

Communication and Culture- Development Of Road Communication And Its Impact On People's Culture In Colonial Northeast India

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Abstract:

From very antique road communications developed with different aims and objectives, basically to connect two destinations. But road not only connects two places, it connects people to people, bears one culture to another. If the passage of developments has been observe it has been noticed that road received royal patronage at various times for its development. In India, there were several royal roads were constructed for serve the purpose of its construction. In Northeaster region of India road communications were developed, which filled up the necessities of internal communication. From its historical evidence, it is presumed that there was a good network of land routes in ancient Northeast India apart from that other communication lines, mentioned in various records. In the centuries before the advent of British in the region, there was a high degree of intermingling of various streams of people come from East and West. British, to administrate, trade, and commerce developed a few communication line with vested interest. With the outbreak of the Second World War, the transport difficulties became acuter and the region needed a secured road communication. Consequently, the constructions of roads were given more priority as per the needs of defence, since the region became strategically very important for the War. The post war and post independent period road communication received importance for various reasons. These developments have great impact on the culture of the people of the region. Despites of its strategic, socio-economic, military and cartographic importance the frontier episode of Northeast India received very little importance as a subject of study properly, especially the communication history and its linkage with culture of people, which shall be going to discuss in this paper

Keywords: Road, Communication, Culture, People, Northeast India.

Introduction:

"If you wish to know whether society is stagnant, religion a dead formality, you may learn something by going into universities and libraries; something also by the work that is doing on cathedrals and churches, or in them, but quite as much by looking at the roads. For if there is any motion in society, the Road, which is the symbol of motion, will indicate the fact. When there is activity or enlargement, or a liberating spirit of any kind, then there is intercourse and travel, and these require roads. So if there is any kind of advancement going on, if new ideas are abroad and new hopes rising, then you will see it by the roads that are building. Nothing makes an inroad without making a road. All creative action, whether in government, industry, thought or religion, creates roads."

Horace Bushnell¹

The road has been with us as long as there has been a living thing to trod and crawl the earth. Man, when he first went in search of food and water, established a path to be followed by recurrent waves of civilizations from the dim past, stumbling and halting at times, but ever moving forward until today we stand in his place and ponder the way which he came; trails worn deep by the countless feet of animals lead today as always to feeding grounds and watering places; reptiles even, such as boa constrictors, are known to have definite routes which they travel, tunnelled through the almost impenetrable denseness of jungle growth. These trails, humble though they are, are the forerunners of our modern high-speed highways, for in many cases roads today may follow in whole or in part these paths established by primitive man and by animals whose instincts led them to choose the easiest gradients and to cross mountains by the likeliest passes.

The ability of animals to select the best locations over which to travel is excellently demonstrated here in the United States by the buffalo, over whose trails, to a large extent, the tides of a restless and adventurous people flowed to conquer the wilderness and create a new and powerful nation. Hulbert states that:

*"The buffalo, because of his sagacious selection of the most sure and most direct courses, has influenced the routes of trade and travel of the white race as much, possibly, as he influenced the course of the red men in earlier days. There is great truth in Thomas Benton's figure when he said that the buffalo blazed the way of the railways to the Pacific. That sagacious animal undoubtedly 'blazed' with his hoofs on the surface of the earth - the course of many of our roads; canals and railways."*²

One of the most vital of all things created by man at any time throughout his entire history is the wheel. The progenitor of every mechanical invention we have today, it has probably had a more potent effect upon our present civilization than any other one factor. More than ever before are we dependent upon this humble invention, for we regulate our lives by the wheels in watches; we travel the earth, the sea, the sky by means of wheels; we harvest and process our food, weave our clothing, light and heat our homes, print our books and papers, manufacture all manner of goods; all by the use of wheels. Take the wheel and its principle of motion away from us and we revert to the semi-primitive. Varied and intricate are the uses to which the wheel has been adapted, but one point is ineluctable to the road was the wheel born and to the road, it remains. Remove it from the road or the railroad and every other wheel in use will stop in harmony.

