

Transport Infrastructure in Colonial Cachar; an Overview

Banasree Purkayastha

Ph. D. Research Scholar, Department of History, Assam University, Silchar

Email: [banasreep.1993\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:banasreep.1993[at]gmail.com)

Mob - 9577080480

Abstract: Cachar is situated on the southern part of Assam. In the first half the nineteenth century, Cachar became the center of political turmoil. The repeated Burmese attack, ongoing civil war along with the assassination of Govindachandra without any natural heir paved the way for the British to occupy Cachar. It came under British Indian Territory in 1832. Occupation of Cachar brought it to the limelight of the British for various reasons and resulted a new direction to the transportation development. The article analysed the motives behind the development of transport infrastructure by the Colonial authorities and also over viewed its impact on the scenario of Cachar.

Keywords: Cachar, transportation infrastructure, chief Commissionership, Govindachandra

1. Introduction

Cachar is one of the three districts of present Barak Valley. It is situated on the bank of Barak River. 'Cachar' derived its name from Kachari tribes. It is bounded on the north by the Jaintia Hills, Nowgang and the Naga Hills; on the east by the Naga Hills and Manipur; on the south by the Lushai Hills district and on the west by Sylhet and the Jaintia Hills. Geographically the district Cachar consisted of two distinct portions - hills and plains (Allen, 2013, p.1). The plain tract, covering Cachar and Hailakandi districts of Barak Valley, were earlier known as 'Cachar plains'. On the eve of British rule, from 1832, the district Cachar and Hailakandi of the present Barak Valley constituted the district of Cachar. Cachar was a vast Bengal territory. Lord William Bentinck, the then governor - general, in his minute of 18th January, 1834, observed that, as the province of Cachar was in plains and was distinct from the hill tract of the North East Frontier, it should be placed under the control of the Decca commissionership. In 1836, Cachar included in the Decca Division and the superintendent's headquarter shifted to Silchar. Later in 1874, the Cachar along with the district Sylhet was incorporated into Assam for administrative convenience and in the British official Records, these two districts were jointly identified as Surma Valley Division. When India got independence in 1947, major part of Sylhet was transferred to East Pakistan. Only four thans of the present Karimganj district remained within Assam. Thus after independence, only the Indian portion of the former Surma Valley Division, constituted the district of Cachar with three sub - divisions viz Silchar, Hailakandi and Karimganj. During the post independent era, Cachar acquired another name 'Barak Valley' after the name of its major principal river of this region. However, Karimganj became separate district in 1983 whereas Hailakandi tagged as district in 1989 as per the administrative convenience.

The Kacharis generally live in the valleys that intersect the hills. They grew wet rice for living. On the other hand, in the hills, they followed shifting cultivation known as jhum. British Officials, after their annexation of Cachar plains, found larger portion the valley as less populated. Due to

repeated raids of neighbouring hilly tribes, Burmese invasion and prolonged civil war, the majority of local population of Cachar had taken shelter in British district of Sylhet. So, after the annexation of Cachar, the first and foremost task before the British government was to restructure prevailing land management system. They curbed the affairs of Khel*. Firstly, they recognized the private ownership of land and secondly, by encouraging immigrants from outsides. The Manipurians were the first group to be settled who had taken shelter in Cachar during Burmese occupation of Manipur. The Superintendent of Cachar sent circulation letters to the district officers in Bengal to encourage the peasant to migrate to Cachar. Sylhet was then densely populated and the Permanent Settlement had forced to peasants to work under most unfavourable conditions. As a result, a large number of them migrated to Cachar from the neighbouring districts of Sylhet, Tripura and Mymensing.

2. Methodology

Thesis is based on exploratory method and sources are both primary and secondary data. Primary data includes government official reports and documents from State Archive Assam, Guwahati as well as from National Archives of India, Delhi. Secondary sources are collected from various books specially written on transport system during colonial period by Indian and foreign writers.

The principal river of Cachar is Barak. It is navigable throughout the year. It found its origin a little to the east of Maothana, northern boundary of Manipur. It forms the boundary from Badarpur to Haritkar but at the latter place, the river Barak divided into two branches: southern portion formed Kushiya which crossed the frontier of Sylhet. While northern branch is called Surma and it continued to form the boundary of Cachar as far as Jalalpur. On the other hand, the fertility of the soil of the valley attracts the people most. The soil of the plain is alluvial origin and consists of a mixture of clay and sand in varying proportions, capable of producing minerals. Apart from that, this region is abundant with variety of timbers and bamboo.

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British first came in contact with Cachet just after the grant of *Diwani* of Bengal. The western portion of Surma Valley forming the Sylhet *sarkar* of Bengal *subah* passed under the authorities at Fort. William. The final confrontation with Cachar was made by the Treaty of Yandaboo (1826) which made British the complete master of Assam. Then they started their policy of consolidation and expansion and the death of Govindachandra, the last Kachari king, without any natural heir provided a golden opportunity to annex Cachar without facing any hurdle. After the annexation, they started taking interest on the affairs of Cachar. But with the passage of time, difficulties arose regarding the supervision of the affairs of Cachar. So government of India appointed, in 1833, captain Fisher permanently as the Superintendent of Cachar.

