

DEVELOPMENT OF TRANSPORT AND COMMUNICATION SYSTEM IN GOALPARA DURING COLONIAL PERIOD -AN ANALYSIS



Diganta Kumar Boroowa *¹✉

*¹ Assistant Professor, Department of History ADP College, Nagaon India

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ABSTRACT

This paper tries to study the development of modern transportation systems in the Goalpara. Assam being the gateway to the other states of the North Eastern Region of the country, the need for development of transport and communication in the state is of vital importance for speedy economic development of the region. Due to its geographical location, transport has been a major bottleneck in the process of economic progress of the state. The transport and communication is a part and parcel for the economic development of a state. The transport system made the dealings very close between producers and consumers. Every old account of Assam suggested that most of the travelers used horses, ponies, elephants, bullock cart, palanquins and country-boats as a means of transportation and communication. The existing infrastructure and facilities of transport are not adequate to meet the requirements. To meet the demands of the new modes of resource extraction, the British colonial rulers developed transportation system in Goalpara.

Goalpara was a gateway of the eastern countries as well as transit point of Bengal and Assam. In early, only river courses became the means of communication for trade activities. The trade facilities of Goalpara district compelled the colonial administrator to build up good transport system. Government of British India constructed roads, railways line, tram line and provided steam service on the river for the purpose of trade activities in the district.

1. INTRODUCTION

Goalpara was the gateway of the eastern countries as well as other parts of India. In colonial period, Goalpara became a transit point from where Bengal goods were supplied to different part of Assam. European merchants, trade agencies of the British East India Company and Indian merchants stationed at Goalpara to carry out considerable trade with the traders of Assam. The trade agencies of British East India Company exported salt, broad clothes and others finish products to Assam and they imported muga, silk, ivory, gold dust and other raw materials from Assam. Assam did not produce salt since ancient days; therefore, Assam had to depend on salt of Bengal, which was affordable and cheap in price. In order to carry salt trade, many private traders and trade agencies of British East India Company came to Goalpara. Salt was kept in the warehouse of Goalpara, Jugighopa and Rangamati from where salt was supplied to Assam.

The British East India Company enjoyed the de-facto authority over Bengal, Bihar and Orissa after obtaining the Dewani right from Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II, which brought trade contact with neighboring independent or

semi-independent states. In the eastern frontier of Bengal, there were five independent states namely Koch Behar, Assam (the Brahmaputra Valley), Jaintia, Cachar and Arakan.¹

Goalpara district was the western most district of Chief Commissionership of Assam. Goalpara turned into a district which was known as North East Rangpur in 1822 under Regulation X of 1822. By the treaty of Sinculla, all Bhutan Duars came under British dominion. Eastern Duars were added to the district of Goalpara. In 1867, Goalpara district came under newly created Koch Behar Commissionership. Finally, Goalpara district was incorporated to new province of Assam in 1874. Undoubtedly, Goalpara had affinity with Bengal, its economy and culture was more akin to Bengal than Assam.²

Goalpara which was situated on the east of Koch Behar and west of Assam came under the trade influence of British East India Company. For the purpose of the collection of revenue and expansion of trade towards eastern countries, Goalpara was made a Thana under the Rangpur district of Bengal Government in 1813 circa. During that time, present Goalpara town maintained steamer ghat where considerable import and export of goods had been carried out. Since the time of Mughal rule, Goalpara and Jugighopa upheld military and trade outpost under the Subah of Bengal.

