

Development of communication system under colonial rule in Cachar, Assam, India

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Abstract: Cachar, situated in the southern part of Assam had its past glorious history. This remotest region of north eastern part of India had vast natural resources that greatly attracted the colonial British government. The turmoiling situation prevailed in Cachar in the last part of Cachari rule under Govinda Chandra provided opportunity to the British and thereby after the treacherous murder of Govinda Chandra in 1830, Cachar was annexed by the English East India Company on 14th August, 1832. So, the British government for their administrative conveniences undertook various developmental measures like the construction and improvement of roads, bridges as well as the improvement of postal system to colonize this region that indirectly improved the general condition of the people of Cachar. In this paper, an attempt has been made to highlight the development of roads and postal communications in Cachar that greatly helped in both the internal and external trade and commerce through the opening of new markets along with the development of tea industry in Cachar. It also helped the British administrators in Cachar to run their administration effectively. In preparing this paper, both primary and secondary sources are consulted visiting Deputy Commissioner's Record Room, Cachar, Assam State Archives, Guwahati, West Bengal State Archives, Calcutta, National Archives, New Delhi and various libraries of our country- India. So, information and sources collected are exploited and explained in analytical method to find out the object of this paper.

Key Words: Cachar, communication system, road, bridge, postal system, colonialism, administration, socio-cultural, economic, prosperity, nationalism.

Abbreviations: CR: CacharRecords, DCRRS: DeputyCommissioner'sRecordRoom, Silchar, DCF: Dacca Commissioner's File, Judl: Judicial.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Cachar, situated in the southern part of Assam, was ruled by various political dynasties like Tripuris, Koches and lastly the Cachari Rajahs ruled over Cachar having its capital at Khaspur from 1750 to 1830. The rule of the Cachari Rajahs is termed as Princely Regime. After the end of Princely Regime (1750-1830) for internal strifes, Cachar was brought under the control of British government headed by Superintendents (1832-1866) and Deputy Commissioners (1866-1947) of Cachar. The British annexed plain Cachar (present Cachar and Hailakandi) on 14th August, 1832 who tried their level best to colonize Cachar in all aspects of life. During the course of British administration in Cachar, the government undertook various developmental works like the construction and improvement of roads, bridges as well as the improvement of postal system to run their administration effectively. All these indirectly helped the people of this region no doubt, but the main object of the British authority was to colonize the resources of Cachar.¹

2. OBJECTIVES:

The study aims at: i) to find out the historical development of communication system in colonial Cachar of the remotest area of Assam with special emphasis on road and postal system that greatly helped the British administration to colonize this region.

ii) to explore the development of trade and commerce in Cachar through the construction of roads and bridges and post office in this region and the reaction of the people.

iii) Cachar is an unexplored area of historical importance and thereby researcher wants to find out the reaction of the people regarding British administration and economic impact on the people of Cachar.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW:

- Datta, D in his book "Cachar District Records" Silchar mentioned administrative matters but not explained the topic in detail.

- Bhattacharjee, Jayanta Bhusan in his book “*Cachar under British Rule in North East India*” provided scanty information on this topic.
- Chatterjee, Suhas also highlighted socio-economic aspects of Cachar but the topic of present discussion is not explained in his book “*A Socio Economic History of South Assam.*”
- Guha, U.C., Hunter, W.W. mentioned few instances of road construction of the British in Cachar but not in detail.

4. METHODOLOGY:

To find out the objectives of this topic, both primary and secondary sources are consulted visiting Deputy Commissioner’s Record Room, Cachar, Assam State Archives, Guwahati, West Bengal State Archives, Calcutta, National Archives, New Delhi and various libraries of our country- India. So, information and sources collected are exploited and explained in analytical method historically to find out the objective of this paper.

5. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS:

Development of Communication System under Colonial Rule in Cachar: History of colonial Cachar commenced only after the annexation of Plain Cachar in 1832 which continued up to 1947. Before that, we find Cachari rule (1750-1830) under Rajahs who started the construction of roads and bridges for their own. So, the attempt in the construction of road communication in Cachar started during the Cachari rule (1750-1830) popularly termed as princely regime having their capital at Khaspur that can be confirmed from the construction of one road from Sylhet to Manipur through Cachar by the last Cachari Rajah Govinda Chandra at his own cost.² Not only this, the Rajar Sarak and Dudhpatil-Jirighat roads were constructed in 1824 during the rule of last Cachari king Govinda Chandra (1813-30) in Cachar for the advancement of the British forces to Manipur. But the heavy rainfall in that year made the road impassable causing death and destruction of elephants, horses and bullocks of the army.³

But Prof. J B Bhattacharjee mentioned in this way:-

“There was a road known as Rajar Sarak probably constructed during the reign of Krishnachandra (1780-1813) originated from Khaspur and connected the places like Udharbond, Dalu, Katigorah, Badarpur, Jainagar, Buribail, Ganirgram and Haritkar.”⁴

However, after the annexation of Cachar (1832) by the British, the communication system of this land was not sufficiently good and thereby the British Government took initiatives to construct the Sylhet -Manipur road through Cachar. Accordingly, Thomas Fisher, the first Superintendent of Cachar, was entrusted to complete the work first from Sylhet to Badarpur thence, to Banskandi. Some prisoners were brought from Sylhet to complete all these roads.⁵

Fisher charged Rs.4000 to construct the Sylhet-Banskandi road. He also constructed the Sylhet -Manipur road through Cachar. The existing road of 1824 from Dudhpatil to Jirighat was made workable by Thomas Fisher considering it as a highway.⁶

The Lakhipur military post that connected the Dudhpatil and Badarpur post needed a good road. So, Badarpur -Lakhipur highway served as the military life line of the East India Company's easternmost territories. This road also helped in conducting trade and commerce between Cachar and Manipur. The government of Manipur maintained and repaired the road from Banskandi to Manipur.⁷

J G Burns, the Superintendent of Cachar, undertook measures for the development of Communication system of Cachar through the construction of a large number of roads and bridges in plain Cachar. Accordingly J G Burns inspected the road leading from Sylhet to the Eastern extremity of Cachar. He completed the construction of Sylhet-Banskandi road in 1836 within six months with the help of 90 convicts from Dacca, Mymensingh and Tripura. It required 28 wooden bridges at an expense of Rs.100. It is to be noted here that the work of this road was started by Thomas Fisher and completed the same by his immediate successor J G Burns of Cachar administration. Not only this, he constructed the first Government High Road between Silchar and Banskandi en route Manipur in 1836 which was urgently needed for the colonial government of Cachar. Burns made a very commendable task initiating the postal system in Cachar which was absent in Cachar. He attached Dawk (Messengers) to the Superintendent's office in 1836. Those messengers carried letters and packets from Sylhet to Silchar and other Sub-Divisional headquarters and Thanahs.⁸

E R Lyons, Superintendent of Cachar, made an experiment in constructing a road between the plains of Cachar and Manipur in 1845. But the terminus of that road at Banskandi in Cachar had never been connected with the station and hence, almost the entire benefit of it was lost. Trade relation of Cachar with Manipur and Sylhet was carried out through the river Barak during E R Lyons.⁹

G Verner after assuming power as the Superintendent of Cachar constructed and repaired some roads for development of communication system of Cachar. He constructed Sylhet-Manipur road through Silchar at a vast expense in 1852.¹⁰ He also reconstructed the Silchar-Banskandi road, first Government High Road, minimizing the distance to 7^{1/2} miles expending Rs.2500 from Ferry fund in 1853. The first 3 miles was made through Mauza Rongpur over pretty high cultivated lands at a cost of Rs.1000, next 3 miles jungles at a cost of Rs.1250 and from jungle to Banskandi at a

cost of Rs.250. It provided postal and trading facility between Cachar and Manipur and marketing facility to the people of Banskandi region of Sadar station.¹¹

The Sylhet- Cachar road was also constructed by G Verner in 1853 under the management of PWD. It was an important road in Cachar under British rule the length of which was about 85 miles.¹²

G. Verner, being a farsighted administrator, developed the postal system of Cachar for the insufficient services rendered by Dawk runners. So, one Post Master for Cachar was appointed in 1852 and Post Offices were established at Hailakandi, Katigorah in addition to the Head Post Office at Silchar.¹³

