

Roadways in Colonial Jalpaiguri District

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During the colonial rule, i.e. prior independence, there had been significant developments in the roadways in Jalpaiguri. Before the advent of Britishers in Jalpaiguri, there existed but a few roads. The region towards the west of Teesta River, Duars had been a place of great importance as its name is derived from the word 'Dooar' which means door-Door to Bhutan. This region served as a gateway to Bhutan at five distinct doors or routes. In short, these routes connected North Bengal to Bhutan. Also in that period in Jalpaiguri researchers have discovered traces of roads (kutchas), one such road name 'Gosai Kamal' is still available in Chhipra village near Alipurduar, though those were in a very impoverished state. British officials Sanders and E.E. Lewis have also noted the same facts in their records. In one such report, dated 5th July, 1890 E.E. Lewis, Commissioner of Jalpaiguri stated, '*the sub division was an outline and remote one, containing but few roads*'.¹ During that time, the whole of Duars region was in a sensitive and unsettled state without proper means of roadway communication.

In due course of time, the colonial administration started taking active participation towards development of communication network in Jalpaiguri. The British authority found it a profitable venture in developing this province. In 1884, it was felt by the Deputy Commissioner of Jalpaiguri that the disbursement of fund for the improvement of communication system in the region would be 'good investment',² and in this context he suggested taking loans for reproductive public works. Now the question arises, why the colonial rulers planned for developing the communication system in this region. Well, there were certain crucial factors that worked as a driving force in developing the communication network of this region. Some of them are discussed here in brief –

Firstly, during that period, this region witnessed the Indo-Bhutan war fought consecutively in the past few years and as a measure of resistance, several cantonments of soldiers were placed in different places in Duars such as Alipurduar, Falakata, Maynaguri, Madarihat, Malbazar, Banarhaat, Binnaguri, Rajabhatkhawa³ etc. Proper roadways were required to be constructed as these places served as a check post against the Bhutanese soldiers so that further invasion could be prevented.

Secondly, Jalpaiguri was recognised as a new district as on 1st January 1869. This meant establishment of a new settlement area. Without proper roadways communication network this was not possible.

Thirdly, development of tea gardens in Jalpaiguri can also be said as a prominent factor as –a) Tea planters pressurised the British authorities for construction of suitable roadways that would facilitate them to carry on their business smoothly. The absence of the proper roads hindered their flourishing trade. These planters came forward with huge contributions for construction of public roads, and the colonial government extended a helping hand to them.⁴

b) Tea industry was new in that region which attracted a lot of people from different social and cultural background. They moved into Jalpaiguri in quest of new occupation.⁵

Fourthly, as already mentioned Duars was in a very unsettled condition, thus in the absence of proper roads, there was no trade at all. In the Western Duars, the eastern and western banks of Teesta River had its own distinct physical features which were very different from Baikunthapur Pargana and its

surrounding areas. To speak more clearly, this region was mainly covered with thick forest hemmed by the lesser hills of the Himalayan ranges which made this region difficult for human settlement. Only a handful of people dwelled here, who can be said as natives (aborigine). Production was scanty and whatever produced was used for consumption. Traders felt that with a proper communication network they could pressurize the local producers for an increased production so that the surplus could be exported outside⁶. Thus construction of planned roadways became necessary for enhancement of trade.

Again during that time the existing local kutchha roads were often unsuitable during the monsoons. In addition to this, river often changed its course sweeping away several places and routes. In **1911**, the following was published in the Grunning Report '*In 1905 the Raidak river deserted its bed and poured across the country to the west of it, sweeping out of existence five miles of the main road to Alipurduar, and making it impossible to reconstruct it on the former alignment. The flood of the 1906 cut the roads to pieces, and much time and money were required to restore communications*'⁷. Thus we can see that these factors altogether made the colonial authorities to work for development of a proper roadway network in Jalpaiguri.

Development of roads or transport network had always been a matter of special importance. But it got its full momentum with the rapid growing tea industry in Jalpaiguri region. The first tea garden was established in the year **1874-75**⁸. Later on in the year **1877**, twenty two new plots of land were leased for tea plantation. Needless to say, tea industry flourished so rapidly in the next few years that by **1895**, the number of newly raised tea gardens rose to 182. Also, it has been already told that the social and economic life of people in Jalpaiguri centered on tea plantation. So the gradual development of Jalpaiguri district, in colonial era, was a result of the growing tea industry which also meant significant development in the transport and communication network here.

Roads in colonial Jalpaiguri district

Let us discuss from the point of inception. As we already know, the transport network had three major forms: - 1) Roadways 2) Railways and 3) Waterways, of which the colonial authorities gave more privilege towards development of roadways. For the smooth extension and maintenance of the roadways, the district Deputy Commissioner handed over the entire responsibility to the Public Works Department and Local Management⁹. There were both types of roadways-Metalled (pucca) as well as unmetalled (kutchha). In **1848**, Dr.Campbell prepared a report whereby he mentioned about the following unmetalled roads in 'Jellypeegauri' now Jalpaiguri¹⁰.