The British East India Company always attempted to establish their trade centre in Goalpara for conducting business with the traders of Assam. However, it was not possible to control the trade of Goalpara because of far location from Calcutta. As a result of which, Robert Clive founded a trade committee known as "Society for Trade" in 1765 with the view to carry out trade in remote places of Bengal. On November 1st of 1765, the trade society appointed eleven agents to transact their business in different frontier areas of Bengal. Out of eleven, three agents namely Hugh Baillie, Tom Lewis, Hargreaves were appeared at Goalpara, Rangpur, Hargreaves and Chialmari respectively.³ Hugh Baillie already was an important trade agent who carried out salt trade on behalf of Henry Vansittart till 1763 before the appointment as a trade agent under Society for Trade.⁴ When Henry Vansittart was succeeded by Robert Clive, Hugh Baillie was posted to Goalpara. After some year, Nawab Mir Kasim imposed strict duties on articles of inland trades and suppressed all illegal trade of Europeans in Goalpara. But Hugh Baillie had been carrying regular trade in Goalpara without any hindrances by paying regular duties to the Nawab of Bengal. No doubt, the agency of Hugh Baillie at Goalpara supplied inland articles to Assam and imported large quantity of betel nut and tobacco from Assam.⁵ Goalpara, Jugighopa and Rangamati were three principal commercial centres in the district of Goalpara where the trade agencies of Company and merchants of Bengal conducted their trade with Assam traders. Goalpara town was situated on the south bank of the Brahmaputra. Besides, Jugighopa and Rangamati were situated on the north bank of Brahmaputra River, which formed as eastern boundary of British Bengal. Important transit point was situated at Hadira which situated on the side of Assam, opposite to Goalpara town. It was known as Kandahar Chowky or Assam Chowky.⁶ During the medieval period, most important route was Gohain Kamal Ali which started from Koch Behar to Narayanpur in Lakhimpur district of Assam. It was constructed during the reign of Koch king Nar Narayan and completed in 1547 A.D.⁷ Besides, the Duars or mountain passes namely Bijni, Sidli, Chirang, Ripu and Guma Duars were the outlets through the Bhutan to Tibet and China.⁸ The trade facilities of Goalpara compelled the colonial power to develop the transport system in Goalpara. British India developed modern transport system for doing trade in various parts of Goalpara district. There were four types of transport system in Goalpara namely Waterway, Roadway, Railway and Tramway.

Since ancient time rivers played an important means of transport system. The Brahmaputra river played an important role as a means of communication in Assam since the time immemorial. Several rivers of Goalpara district were also used for transportation.⁹ The traders of Goalpara district utilised country made boats for transportation

¹ A. C. Banerjee, *The Eastern Frontier of British India 1784-1826*, Calcutta, 1946, p. 1

² Barnali Sarma, *Urbanization in the Brahmaputra Valley during Colonial period*, Unpublished Ph. D Thesis submitted to Gauhati University, Guwahati, 2010, p. 83

³ Committee of Trade to Clive, Nov 1, 1765, committee's fourth report App.41, ASA, pp. 15 & 31

⁴ S. K Bhuyan, *Early British Relation with Assam*, EBH Publisher, Guwahati, 2013, p.94

⁵ Ibid, p. 68

⁶ Ramesh Chandra Kalita, *Assam in the Eighteen Century*, Omsons, New Delhi, 1985, p. 58

⁷ D. P. Boroah (Ed.), *Assam Gazetteers Goalpara District*, Government of Assam, Guwahati, 1979, p. 247

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid, p. 247

of goods for internal and external trade.¹⁰ The Brahmaputra river course connected with Calcutta via Jennai to Pabna then Ganga and finally to Calcutta through Matabanga or Jellengi.¹¹

British India navigated steamers and large native boats in Brahmaputra river throughout the year.¹² In 1848, British East India Company started steamer service in Assam between Calcutta and Gauhati. The steamer service trial was succeeded after long days of experiment. In 1860, India General Steam Navigation Company entered into contract to run pair of vessels for six days in a week. A daily mail steamers service was also started between Dibrugarh and Dhubri in 1884. The Steamer services between Dhubri to Jatrampur connected with the railway line which made journey to Calcutta.¹³ There were four major ghats in Brahmaputra river, they were Dhubri, Bilasipara, Goalpara and Dologama where all steamers, passenger boats and large cargo boats were stationed. Few small steamers were also used for mail service from Dhubri to Gauhati and from Gauhati to Dhubri.¹⁴ The cargos were carried by smaller passenger boats as well as larger steamers. Small steam ferries also ran across Dhubri, Fakirganj, Goalpara and Jugighopa.¹⁵ All steamer services were managed by India General Steam Navigation Company.¹⁶ So, river transport played a vital role in maintaining trade relation between Assam and rest of India. Assam - Calcutta service was the principal water transport route which started from Dibrugarh to Calcutta via Goalpara town, Jugighopa and Dhubri of the district of Goalpara.¹⁷ Many tributaries of the Brahmaputra river were also playing an important role for transporting goods to the remote places of Goalpara district.

