.J.M., Report on the Province of Assam.

<sup>9</sup>Medhi. Shyam Bhadra, Transport System and Economic Development in Assam, p.41.

<sup>10</sup>Bengal Judicial Proceeding, 1873, 1<sup>st</sup> March, file No.-15/18.

<sup>11</sup>Barpujari, H.K. *Comprehensive History of Assam*. Vol-IV, p.294.

<sup>12</sup>Opcit, Medhi. P.41.

<sup>13</sup> Opcit. Goswami. P.153.

<sup>14</sup> Dhar, P.K. *The Economy of Assam*. New Delhi. 1977 p.105.

<sup>15</sup>Goswami, P.C. *The Economic Development of Assam*. New Delhi. 1988 p.213.

<sup>16</sup> The Assam Gazette, 30,1947.

<sup>17</sup> Statement of Hon'ble P.W.D. Minister, Assam Gazette Part — VI, 20 September,1946

<sup>18</sup> 'Statement of Hon'ble P.W.D. Minister, Assam Gazette Part VI, 2 June, 1948.

<sup>19</sup>Goswami, P.C. Opcit. P.213.

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