1. One road connecting Bodaganj, Rangdhamali, Haldibari, Domar , Dimla and stretched upto Rangpur (Rangpur now in Bangladesh).
2. From Jalpaiguri via Berubari Singh road went upto Boda and Panchagarh.
3. There were roads connecting Bhajanpur and Panchagarh to Rajganj.
4. A road that stretched from Maynaguri to Rangpur.

It is necessary to mention that Maynaguri was a place of great significance from administrative aspect. Since 1864, Maynaguri was the head quarter of entire Western Duars region before Jalpaiguri was made a fully fledged district¹¹. The office of the revenue collection of entire Duars region was in Maynaguri and it remained same even after the creation of Jalpaiguri district. At that time Maynaguri was connected to several places through the following roadways-

1. From Jalpaiguri to Maynaguri to Alipur via Falakata
2. Maynaguri to Nagrakata via Ramshai with a route length of 26 miles
3. Maynaguri to Domohani, 6 miles
4. Maynaguri to Helapakri, 11 miles
5. From Bhothaat to Chengrabanda, 7 miles
6. Maynaguri to Churabhandar via Jalpesh, 7.5 miles
7. From Ramshai Haat to Tundu Basti, 8 miles
8. From Aamguri to Daukimari, 7 miles
9. Ramshai to Gairkata, 12 miles
10. Maynaguri to Maulani Haat, 8.5 miles¹²

By **1869-70**, following was the network of roadways-

1. From Rangpur to Jalpaiguri via Kargir Haat, (zilla Board)
2. From Siliguri to Jalpaiguri via Phulbari and Baikunthapur
3. From Darjeeling to Tetulia
4. Phuntsholing to Maynaguri via Buxa
5. From Kalimpong to Dam Dim
6. Dabgram to Sikkim via Sevoke¹³

In **1870**, at the initiative of the District Deputy Commissioner, construction of three major roadways started-

1. Purnia to Darjeeling via Tetulia, 27 Miles (also known as Imperial Cart Road)
2. Jalpaiguri Town to Purnia-Darjeeling road, 29 Miles
3. Buxa Duar to Cooch Behar, 21 Miles¹⁴

The above mentioned roads stood very useful as they were all weather roads which meant it was used by both cattle and human all throughout the year. The Deputy Commissioner entrusted the responsibility of maintenance and repair of these roads and dams with the local administration. The expense of maintenance of the roads in the entire Duars region was met by the Government Estate Improvement Fund or Western Duars Market Fund. With reference of this context, it is important to mention here that out of the total expenditure of Rs.7000 made for the construction of Maynaguri Tehsil Jorda Bridge, Rs.5000 was provided by the Market fund¹⁵. At the same time local management played a crucial role in the development and expansion of roadways. But during rainy seasons, these network of roadways collapsed, which was a usual matter then. There was only expansion of 77 miles which can be highlighted as follows-

1. Jalpaiguri to Maynaguri - 07 Miles
2. Maynaguri to Dhupguri - 13 Miles
3. Dhupguri to Falakata - 12 Miles
4. Falakata to Alipur - 22 Miles
5. Alipur to Sankosh- 23 Miles

Total = 77 Miles ¹⁶

On critically examining the above mentioned data we can conclude that the development of the roadways promptly started soon after the establishment of Jalpaiguri District. The district administration took active part in the expansion and maintenance of the roadways in Jalpaiguri and kept a close watch upon its progress. This can be well understood from the following example in which in 1870, in a report of Deputy Commissioner, the following extract was found, *'That portion of the*

road between Jalpaiguri town and Phalakata was in very good orderFrom Phalakata ,however, eastwards to Haldibari it is not a good condition, and carts are only able to pass along it in the cold and dry seasons'¹⁷. Thus it is clear that the colonial administrator kept a close watch and also monitored the projects with vigilance.

But the expansion of roadways reached its peak in **1905-1906**, especially in the Duars region; nine major roadways were constructed by the Public Works Department in those regions which were under colonial administration in Alipurduar. These roads were-

1. Lataguri –Matiali Road, 19 miles long
2. Ramshai-Sulkapara Road, 10 miles long
3. Sulkapara-Thaljhora Road, 8.5 miles long
4. Nagrakata Feeder Road, 1 mile long
5. Banarhat-Chamurchi Road, 6.25 miles long
6. Ramshai-Gaikata Road, 12 miles long
7. Gaikata-Birpara Road, 7.5 miles long
8. Gaikata-Dhupguri Road, 8.25 miles long
9. Gaikata-Binnaguri Road, 4.5 miles long¹⁸

It is also important to mention here that apart these nine roads, several other roads were also constructed in western Duars. These roads were constructed at the initiative of District Board in the years from **1900** to **1911**. Following are the names of those roads-