Several rivers which were originated from Bhutan Hills also played an important role for transportation of agricultural products and timber from the northern part of Goalpara district to major trade centres. The timber logs were floated down by Gurfela, Gongia, Longa river to Sapatgram timber depot and then by Tipkai river to Bagribari sales depot.¹⁸ The river Gadadhar transported timber of Guma reserve forest to Dhubri sales depot.¹⁹ The Sonkosh also played an active role for transporting of timbers and other goods from the northern part of district. The Saralbhanga, Gaurang and Champamati rivers were also used for transportation of timbers from the Sidli-Chirang Duars to Bilasipara.²⁰

Two roadways from Bengal to Assam passed through Goalpara district. First road was started from Murshidabad, Malda, Dinajpur, Rungpur, Bagwah to Goalpara which was recognized as Dak (postal route) line of Calcutta and second road ran via Dacca, Dumary, Puculoe, Jumalpore, Singimari to Goalpara but it used to be blocked in the rainy season.²¹ All roads of Goalpara district were in deplorable condition during 1853. In 1868, Public Work Department was established to construct roads with the help of member nominated by Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara district. All major roads of Goalpara district came under Public Works Department. Assam Trunk Road had entered through the district of Kamrup to Dhupdhora in Habraghat Pargana of Goalpara district.²² In 1871, the construction of Assam Trunk Road was completed up to Agia of Mechpara Pargana.²³ During 1875-76, 74 kilometres of first class road, about 55.4 kilometres of second class road and about 480 kilometres of third class road were constructed in Goalpara district.²⁴ A committee was formed in each district under Assam Local Rates Regulation of 1879 to supervise the expenditure of road construction. In 1882, this Committee was replaced by Sub-Divisional Local Board.²⁵ Sub-Divisional Local Board was entrusted the duties of maintaining all roads except few major roads.²⁶ A distance of sixty-four miles public road between Goalpara and Singimari came under the Public

¹⁰ Ibid,

¹¹ Ibid

¹² B. C. Allen, E.A. Gait, C.C.H. Allen H.F. Howard, Gazetteer of Bengal and North-East India, Mittal publication, New Delhi, 2012, p. 520

¹³ B. C. Allen, Assam District Gazetteers, Goalpara, Assam Government Press, Guwahati, 2012, pp. 97- 98

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ W.W. Hunter, The Imperial Gazetteer of India, Vol. V, Second Edition, Trubner & Co, London, 1885, p. 118

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ D. P. Boroah, Op. cit, p. 261

¹⁸ N. L. Bor, A Working plan for the Forest of Goalpara Division, Western Circle of Assam, 1929-30 to 38-39, Assam Government Press, Shillong, 1939, p. 14

¹⁹ M. N. Jacob, A Working Plan for the Forest Reserves of the Kochugaon Division, 1939-40 to 1948-49, Part-I, Assam Government Press, Shillong, 1949, p. 14

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Jonh M. Cosh, Topography of Assam, Bengal Military Orphan Press, Calcutta, 1837, p.9

²² W. W. Hunter, Statistical Account of Assam Vol. II, Trubner & Co., London, 1879, pp. 72-73

²³ Ibid, pp. 72 - 73

²⁴ Ibid, p. 73

²⁵ D. P. Boroah, Op. cit, p. 248

²⁶ Ibid

Work Department.²⁷ Twenty-six miles of old public road between Dhubri and Kerbari was reconstructed at the expense of Imperial fund under the supervision of Sub divisional officer of Dhubri. It was connected to Bengal.²⁸

Several local roads under Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara district were Goalpara to Koraihari, Goalpara to Jira, Goalpara to Lakshmipur, Jogighopa to Dotma and Bijni to Raha (an adjacent place of Kamrup District). On the other hand, Bijni to Raha road was constructed by government officers who held the office of Bijni estate.²⁹

Other roads that existed in Goalpara district were Damra to Dhupdhara, Damra to Salmara, Goalpara to Nibari, Kitkibari to Jira, Jogighopa to Raha, Salmara to Bijni, Jughigopa to Salmara, Jughigopha to Bilasipara via Salemcha, Hakma and Bilasipara to Gauripur estate. Raha to Bijni road was extended to Haldibari in Western Duar during Anglo-Bhutan war.³⁰

There were two Trunk roads on the north bank of Brahmaputra which came under Public Works Department. A Trunk road started from Dainimari Band of Sonkosh which passed through Kochugaon, Patgaon, Sidli, Chapaguri, Bijni and Raha and another Trunk road started from the Jugighopa which ran through Kotaibari, North Salmara and Chapaguri.³¹