How, when or where the wheel was invented is a matter of pure conjecture. Inscriptions and archaeological finds prove that it was known as far back as the 4th millennium B.C., but civilization was already far advanced at this stage. Childe states that:

*"Well before the end of the 4th millennium B.C., wheeled vehicles were in use from the Indus to the coasts of the Mediterranean. Very soon they reached Crete, but in Egypt, the device was not adopted till it was imposed by the Hyksos from Asia about 1700 B.C. There is no question that the invention was infused. Early in the 3rd millennium, models from Crete, Assyria, Babylonia, Turkestan and India all exhibit divergences in the construction of the vehicles. The idea must have been implanted long enough in several centres for local differentiation to have taken place."*³

The historiography of South Asia in the realm of connectivity has been built on the premise of how improved means of communication through the network of roads, railways, and canals were 'public works', seeking to improve the lives of the people. Lack of transport and communication in conjuncture with trade facilities has been viewed as barbarism by colonial historiography. Transport facilities for commercial purposes were viewed as a measure of a triumph of western techno-science, fostering regional development on one hand, while unifying regions to the world trade cycles-particularly in the railways. It was linked with ideas of material and moral progress rendered by the efficient road communications. The debates on economic nationalism too rested on whether transport and communication of all kinds were beneficial to the British or the Indian nation.⁴

According to critiques like Sandra Harding, the progress of European science is chiefly attributable to the 'military economic and power of European cultures' rather than to claims of possessing greater rationality or commitment to the pursuit of disinterested truth.⁵ The unification of regions or fostering of regional created new socio-economic constellations with which the indigenous business interacted.

Ravi Ahuja in his book *Pathways of the Empire: Circulation, 'Public Works' and Social Space in Colonial Orissa, c. 1780-1914*, (Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2009) tries to argue that each of these infrastructure modes has been studied, de-contextualized from its historical contexts and considered to have no specific context. It was presumed that both roads and railways were open to wide range of social actors. He further states that colonial sources were extremely laden with data on railways and canals, with a corresponding paucity of data on roadways and waterways. To him, it reflected the dominance of certain social interests.

Within the history of South Asian transport and infrastructure Jean Deloche's *Transport and Communication in India Prior to Steam Locomotion*, 2 Vols., (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993-1994) has been significant in tracing the pre-colonial modes of transport. Such modes of transport within the historiography have received very little attention, except in terms of alluding to roads as gleaned from the *Arthashastra* of pack bullocks wherein comparisons are made of its relative costs and contrasting it with savings achieved by the coming of railways.⁶

In the context of colonial Assam Sarah Hilally's book on *The Railways in Assam 1885-1947* (Varanasi: Pilgrims Publishing 2007) is a maiden history of transport history. It was framed within the discourse of transport and communication where the railways as a harbinger of major technological changes. The commonalities and the distinctiveness of the railway policy in terms of its introduction are dealt with. As a 'public work,' the role of railways in all sectors of the economy, urbanisation, and immigration as a concomitant has been explored. The social effects too have been explored. A limited critique of the colonial policies though has been made in accounting for the lopsided development. The broader framework being in viewing it as a 'productive public works'. Beyond the purely economic implications, the study has not taken into account its core social and cultural implications.

Development of Roads in colonial NEI and its Impact on People's culture:

Human beings have always moved from place to place and traded with their neighbours, exchanging goods, skills and ideas. Throughout history, Northeast India was crisscrossed with communication routes and paths of trade, which gradually linked up to form what is known today as the Silk Roads; routes across both land and sea, along which silk and many other goods were exchanged between people from across the world. Maritime routes were an important part of this network, linking East and West by sea, and were used for the trade of spices, in particular, thus becoming known as the Spice Routes.

From the historical evidence, it has been proved that there was a good network of land routes in Ancient Northeast India. During the period of Bhaskarvarmana, in the middle of the seventh century AD, the Chinese explorer Hiuen Tsang entered Magadha through Campa [Modern Bhagalpur, Kahangala (Rajmahal)] and Pundra Vardhan (Rangpur) moving eastward reached Kamrupa.⁷ This signifies the existence of land routes from Magadha to Assam. From the account of Hiuen Tsang, it is found that China had a direct link with Assam through a mountainous land route. This route was from the upper Brahmaputra valley to Burma and then to China. By this route, a considerable trade between China and Burma was carried on. The line of trade was from Sadiya, the frontier station of the Upper Brahmaputra Valley, via Bisa across the Patkai ranges of mountains and through the valley of Hukoong to the town of Mukung (situated on a navigable branch of the river Irrawaddy). The merchants proceeding from Mukung to Ava at once descended the Irrawaddy to the capital of Burma.⁸

This route helped the Burmese to invade Assam. It is very hard to go outside from Assam before the advent of the colonial people. Strict security was imposed in all possible passes of communication, and without prior permission from the throne, no one was allowed to enter or go outside. Its earliest commercial relation was with its nearest province Bengal and main means of communication was a river. From tributaries of Brahmaputra, the goods were collected and through it, the mercantile boats ply towards Bengal. John M'Cosh traced the existence of the route from Sadiya to Tibet across the Himalayas along the route from Sadiya to Tibet across the Himalayas along the course of the river Brahmaputra.⁹ Further, M'Cosh has mentioned the three inter-state (between Bengal and Assam) land routes.