So far as the transport infrastructure of Cachar is concerned, the source of information about this field is very scanty. Economy of Cachar was self - sufficient. There was lack of transport and communication system, although all modes of communication were conducted. Usually, people reached at their destination by walking and carried all goods by their hands, head and shoulder (ramaswamy, 1957, p.3) . Domesticated animals like ox, donkey and elephants were sometimes used for transportation of men and materials. They provided door to door services. The natural condition of Cachar compels its inhabitants to device measures to go through water. Early inhabitants used raft for transportation and to cross the water. Internal trade was conducted with the hilly regions and external trade was governed through waterways with Bengal. There were large populations employed in the plantation industries. Tea, timber, sugar cane, bamboo, elephant tusks and some other forest products were exported from Cachar. Road and rail links took a long time to establish their hold as a line of communication and could never come at par with the water routes largely due to the boating tradition of the valley. The forest of Cachar was abundant with such timbers like Jerul, Sundi, Gamar, Jam which were useful for making boat - logs. Kathigorah, Baradpur, Sealtekh, Silchar, Sonai, Jirighat were the main important ghats. The timber, bamboo and cane were flouted down the river channels from Cachar to Sylhet, Nabiganj, Habiganj and thence exported to other parts of Bengal. While other goods and cargoes were shipped by boats and steamers. Boat was predominated in regard to cheap navigation. Export markets like Decca, Naranganj, Mymnsingh were nearer to the production centers. So the boat transportation was economical. Steam communication would add to the efficiency of the different departments and effect saving of expense of the government. Therefore, all kinds of foreign trade were entirely carried by waterways and still today, the river Barak and Surma provided for a well - to - do service as a means of communication. But this picture is completely changed during winter season. For that the European merchant for business purposes, had to depend upon roads. Perhaps, the road communication of the valley was very scanty. At the initial period, company's rule in Cachar, they did not pay any attention towards road communication. The self - subsisting nature of economy failed to meet the requirements of expanding population.

Road communication began as a part of war preparation only during the Anglo - Burmese War. One of the earliest

passes from Ava into the company's territory was through Manipur and Cachar and the occupation of Cachar was essential for the defense of the pass as well as to check the progress of Burmese arms. After the Treaty of Yandaboo (1826), signed after the Anglo - Burmese war (1824), the deposed Raja Govindachandra was restored to the throne of Cachar. Raja received a loan of Rs 2000 from the Calcutta government as financial assistance. The Company's government used this opportunity and asked Raja to take the responsibility for construction of road in this territory in lieu of loan. Hence, instead of paying tribute, in 1827, the Raja of Cachar constructed roads in the plains lying between Cachar and Manipur to facilitate easy communication with British Sylhet. Basically, main intention behind the road development was to combat with Burmese threat and for that, government had acquired an accurate knowledge of different communication routes of the Valley. Pemberton in his report has mentioned about several direct routes that connected Cachar with Manipur and latter with the Burmese territory. Perhaps these were constructed before or after the War. Of the former was that by Aquee, by which General Shuldham's army intended to advance in 1825, one by Kala Naga, and a third through Kuki villages. The point of departure for these and every other known route, between Cachar and Manipur was Banskandi, a village nearly at the eastern extremity of the cleared plains and where any whichever route they might ultimately intend to advance, it would be necessary to form a depot for military stores, and the supplies of any force, destined to garrison Manipur or protect the frontier. The Aquee route, situated in the most north and has been very little frequented since Burmese war, its total length from Banskandi to Jainagar in the Manipur valley was 86.625 miles. Second was the Kala Naga route, that connected Banskansi to Lumlangtong via Kowpoom. It was 82.5 miles. This route has also the great advantage of crossing the Jiri at a point not more than eight miles distant from its mouth. From Kala Naga route, the Jiri has water sufficient in the cold season for small *dingees* of from 8 to 10 maunds burthen. All the rivers crossed by either the Aquee or Kala Naga routes were formidable during the cold season with the exception of Barak. Another military road, constructed during war period, was started by David Scott that connected Sylhet and Burma through khasi Hills, Cachar and Manipur. But construction resulted Anglo - Khasi war. It will be unjust to conclude here that road construction started with the British. The Assamese Chronicle referred to the existence of the early routes between Khaspur and Assam through which repeated expeditions were dispatched by the Ahoms against Cachar. There was major road in Cachar which was originated from Khaspur and connected the important places like Udharband, Dolu, Kathigorah, Badarpur, Jainagar, Ganirgram and Haritkar. This was probably constructed during the time of Raja Krishnachandra Narayan, the last Koch king, and even today, it is known as '*Rajar Sarak*'. Roads were constructed mainly as military roads before commence of P. W. D. The East India Company for almost the entire period of its existence in India neglected public works. It was under Lord Dalhousie's administration that, a separate Public Works Department was set up in 1854, removing public works from the control of Military Board. It marked a sudden spate of activity in road building after that. Apart from defensive purpose, the road also offered viable commercial prospect as