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Dhubri Local Board also constructed two principal roads which started from Dhubri to Kochugaon passing through Balajan, Paglahat, Tamarhat, Gossaigaon and Kochugaon. Another 16 mile road started from Talguri Kali temple of Chapar to Sildi which passed through Bidyapur, Basugaon and then connected to North Trunk Road at Sidli.³⁴ Dhubri Local Board also maintained several roads of the district. The roads of Gauripur - Raha passed through Manipur, Bilasipara, Salkosa, Chapar, Moligaon, North Salmara and Raha.³⁵ The roads of Bilasipara and Bogribari joined together at Sapatgram and then it proceeded to Tutsibil, Baoraguri and Gossaigaon taking the name of Sapatgram-Gossaigaon Road. Many of minor roads of Kokrajhar, Agomony, Sasargaon, Dotma, Tipkai and Golokgonj were came under the responsibility of Dhubri Local Board.³⁶

A road which started from Bilasipara was divided into two branches i.e. western and eastern roads. The western road was connected to Fakiragram, Dotma, and Serfanguri and in eastern road linked to Kokrajhar, Haltugaon, Gurubasha.³⁷ On the other hand, there was a road which ran from Jugighopa to North Salmara till it met the Trunk Road near the cross point of Ai river.³⁸ The road on the south bank of Brahmaputra river was called South Trunk Road which ran through Kakripara, Singimari, Patakata, Fakirganj, Lengrabhita, Lakhipur, Baida, Agia, Krishnai, Rangjuli and Dhupdhara.³⁹ The Goalpara town was connected by Trunk road of Agia.⁴⁰ Damra to Dalgoma road was also important road of the district.⁴¹

The demand of Assam tea in European markets compelled the British India to construct a metre gauge railway line through the district of Goalpara.⁴² The proposal for construction of a railway line from Golokganj to Guwahati

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ W. W. Hunter, Op. cit, 1879, p.73

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Assam District Gazetteers, Supplement to Vol. III, Goalpara, Assam Secretariat Press, Shillong, 1914, pp.6 - 7

³² W. W. Hunter, Op. cit, 1879, p.73

³³ Assam District Gazetteers, Supplement to Vol. III, Goalpara, Assam Secretariat Press, Shillong, 1914, pp. 6 - 7.

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ B. C. Allen, Op. cit, pp. 97 -99

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Assam District Gazetteers, Supplement to Vol. III, Op. cit, pp. 6 - 7

⁴⁰ B. C. Allen, Op. cit, pp. 97 & 100

⁴¹ ibid

⁴² Dr. Shyam Bhadra Medhi, Transport System and Economic Development in Assam, Publication Board of Assam, Guwahati, 1978, p. 66
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was unanimously agreed by Chief Commissioner of Assam and Government of British India.⁴³ On 4 May, 1900, Chief Commissioner of Assam issued an order to Director of Railway for preparation of a route. The Office of Director of Railway was ready to establish railway for providing better transport system in Goalpara district. In 1902, Dhubri was connected by fifteen miles metre gauge railway line of Eastern Bengal Railway which entered into Goalpara district through Bishkoa Nadi to Golokganj, Balajan, Gauripur and then to Dhubri.⁴⁴ In the same year, railway department also conducted survey for the construction of Dhubri -Guwahati line. The Director of Railway proposed two lines for the construction of railway in Goalpara district. The northern route started from Golokganj which passed through Parbatjhora forest, Bijni, Bhabanipur, Rangia and Amingaon and southern route started from Gauripur to Bagribari, Bilashipara, Chapar, North Salmara, Barpeta, Hajo and Amingaon.⁴⁵

On 11 September, 1902, Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India issued an order to George Hamilton, Secretary of the State, for the construction of Dhubri - Guwahati line and sanctioned Rs.92, 31,245.47 ,Office of Secretary of State sanctioned an amount Rs. 10 lakhs for the construction of Dhubri- Guwahati line in 1903.⁴⁶ Very quickly, the railway line was completed up to Bijni in 1905 and the line was completed up to Amingaon which is opposite to Pandu in 1912.⁴⁷ The new line between Dhubri and Guwahati was opened for traffic in 1913.50 Amingaon became a western terminus of Assam-Bengal Railway after the completion of 151 miles length track from Golokganj to Guwahati.⁴⁸

Interval stations were established at Golokgonj, Basbari, Tipkai, Sapatgram, Fakiragram, Sisapani, Kokrajhar, Basugaon, Abhayapuri and Bijni.⁴⁹ Golokgonj station became a junction point of Dhubri - Guwahati line.⁵⁰

Tramway was established by forest department in the erstwhile Goalpara district for the extraction of Sal timber from reserve forests. Sal timber was in a great demand for using as a sleeper for railway track. In early colonial period, Sal timbers were dragged by elephants and bullock carts up to river ghat and then transported by river to Dhubri. Sal trees were available in the inaccessible areas of Goalpara forest. So, forest department set up a Tram line in Goalpara forest for extracting more timber from the remote areas.

