

IMPORTANT TRADE ROUTES OF THE BARAK VALLEY DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD

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Abstract

Transport and Communication are the means by which agricultural and industries commodities are moved from internal consumption and far export abroad. Amongst all forms of transport, waterways dominated the scene in Barak Valley. During the colonial period, the basic infrastructure for the development of agriculture and industry was transport. Communication in the Barak Valley was not well developed though all the forms of communication were in use. This is due to the isolated location of the North-East India which is linked with rest of the country by only a narrow corridor between the Himalayas on the one side and Bangladesh on the other. Actually, the development of trade and commerce is entirely dependent on economic infrastructure. The state of transport and communication had been sadly very poor in Barak Valley. There was no road which could be used for all the year round. The river Barak and Surma and their large tributaries were the only means of transport of the boats carrying the goods. The tributaries of Surma-Barak were not at all navigable in the upstream and during the rainy season because of strong currents. Plying of loaded boats was extremely risky.

Introduction:

During the Burmese War (1824-26), Colonel Innes, the officer Commanding the Cachar Column constructed in 1824 a workable road from Dudpatil fort (near Silchar) to Jirighat the eastern border of Cachar for the advance of the British forces to Manipur but the heavy monsoon of that year made the road impossible causing the death and destruction of the elephants, horses and bullocks of the army. The said road was, however, made workable by Captain T. Fisher, the first Superintendent, Cachar who happened to be an army engineer. The above road was considered as the high way by the early British authorities. The Lakhipur military post which connected the Dudpatil and the Badarpur post needed a good road. So, Badarpur-Lakhipur highway served as the military life line of the East India Company's Eastern most territories. The high way also met the needs of the increasing commerce between Manipur and Cachar. The Government of Manipur maintained the upper portion of that highway from Banskandi to Imphal. Manipir Government repaired the road annually up to Banskandi but the portion of the road from Silchar to Banskandi had not been repaired by the Cachar authorities since 1839 because of resource crunch. Under the insistence of Captain G. Verner, the Superintendent of Cachar the Government of Bengal sanctioned the repairing cost of the highway from Silchar to Banskandi.

The excellence of its water communications makes Assam less dependent upon its highways than other parts of India and it was not till 1865 that steps were taken to construct a road through the whole length of the Brahmaputra Valley. This road runs along the south bank of the river from Sadiya at the eastern end to a point opposite Dhubri, where it is connected by a steam ferry with the road system of Goalpara and northern Bengal. At Guwahati it is joined by the excellent metalled road which runs to Shillong. Shillong is connected via Cherrapunji, Therriaghat, Companyganj, and Sylhet with Cachar, though for a distance of about 8 miles down the face of the Khasi Hills, which here rise very sharply from the plains, the tract is not fit for wheeled traffic. From Cachar a bridle path leads to Manipur, and from there a cart road to the Brahmaputra, passing through Kohima, Dimapur. In the Surma Valley two important roads are those from Sylhet to Fenchuganj and thence then Kulaura railway station and from Silchar up to Hailakandi Valley.

Till 1853, the road transport condition was quite backward but by 1873, the Barak Valley improved considerably in respect of road communication and had several roads. There were two roads namely Sylhet-Silchar road which run along the Barak River competing the water traffic and the other Lakhipur Road which ran from Silchar eastward to Jiri River where it joined the main route to Manipur. These roads were maintained by the public works department. Besides these, there were another 15 roads under local management. The majority of them were constructed for accommodation of tea gardens. By that year the Silchar Municipal Union had 12.8 K.M of roads which were improved and extended later on. The other important roads were listed below Table-1

Table-1

Name of the Road	Length in Kilometer	Name of the Places connected by the road
Barkhala	14.4	Tarapur, Nij Jayanagar, Barkhala with Silchar
Durganagar road	20.0	Rangpur, Bahadurpur and Udharbond with Silchar.
Chatla Hamor road	29.6	Ambikapur, Meharpur and Adjoining tea gardens with Silchar
Nagdirgram road	20.0	Sonapur, Nagdirgram
Moniarkhal Road	14.4	Maniarkhal tea gardens with Nondigram
Tarapur road	12.0	Tarapur, Labak tea gradens with Baskandi on the Lakhipur road.
Baladhana road	16.0	Kamranga and adjoining tea gardens with Lakhipur.
The Sonai Road	17.60	Hatikuri and Binnakandi tea gardens.
East Hailakandi road	19.2	Samairkuna, Matijuri with Hailakandi.
Katakhal Road	12.8	Goglachhara and Sudarsanpur tea gardens.
Kaya or Mona road	12.0	Gangpar and Dumkar with Rajyeshwarpur.
Hailakandi road	20.8	Panchgram, Kasinagar and Rabinagar.
Masimpur road	35.2	Natwanpur and other tea gardens with Jaynagar.
Sylhet road		
Golapganj road	10	Sylhet to Golapganj
Ramdha road	17	Sylhet to Ramdha
Sheolamukh road	23	Sylhet to Sheolamukh
Karimganj Road	35	Sylhet to Karimganj
Fenchuganj road	15	Sylhet to Fenchuganj
Markuli road	111	Sylhet to Markuli
Shealmukh road	26	Sylhet to Shealmukh
Govindganj Road	13	Sylhet to Govindganj
Pagla road	29	Sylhet to Pagla
Sunamganj Road	42	Sylhet to Sunamganj