"The first was via Murshidabad, Malda, Dinajpore, Rangpore, (sic) Bugwah and Goalpara ... the second road was via Dacca, Dumary, Pacualoes (sic), Jumalpore, Singimari, and Goalpara. The third via Sylhet, Cherra, Mophlung, Nungkhlow, Ranigodown, Canneymookh and Gauhati..."¹⁰

However, all these routes were impassable during the rainy season and the traffic to Bengal was confined to water routes only. The important routes to Bhutan were Bijni-Duar, Buxa-Duar, Na-Duar, and Char-Duar. M'Cosh also noted that there were not less than five routes leading from Sadiya to China proper.¹¹ They were the passes of Dihing, the Mishmi route; the Phugan pass to Manchee and China; the route through Manipur to the Irrawaddy and the Patkai pass to Bhamo on the Irrawaddy.

"Very few provinces in India have been provided with such a splendid system of public roads as in Assam and from the great highways, which were carried uninterruptedly through the whole country to the great crossroad, between the principal towns and their minute's ramification, which connected the villages..."¹²

These vast networks carried more than just merchandise and precious commodities, however: the constant movement and mixing of populations also brought about the transmission of knowledge, ideas, cultures and beliefs, which had a profound impact on the history and civilizations of the Northeast Indian peoples. Travellers along the Silk Roads were attracted not only by trade but also by the intellectual and cultural exchange that was taking place in cities along the Silk Roads, many of which developed into hubs of culture and learning. Science, arts and literature, as well as crafts and technologies, were thus shared and disseminated into societies along the lengths of these routes, and in this way, languages, religions and cultures developed and influenced each other.

Roads are traditionally associated in the literature with a limited set of environmental and social benefits and impacts. On one hand, roads are associated with economic growth and national wealth (Wilkie et al. 2000)¹³. In Nelson et al. (2006)¹⁴ roads are viewed as a solution to the "poverty trap". Better rural transportation is a principal factor for improving livelihoods, especially in developing countries through better access to markets, increased social mobility, migration, and greater economic opportunities. The development of roads is also viewed as a means to expand into a territory, tap into otherwise inaccessible resources, and provide new opportunities.¹⁵

On the other hand, there is a growing body of literature highlighting the negative aspects associated with development of roads. Roads are associated with ecological disturbances and landscape degradation. In conservation biology for example, many researchers agree that road density is a good indicator of intensive use and the human footprint on the landscape. Some, like Crist et al. (2005)¹⁶ therefore advocate a high value for roadless areas as an integral part of conservation strategies. Reviews by ecologists such as Trombulak and Frissel (2000)¹⁷ and Formann (2000)¹⁸ outline the ecological effects of roads: 1) habitat destruction, 2) species mortality due to collision, 3) altered animal behaviors, 4) changes to physical and chemical environments, 5) introduction of exotic species, and 6) increased anthropogenic use of the territory. Increased poaching, illegal logging, and squatting have also been identified as a result of road development.¹⁹

Roads facilitate and physically increase the ability to use resources, other changes may occur with increasing road densities (Trombulak and Frissel 2000, Bourgeois et al. 2005). The perception of the benefits from roads in the short versus long term is at least in part a function of how much road development is occurring (Kneeshaw et al. 2010)²⁰. Are the initial benefits provided by roads maintained with increasing road networks and road densities? As roads enable resources to be used, they also provide opportunities for resource development efforts as well as changes in community access dynamics. Roads increase resource use by non-Aboriginal hunters, recreationists, and for non-Aboriginal resource development. According to Sikor and Lund (2009), access to resources is often contested and rife with conflict especially in societies where normative and legal claims to resources are competitive. Many Aboriginal communities are asserting their rights to land and resources and from their perspective, there is a climate of uncertainty when rights and claims to resources are considered.²¹

There is a tendency to view roads and access in tandem. Access is usually defined as the ability to benefit from things. In management, the effects of roads are often limited to their impacts *on* a resource and as affecting access *to* the resource. It is a pattern oriented point of view in which the effects of roads on a landscape are organized along a biophysical and social gradient (Cumming 2011). In this sense, roads are assessed by the physical nature by which they provide access to a territory and the movement they permit within their networks. The interaction between roads and access is perceived as being limited and dictated through property rights and laws. In this point of view, the system is composed of the structural components of access: roads, rights, and laws.