well. In 1853, there was only one commercial road in the district and that had not been repaired for years. In 1855, tea garden was established in Cachar. Major Stewart, the last Superintendent, with an eye of the tea industry took effective steps to construct border roads. This industry gave a beacon of light to the development of road infrastructure. The program of road construction, however, gathered full momentum at the hands of administrator John Edger, who connected principal trade marts of Cachar with sadar town, Silchar. There were seven *kutchas* (metal) roads from the tea factories of Dalidur, Chandipur, Ballikandi, Damanipur, Kanchanpur, Kachula and Banglanagar joining the Panchgoan - Luckinagar road. As the time rolled on, for the management of road in 1864, the Cachar Road Committee was constructed. The Committee was charged with the administration of fund which might be available for expenditure on road and communication in the district. The Local Board, constructed in 1881, was entrusted with the task of maintaining provincial roads within their respective jurisdiction. For looking out the roads, inspection bungalows were created. There were such bungalows at Barkhala on the Jatinga Valley road; at Tikalpur on the Durganagar road; at Udharband on Scottpur Udharband road; at Sonaimukh on the Maniarkhal road at Lala, Kathlichara, Jalinga and Kanlai on the Aijal road.

Hurdles before the Development

Introduction of modern means of transportation by the colonial authorities was not at all a very smooth task. Many challenges faced by them. But even through the road construction had been carried out by colonial authorities, still there were a lot of challenges faced by them while using that practically. In monsoon, havoc and immensely poor condition of road made it entirely unsuitable for use. Not only that, the construction of roads at a time was also bone of contention between the natives of the region and the British officials, Kuki rebellion, Khasi rebellion are their instances. On the other hand, major hurdle in front of construction was deficiency of local labours.

Meanwhile for the maintenance of the water ways, the existing navigable rivers of the Barak Valley although could have been used in the normal summer days but winter seasons created difficulties for the smooth using waterways as well.

Overall outcome

The modern means of communication that was introduced within the district of Cachar had borne fruitful results. The development of the roadways had made its direct impact on the inter connectivity of Cachar with the neighbouring provinces. Till 1880, Cachar road was accepted as a lifeline to make the commercial activities with Sylhet and Burma and Manipur. A large number of labours for tea garden from outsiders were also carried through roadways. So far as development of water transportation is concerned, the colonial attention was diverted towards it after realizing the utility of the inland transportation of the navigable rivers of Cachar. It was in 1861, the plans were initiated to interconnect Cachar with Calcutta through the inland waterways transport system. There were planned in that direction and the task to carry out the plans for that was given to a private company of Calcutta so as to make it easy

to access the navigable rivers of Cachar. The initial stages marked only the local transaction of commodities but gradually the attention of the trading class of the people from outside the district of Cachar was drawn towards 'streamerghats' areas that become important center of commercial transaction. In Silchar, areas like Malughram, Sadarghat, Gudamghat etc. were built up after the improvement of waterways services. The gradual expansion of the industry in a labour short economy created a class of agents or middlemen who supplied labour to the tea garden areas. The introduction of modern means of communication gradually boosted up the growth of industry. People from the outside districts started settling down themselves to earn a living. These developments affected the demography and also led to the growth of urbanization.

3. Conclusion

Finally, while summing up the overall conclusion, it can be stated that, colonial rule in itself had given birth to a many positive prospects and transformation, in the means of transportation, was indeed one of the most vital changes that had completely overhauled the entire economic structure of Barak Valley. The British occupation of Assam brought about a commercial revolution and established a new economy in this province. The British eye on the resources of the Cachar and their mind about the future policy towards the state are carefully reflected with their occupation of Cachar. The main motive behind the development of transport infrastructure was no doubt to fulfill their economic desire. Remittance of profit on British capital invested in railways, roads, plantation has been brought to be defended on the ground that such things after all were 'developing' or 'modernizing' India (sarkar, 1999, p.26). The fast development of trade and commerce was possible just because of the establishment of different means and types of communications like brindle path, navigable rivers up to certain points and roads. Though some of these means of communications were in crude form but they served a useful purpose in transportation of essential goods and materials to and from the hill areas as well as with neighbouring provinces. The streamer services on Barak - Surma Rivers maintained their commercial prospects with their neighbouring provinces with that of Bengal while the only road which directly connected the valley with Bengal was Guwahati - Sylhet road. With the development of modern communication, the trade and markets were developed and was also responsible for the growth of towns. The European traders were encouraged to invest their capital in Cachar. Development of transport system on the other hand connected remotest areas with the centers. It transferred Cachar from self - sufficient economy to the surplus economy.

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