Source: B.B Hazarika and S.B. Roy Choudhury, Assam District Gazetters, Cachar District, Pp. 209-210

In 1873, the total length of roads under the local management of the Barak Valley came to 265.60kilometers. But in 1875-76 there were 577.60 kilometers as waterways communication, 332.80 kilometers of second class roads and 480 kilometers of third class roads. In spite of the availability of roads within the district, roads from Cachar to the neighboring districts of the state are mostly fair weather roads and the transport is seriously felt during the rainy season in particular.

In 1904, there were altogether 321.60 kilometers of road and out of this 308.80 kilometers of bridle Paths were in plains portion of Cachar district. All these roads were very good and useable by carts and in spite of the existence of these cart roads, goods were carried by human labourers and pack bullocks. At that time, the inhabitants of the Surma Valley showed a lack of initiative and enterprise in the matter of wheeled traffic. Only in 1902 there were 260 carts in Cachar as compared with upwards of 3,500 in the Darrang district. Carts were first sent to Manipur from Cachar in 1896.

The road position of the Cachar district in 1904 was as follows: the trunk road entered the district at Badarpur 81.60 kilometers from Sylhet and crossed the Manipur frontier at Jirighat 64 kilometers from Badarpur, The main places touching the roads were Badarpur, Salchapra, Silchar, Lakhipur, Jirighat and Banskandi. Another road led South from Silchar and then turned west and passed through Hailakandi and then finally ran to the North till it meet the trunk road a little to the east of Badarpur. The Burnimukh road took off north of Hailakandi to the East up to Salchapra railway Station. In the South of Hailakandi, two roads which ultimately merge in one and sink to the status of a bridle path led towards Mizoram state. This road has now developed into a black topped highway. Many roads and bridle paths touching off east and west from this road served the different tea gardens in the vicinity. East of Silchar Maniarkhal road run up to Sonaimukh. There were other roads namely Damchara, Nematha, Shingarbond. Baladhan and their branches in the districts. From Maibong a bridle Path run to Baladhan the total length of which was 89.6 Kilometers

There are some public and private bus and carrier service employees and employer's organizations in the district. These organizations ran the private bus services in the district smoothly and the grievances of the employees are meted out by the bus owners Associations. The names of some of these organizations are mentioned as (i) The Cachar Transport Vehicle Owners Associations, Silchar, (ii) Silchar Kumbhirgram Bus Owners Associations, Rongpur, (iii) Patharkandi Transport Society, Patharkandi, (iv) Sub-divisional Motor Transport Union, Hailakandi,

(v) Karimganj Motor Service Union, Karimganj and (vi) Karimganj-Hailakandi Motor Transport Union, Karimganj etc.

The railway system of Barak Valley during the Colonial period was a meter gauge system. After the formation of Assam-Bengal Railway in 1892, steps were taken to connect Assam with the rest of India. As a result this Valley had the first railway line from Chandura in Bengal to Badarpur. In 1897, railway communication from Chittagong to Cachar district was established. It entered the district at a point a little to the East of Badarpur junction then under Sylhet district and had a length of 403.20 Kms. Here the line divided and a branch line ran South of the Barak passing through Katakhal, Salchakra and ultimately reached to Silchar. This line covered 28.80 kms only. The main line after leaving the Badarpur junction crossed the Barak river on a bridge, which was 415.1376 meters in length and had a foundations of its piers carried to a depth of 24.3840 meter below the bed of the river. It then went its way up the Jatinga Valley and so made its way through the North Cachar hills into Brahmaputra Valley. Hilara-Bihara Damchara, Harangajao. Jatinga, Halflong, Mahur, Maibong, Langting and Hatikhali and linked the Gawahati branch at Lumding junction were the stations in the N. C. Hills district. The North-East Frontier Railway Hill Section from Lumding to Badarpur serves as a feeble railway link of Cachar with the rest of the country. This section is quite unreliable during the rainy seasons when the railway service remains suspended for days together because of heavy landslide. There are further more a large number of tunnels to cross on this line which had to the difficulty of movement of large sized manufacturing plant and machinery.