According to Cumming²² (2011) interactions between people and nature should be framed within a cohesive system which includes elements which are not only spatially located (the structural components), but also flow, interact, and are disturbed (the relational components). This system has an identity and a level of resilience and thus the components and their relations need to be maintained in relation to a given perspective and problem (Cumming 2011). Indeed, access is a complex issue which involves the promotion of other social, cultural, and environmental values (Ribot and Peluso 2003). Property and access are a personal issue which falls beyond the realm of laws (Krueckeberg 1995). As mentioned in Ribot and Peluso's (2003) theory of access, access is actually the ability to benefit from things including material objects as well as persons, institutions, and symbols. According to the theory of access, there are many actors that seek to benefit from access. These actors interplay via social relations that are influenced by access mechanisms such as knowledge, technology, social identity, capital, labour, authority, and markets. The social relations between actors influence how access to resources is gained, controlled, and maintained. Social relations dictate access through a variety of means including interplaying norms, power, authority, property, and control over territorial occupational patterns and resource use. There are therefore complex and overlapping webs of relations and mechanisms which organize actors and their access to resources. Roads are only one of the many mechanisms involved in access. Roads are one of the technological mechanisms of access which will have multiple levels of an impact because they are involved in a web of social relations that shapes benefit flows. The changes in access brought about by the development of road networks need to be assessed through both structural and relational issues.²³

Community responses to roads are an important factor to consider in development efforts. According to Shindler et al. (2002)²⁴, forestry professionals need to understand how natural systems function and are sustained *as well as* how people interpret and respond to changes in forest settings, policy decisions, and management institutions. Community responses to roads may also help identify relational and structural issues especially those related to resource development, access, socio-environmental dynamics, and territorial competition for claims to the land. Some of the relational changes associated with road development may be classified by Turner et al. (2008) as invisible losses: impacts which are not widely recognized in decisions about resource planning and decision making because they are an indirect or cumulative result of management decisions or policies. The

invisible losses include: cultural/lifestyle losses, loss of identity, loss of self-determination and influence, emotional and psychological losses, loss of order in the world, knowledge losses, and indirect economic losses and lost opportunities (Turner et al. 2008)²⁵.

Northeast India is a frontier region situated in a geographically strategic location near the borders of the Indian sub-continent and has links with China, Bhutan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. The region is culturally and racially diverse from the rest of India. The diversity of culture has been brought about by the intermingling of people from countries such as China, Bhutan, Myanmar etc. There have also been significant socio-economic and religious influences on the North-eastern region from its neighbouring countries, which were manifested through various means, such as land routes, maritime contact etc. The numerous passes in the mountains and hills of Northeast India exhibit evidence that there existed strong socio-cultural and economic ties between Northeast India and the neighbouring countries. Through these land routes, people of all kinds, ranging from travellers and invaders to traders and adventurers, entered the region.

*"The frontier's numerous passes has received people from China and various parts of South East Asia, invasions took place and allowed trade relations to exist"*²⁶.

The frontier region has experienced considerable population movement from different directions. The region has maintained a few trade and migration routes with East and Southeast Asia. In the centuries before the advent of British in the region, there was a high degree of intermingling of various streams of people. People came from far away countries such as China, Mongolia, Thailand, Laos, Tibet, and Burma over a long period. As Bridget and Raymond Allchin rightly points out-

*"This North-eastern frontier region is often regarded as a colourful corridor between South and South East Asia because it has been receiving various races, languages, cultures, and religions from South East Asia and China making the region culturally and racially diverse"*²⁷.

Present Notion of Development and its Impact:

Apart from colonial development and its impact, the recent development of communication in this region has many implications. The Idu-Mishmi tribe, a very small population of Arunachal Pradesh, fears a demographic change because of the migration happens after the construction of a road in their areas. They speculate that the migrants will easily outnumber them and that this will lead to a loss of cultural and linguistic identity. At the same time, they also hope for positive changes such as greater market access, health care, education and jobs. The Mishmis have missed out on various economic benefits in the region since the 1950s. Another speculation of the local people is that bridges and roads that are supposed to help connect this region have actually been priorities for military and hydropower projects over local needs. As like Idu-Mishimi other small tribal communities such as the Tai-Khamtis, the Singphos, the Meyos – cannot contribute to the skill-based jobs for which the local inhabitants too. Otherwise, tribal communities will be left behind as doubly marginalised under the weight of such fast-paced development goals.

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