It is to be noted that another road between Silchar to Phulbari in Katigorah was improved by G Verner in 1853 to improve the postal system of Cachar. Verner demanded Rs. 300 for this purpose that was to be deducted from ferry fund for that year. At all, G. Verner did many things for the improvement of communication system of Cachar.¹⁴

R Stewart was the last Superintendent and first Deputy Commissioner of Cachar who did maximum administrative works to consolidate the position of British rule in Cachar. In this respect R Stewart's attention towards the development of communication system was mostly significant. Because, R. Stewart constructed and repaired a large number of roads and bridges in Cachar incurring money from the local funds and 3% net revenue of Cachar.¹⁵ The local fund comprised of public Ferry, River fishery, pounds, convict labour fund, additional 1 per unit on settlements, 3 per unit on net collections of Government estate. These were used for repairing and maintenance of roads and bridges of Cachar.¹⁶

R Stewart constructed Silchar-Ghungur Road of 5 miles length in 1858-59 on the subscriptions made by Cachar, Silchar and Equitable Tea Company.¹⁷ The Cachar, Silchar and Equitable Tea Companies contributed a sum of Rs.3301-10 towards this undertaking. This new road of 5 miles in length was constructed by convict labours. The earthwork of this road required Rs.300 per mile. There were two rivers and several smaller streams and Nullahs to be bridged. The whole work was expected to cost about the sum subscribed, but in the event of there being any surplus funds, those were to be employed in carrying on the road towards Jalinga, 5 or 6 miles to the south of Ghungur. He also thought to extend the new road for 6 or 7 miles beyond Jalinga through the cultivated plains of Dhowarbond. It required a cross road to connect the new road with Hailakandi on the one side and Bundraj on the other. The local funds and subscriptions were being not sufficient for this grand project, Stewart sought Government aid of Rs.10,000. But the Government declined to pay a large amount for it. Accordingly, R. Stewart undertook measures for the construction of a local road from Silchar through Chatla Hawhr.¹⁸

R Stewart also constructed Silchar -Rungarkhal road, Rungarkhal- Ghungur road, Ghungur-Dargakona road, Boaljurroad in 1858-59. He also completed the construction of Ghungur, Rungarkhal, Khoyakooriekhal, Baldur Kukipara, Lakhichura bridges along with six bridged drains during 1858-60 incurring amount subscribed by Cachar, Silchar and Equitable Tea Company.¹⁹

He constructed and repaired large number of roads and bridges for the benefit of this district. He constructed Silchar-Udharbond road (Madhura), Bundraj-Hailakandi road, 3 timber bridges, 6 pucca drains and repaired Sylhet-Cachar road in expense of Rs.4080 in 1860.²⁰ R Stewart constructed a road between Hattia and Silchar in 1861 at a cost of Rs.700 out of which Rs. 300 was subscribed by Tea planters of Bagliaghat.²¹ Another road from Banskandi to the Station to connect the later with military road across the hills to Manipur was constructed in 1861 in expense of Rs.3469-5-5. He also expended Rs.881 for the roads of Banskandi, Hattia and of station roads in 1861. He also repaired the road towards Barkhola in expense of Rs. 200 in 1861.²²

He also made attempt to open communication between Sonaimukh and the plantations of Jalinga and Jogibond during his tour period in December, 1861.²³ The Sylhet -Cachar road started by R Stewart in 1863 was given final shape under the supervision of Lieutenant Haywood.²⁴ He reconstructed the Sylhet-Manipur road via Silchar which was constructed by Govt at a very vast expenses in 1850. This road had its importance from the military and commercial point of view. Not only this, after the development of this road, the value of the land of adjoining areas must be increased and thereby government can recover the cost of reconstruction of the road.²⁵ Silchar-Manipur road was tried to be constructed by R Stewart in 1860 but failed. It was made as an extension of Sylhet- Cachar road.²⁶ R Stewart constructed two streets one at Silchar and the other at Panchgram at a cost of Rs.500 and two subsequent establishments of Rs.25 per month for each were set up at Silchar and Katigorah in 1864.²⁷

R Stewart urged for opening pathways in garden area to the tea planters for public necessity and to pass tea labourers in garden area of Cachar on permission from Superintendent of Cachar if considered to be most necessary. Thus we see that R Stewart undertook all types of measures for the development of road communication through the formation of Cachar District Road Committee and Ferry Fund in 1864.²⁸