The names of a few railway stations including junctions, branch lines and total length of the Barak Valley are as follows:

1. Badarpur Junction-Haflong Hill-Lumding Junction(Total length of 38 kms.)

i. Badarpur Junction, ii. Hilara, iii. Bihara, iv. Chandranathpur, v. Damchera, vi. Bandarkhal

2. Mahishason-Badarpur Junction-Katakhal Junction-Silchar (Total length 61 kms)

i. Mahishasan, ii. Langai , iii. Karimganj Junction, iv. Chargola, v. Bhanga , vi. Ruposibari, vii. Badarpur Junction, viii. Badarpurghat, ix. Panchgram, x. Katakhal Junction, xi. Salchakra, xii. Aurnachal, xiii. Silchar

3. Katakhal Junction-Lalaghat (Total length 49 kms.)

i.Katakhal, ii. Algapur, iii. Hailakandi, iv. Monacherra, v. Lalabazar, vi. Lalaghat

4. Karimganj Junction-Dullabhchara-Kalkalighat

i.Karimganj Junction, ii. Suprakandi, iii. Nilambazar, iv. Kayosthagram,v. Baraigram Junction, vi. Eraligul, vii. Phakuagram, viii.Nagendra Nagar, ix. Ratabari, x. Anipur, xi. Durllabchara, xii. Kanai Bazar, xiii. Kalkalighat

The section wise length of the Railways in the Valley are listed below table-2

Section	Length in K. M
Badarpur-Lumding	185.0
Badarpur-Katakhal	19.0
Katakhal-Lalaghat	38.1
Katakhal-Silchar	20.0
Badarpur-Karimganj	21.0
Karimganj- Mahishasan	10.3
Karimganj- Durllabchara	59.8
Baraigram-Kalkalighat	12.3
Kalkalighar-Dharmanagar	32.3
Silchar-Hailakandi	23.0
Sylhet-Karimganj	65.0

Source: Report on the Trade carried by Rail and River in the Province of Eastern Bengal and Assam,Pp.73-81.

A number of railway stations Barak Valley are situated near tea-gardens and rice fields and therefore tea, rice, raw jute timber etc. are the main goods exported from these stations. Following are the some important commodities which exported by the rail listed below table-3

Names of the Commodities	Destination of export
Pineapple	Lumding, Guwahati
Ginger	Tinsukia
Jute	Calcutta
Tea	Calcutta
Timber	Calcutta
Medicinal	Calcutta

Source: B. B. Hazarika and S. B. Roy Choudhury, Assam District Gazetteers, Cachar District, P. 194.

The principal commodities traded are tea, jute, bamboo, timber, food grains, raw materials, cotton and miscellaneous goods. Among inward goods, mention may be made of petrol and petroleum products, mustard oil, pulses, foodgrains, sugar, salt, wheat, flour, coal, other miscellaneous goods and garden stores.

The Barak receives numerous tributaries the most important being on the north the Jiri, Jatinga, Bogapani and Jadukata, and on the South, the Sonai, Dhaleswari, Singla, Langai, Manu and Khowai. In the upper part of its source it flows in a very deep channel, and though rain in the hills often make the river rise many feet in a few hours, it seldom overflows its banks. Lower down, where the bed of the river is not so deep, its waters sometimes spread over the surrounding country, and the floods both of the Surma and of the Kusiya are said to do some damage. During the rainy season, large steamers proceed up the Kusiya to Silchar, while steamers of lighter draught ply between Silchar and Lakhipur and from markhali near the western border of Sylhet past Sunamganj and Chhatak to Sylhet town. In the cold weather the large steamers go to the Chhatak, and only small steamers can pass up to the Kusiya to Silchar, at that season of the year there is very little water in the river. The surface of all the numerous channels of this river is dotted over with native boats of various shapes and sizes at all seasons of the year, and in that part of its course where it flows through or in the neighborhood of the hills, the scenery is extremely picturesque. Its importance as a trade route has caused many local marts to spring up on its banks. The most important of these are on the river prior to its bifurcation, where it is known as the Barak-Lakhipur, Silchar, Siyaltek and Badarpur, where it is spanned by a magnificent railway bridge. On the Surma or Northern branch lie Kanairghat, Sylhet, Chhatak, Dwarabazar and Suamganj while on the Kusiya, Karimganj, Fenchuganj, Baliganj, Manumukh, and Ajmirganj are found. These are however, only the more important centers of local trade. Throughout the whole of its course in the plains the banks of the various branches of the river are lined with villages and there are numerous markets of less importance

During the Colonial period, the Barak Valley's ferry services linking the road transport were under the management of the Public Works Department. The navigable water-way and ferries in the Barak Valley are listed below table-4.