1. Dam Dim to Fagu Tea Garden
2. Hantapara Tea Garden to Falakata
3. Rajabhatkhawa station to Cooch Behar Rail Station
4. Buxa Military Station to Cooch Behar
5. Jayanti-Raidak Road
6. Bhalka Pargana to Chokchoka¹⁹

Roads under Baikunthapur Estate:

Now let us speak about Baikunthapur estate. During that time Baikunthapur was connected to Cooch Behar by an old road named '**Deomali**'²⁰. The origin of this road was at Cooch Behar which went through Chilapata forest, Nolarajar Gadh via Khagen Haat, Ramsai, Singimari, Rangdhamali, Sanyasi Kata to Ambari-Falakata via Siliguri. This was the oldest known road in Baikunthapur. After the commencement of the Sinchula Treaty, Dalimkot came under the province of Darjeeling in 1867²¹. Also it was said that Dalimkot had connection with Baikunthapur Rajbari. Again from Rajbari ,Dalimkot stretched upto Odlabari through Paharpur, Rangdhamali via Bodaganj.

The road that stretched from Jalpaiguri Jail to present Rajbari known as '**Dalimkot**'. The plan and construction was initiated by the District Board in the year **1890**²². In the beginning it was unmetalled. It is necessary to mention here that the present Sevoke road was earlier known as '**Teesta Valley Road**'²³. This route run along Tetulia, Phulbari and stretched up to '**Bagh Pul**'(Coronation Bridge),then in the 1890. At that time Siliguri was under Jalpaiguri, Baikunthapur, not under Darjeeling²⁴. In the year **1890** further initiative was taken to construct a few more roadways in the Baikunthapur Pargana about which was first discussed in the letters of Promotha Nath Ghosal²⁵. It mentioned about the following roads .

1. From Jalpaiguri to Rangdhamali
2. From Rajbari palace to Paharpur

3. Jalpaiguri Barnish to Gour Gram

Under Baikunthapur estate, the responsibility of construction, expansion and maintenance of roads was entrusted with the District Board, Union Board or the Local Board. They also received immense support and help from the Raikot Raj Fanindra Dev Raikot²⁶. Roads such as Rajganj to Chawlhati, Rajganj to Baikunthapur were all constructed at his initiative which was later on more developed by the Local Board.

Road construction under Municipality, Jalpaiguri:

Progressive expansion of roads in Jalpaiguri actually started after the municipality Board was established which was in the year **1885**. At that time municipal board had access to only a limited area of 3.5 sq.k.m. The area under the Jalpaiguri municipal board was maintained by the district or municipal board. At that time the board covered only seven wards. In the later years the area of influence of the board increased and along with it its field of operation too.

From the past records of the municipal board, it is known that out of the several function performed by the board , the most important work was to developed a better communication network in that area and maintenance and repair of old roads. For the year **1885-86** and **1886-87**, the financial records of the municipal board showed the income and expenditure of those financial years whereby Rs.200 was allotted for maintenance of roads and Rs 91.14 for construction of new roads²⁷. From these records, it is clear that in **1885-86**, a few new roads were constructed. However the names of those roads are not available. In this connection special attention may be given to a plan proposed by the municipal Board in the year **1911** whereby it stated for financial assistance for the maintenance and repair of some old roads²⁸. Name of those roads are highlighted as follows-

1. Kamarpara Road
2. Ukilpara Road
3. Road No. 21-connecting Silliguri & Boda Road
4. Telipara Road
5. Karala Bank Road
6. Road to Club to Teesta River Bank
7. Road No.15
8. Road No.16
9. Station Kachhari Road, **1885**²⁹

From the above discussion we can conclude that the fund which was raised in the year 1911 was utilized for construction and maintenance of several roads starting from year 1885 to 1911. In the later years several new roads were constructed. With reference to this context, it is evident to say that in **1936**, the roads of Pahari Para was unmetalled, whereas there was a complete absence of a proper road in the Natun Para. Similarly the roads of Sen Para, 'Khen Para' then, were also unmetalled. Again to the north of the present Zilla school there existed a road that connected Balapara to Teesta Ghat³⁰.

From **1936** and hence the area or the field of work of the Municipal Board expanded leading to more gradual development and construction of new roads³¹. During this time following roads were constructed-

1. Mess House Road
2. Teesta Bank Road(Now Hakimpara road)
3. European Club Road

4. Jagodindro Deb Raikot Road
5. Serpentine Road
6. Mohanto Para Road
7. Police Line Road

In **1968**, a massive devastating flood occurred, wiping out Jalpaiguri, in which all the official documents and records of the Municipal Board were destroyed. Due to this reason, all the relevant information about the Jalpaiguri Municipal Board after 1936 regarding network of roadways couldn't be provided with authenticity. After Independence, the scenario changed, more new roads were constructed but its foundation was laid with the establishment of Jalpaiguri District.

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