R Stewart also took initiatives for the improvement and extension of inland navigation in Cachar. Boats, steamers were used in the rivers Barak and Katakhal as the only navigable source of communication in Cachar. Horses were used by the Superintendents and planters to visit the interior region of Cachar. In this respect mention may be made of the extensive visit of R Stewart in the interior places riding on horses to inspect the PWD works and of the newly opened tea gardens in Cachar.²⁹

British government in Cachar under the Superintendency of R Stewart did commendable works for the development of postal system in Cachar which was initiated by G Verner earlier. The Cachar Post Office was constructed in 1861-62. Regular Post Office was established by R. Stewart at Hailakandi in 1863. From the Postal Statistics of Cachar for the years 1861-62 and 1865-66, it was also found that huge works had done by the postal department of Cachar in a progressive rate. In 1861-62, total receipts from the sale of postage stamps and cash collection was 317-16-5 dollars and total expenditure was 155-10-3 dollars. Similarly, in 1865-66, total receipts from the sale of postage stamps and cash collection was 936-14-11 dollars and total expenditure was 588-15-6 dollars.³⁰

In this way, the Superintendents of Cachar undertook constructive measures for the development of communication system of Cachar through the construction of roads, bridges as well as through the setting up of postal system keeping colonial interest in mind. After the end of the rule of Superintendents of Cachar, Cachar administration was left in the hands of Deputy Commissioners who also laid great emphasis on the development of communication system of Cachar right from the first Deputy Commissioner-R Stewart who was also the last Superintendent of Cachar. R Stewart was succeeded by J W Edgar, Mc. William who were not lagging behind in this respect that can be visualized from the development of road and water communication in this district.

In the early days of Deputy Commissioners, it was seen that road system was under the control of PWD and some under the local management. In 1873, it was found that two roads managed by PWD -one from Sylhet to Silchar ran along the bank of the river Barak and the other was Lakhipur road leading from Silchar eastwards to the Jiri River, where it joined the main route to Manipur. We also find another 15 roads under local managements being constructed for the accommodation of tea gardens. Those roads were-1) The roads in the Silchar Municipal Union 2). The Barkhola road connecting Tarapur, Janiganj and Barkhola with Silchar. 3) Durganagar road, connecting Rangpur, Bahadurpur and Udharbond with Silchar. 4) Chatla Haur road connecting Ambicapur, Meherpur and the adjoining tea gardens with Silchar. 5) Nagdirgram road connecting Sonapur and Nagdirgram. 6) Manierkhal road connecting Nagdirgram. 7) The Tarapur road. 8) The Baladhan road connecting Kamranga and adjoining tea gardens with Lakhipur. 9) The Sonai road connecting the tea gardens of Hatikuri and Binnkandi. 10) The East Hailakandi road connecting Samaikona and Matiguri with the sub divisional station of Hailakandi. 11) The Katakhal road connecting Goglachara tea garden and Sudarsanpur. 12) Mona road connecting Gangpur and Dumkar with Rajesarpur. 13) The Hailakandi road connecting Panchgram, Kasinagar and Rafinagar. 14) The Masimpur road connecting the Borkhola and other tea gardens with Masimpur. 15) The Natwanpur road connecting the Natwanpur and other tea gardens with Jainagar. The length of all these roads under local management in 1873 was about 166 miles. These roads were to be repaired expending huge amount annually for the betterment of communication system of Cachar.³¹

6. CONCLUSION:

It is observed and found that the communication system both in land and water in colonial Cachar was not lagging behind from the inception of British rule in Cachar. All these roads, postal as well as water communication system evolved under the colonial British rule in Cachar enriched the tea industry, trade and commerce through the extension of markets. It was a significant booster of economic prosperity, cultural tie and affinity among the general masses in Cachar. So, it is correct to say that the measures undertaken for the upgradation of communication system of Cachar paved the way for the formation of a multi cultural society in Cachar. Not only this, it also brought about socio-cultural unity among the common people that provided great impetus for the emergence of national awakening against the colonial British government of Cachar. Such type of communication system evolved under the colonial British government helped the Cachar people in participating in the freedom movement against the British rule in India.

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