Name of River	Navigable reach from	Distance in Km.	Period when Navigable	Type of craft Plying	Remarks
Barak	Karimganj-Silchar	89.6	Throughout the year	The steamers & country Boats	Feeder Steamer Service
Barak	Silchar-Fulertal	64.0	Throughout the year	Feeder steamer Ply during June to October	Feeder Steamer Service
Langai	Damchhara	104.0	During rainy seasons	Country boats	Small dug outs ply throughout the year
Katakhal	Lushi hills-katakhal	160.0	Whole year	Country boats	Do
Sonai	Bhuban hills-Sonaimukh	48.0	Whole year	Country boats	Do
Angur	Binnakandi-Augurmukh	16.0	Rainy season	Country boats	Do
Jatinga	Ditekchara-Jalingamukh	64.0	Rainy season	Country boats	do
Madhura	N.C.Hills-Madhuramukh	32.0	Rainy season	Country boats	---

Dadri	Whole length	25.6	Rainy season	Country boats	---
Chiri	Jaipur-Confleena with Barak	41.6	Rainy season	Country boats	---
Jiri	Manipur Hills- Barak	64.0	Whole year	Country boats	---
Surma	Karimganj-Sylhet	61	Whole year	Steamer	Feeder Steamer Service

Source: Report on the Rail and River-Borne Trade of the Province of Assam, Pp. 40-46
 Status of Navigable Rivers of Barak Valley are listed below Table-5

Name of River	Highest point to which Boat of 4 tons Burthen can proceed	
	In cold weather	In rains
Amjur	Not navigable	Up to Thaukin Punji
Badri	Not navigable	Narainpur Tea Estate
Barak	Tipaimukh	Kacharbali
Bohali	Not navigable	Thaukim punji
Chiri	Not navigable	Jaypur Bazar
Dalu	Not navigable	Dalugram Mukh
Dhaleswari Katakhal	Not navigable	Bhairabichara Mukh
Ghagra	Not navigable	Barajalinga Bazar
Jatinga	Not navigable	Balichara Tea Estate
Madhura	Not navigable	Patichara Tea Estate
Mara Dhaleswari	Not navigable	Ainakhal Tea Estate
Rukni	Not navigable	Lushai Boundary
Salganga	Not navigable	Derby Tea Estate
Sonai	Moniarkhal Tea Estate	Chhotanatia

Source: B.C.Allen's Assam District Gazetteers, P-113.

Values of the steamer and Boat trade in Surma-Barak Valley during 1850 to 1880 are listed below Table-6

Period	Steamer(in Rs)	Boat (In Rs.)
1850-1860	1,46,07,193	1,12,94,320
1860-1870	1,79,92,795	1,36,37,657
1870-1880	1,69,19,394	1,24, 56,048

Source: Report on the condition and Prospect of British Trade in India, Calcutta, 1939, p.68

Conclusion:

Finally, we can say that the communication in the Barak Valley was not well developed though all the forms of communication were in use. The transport of Barak valley till 1853, was quite backward in respect of road transport. In 1897, railway communication from Chittagong to Cachar district was established. It entered the district at a point a little to the East of Badarpur junction. Here the line divided and branch line ran south of the Barak passing through Katakhal, Salchapra and ultimately reached Silchar. Through the railway, the important items of imports and exports were tea, rice, raw, jute, timber, pineapple, ginger, medical and miscellaneous goods. Actually, during the colonial period in Barak Valley , Boat as the main important means of trabsporting the commodities. Goods were imports and export by steamer and boat. There were, however some transit ghats for loading and unloading the goods on the river bank. The river parts in the Barak through which the steamers plied are Badarpur, Sialtek, Jatingamukh, Masimpur etc. In the rains, the feeder steamer went up the Barak from Silchar to Lakhipur up the Madhura to Chandighat, up the Ghagra to Hattia rocks, and up the Kathakal to Kukichara.

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