Tramway played an important role in transporting timber to sales depot from the forest. The proposal for the establishment of Tramway in Goalpara forest went back to Gustav Mann, who expressed about profitability of Tram project. In 1897, wood sleeper operation commenced in order to supply to Eastern Bengal Railway for line extension from Mogalhat to Dhubri but the operation proved that the exploitation of round timber for Bengal market was more profitable than the procurement of the yield in the form of sleepers.⁵¹

Railway department required heavy hardwood timber sleepers like Sal (*Shorea Robusta*) to set the track on earth, which was available in Kochugaon of Goalpara division.⁵² The forest of Goalpara had been partially exploited in estimated yield. The supply of timber sleeper was the most profitable one to the forest department but did not extract the timber from thick jungle due to lack of communication. In the month of October 1899, Mr. Chester, Conservator of Assam put forward a proposal to purchase a light portable Tram for the development of departmental timber operation.⁵³ The proposal was looked in by Mr. Henry Cotton, Chief Commissioner of Assam who gladly supported the proposal for introduction of Tramway in Goalpara forest despite of fear of more expenses.⁵⁴

Chief Commissioner of Assam always tried to grasp the opportunities of supplying Sal sleepers to railway authority and cut off Pyinkado sleeper market of Burma. Pyindako wood sleeper of Burma was durable than other wood but it cost was too high. It was not possible to bring all Pyindako sleepers from Burma which required more energy. He believed that the forest department of Goalpara could earn good profit from Sal sleepers, if sold at Rs. 2 - 6 annas per sleeper. He also observed that the prices of sleepers were likely to increase if Eastern Bengal Railway extended up to Goalpara district for taping the reserve forest.⁵⁵ Mr. Cotton did not face any difficulty in getting the

⁴³ H. K. Barpujari (Ed.), *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, Vol. IV, Publication Board of Assam, Guwahati, 2007, p. 323

⁴⁴ D. P. Boroah, Op. cit, p. 259

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ Sarah Hilaly, *The Railway in Assam 1885-1947*, Pilgrims Publishing, Varanasi, 2007, p. 157

⁴⁷ Ibid, pp. 158 - 159

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 157

⁴⁹ B. C. Allen, Op. cit, pp. 97 - 98

⁵⁰ D. P. Boroah, Op. cit, p. 259

⁵¹ E. S. Carr, *Progress Report of Forest Administration in the Province of Assam for the Years 1903-04*, Shillong, 1904, Appendix, p.1

⁵² A. C. Singha, *Colonial Legacy and Environmental Crisis in North East India*, EBH,Guwahati, 2012, p. 20

⁵³ Extract from the Proceeding of the Chief Commissioner of Assam, in the General Department, No. 203R., dated Shillong, the 23rd January, 1900. Resolution on the Assam Forest Report for 1898-99, p. 2

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ Ibid

consent of Government of British India to set up a Tramway. After careful examination, a proposal was made for installation of ten or twelve miles of portable Tram line. The proposal was duly sanctioned 14 lbs. 24 gauges with steel sleeper for affording sufficient portability and strengthened to work in hand.⁵⁶ The Government of British India granted Rs.15, 000 for laying down the light Tram line. Very modest mileage of two and half miles of Tram line was constructed in 1901-1902.⁵⁷ Tram carried water to the forests for supplying water to forest labourers who were felling and scantling the timber log in waterless forest tract. At the time of returning the Tram brought timbers from the remote forest and unloaded at Kochugaon from where the timbers were taken up to river side for floating down to respective sales depots.⁵⁸ In 1902, Imperial forest department purchased a portable Tram at the rate of Rs.16, 125 for timber transportation. In the same year, Government of British India sanctioned another 2 ½ miles extension of the existing line. The cost of ½ miles Tram line installation was Rs. 10,042 and 6 chains were fixed in the line at the cost of Rs.172. In 1903, total length of portable Tram line was six miles. During that year, total expenditure for development of Tramway was amounted Rs. 35,171.⁵⁹

At beginning, Tramway was set up from Kochugaon to Hel block, which ran between Pekua & Hel rivers. Goalpara Forest Division (present Kochugaon Forest Division) had a fame of having one Tramway in the eastern region of the country.

Tramway was extensively used for carrying labours, materials, drinking water, logs in the inaccessible forest of Ripu reserve. Tramway which passed through the remote forest areas of Kochugaon Forest Division undoubtedly indicated the proper utilization of the forest's wealth. The establishment of Tramway was mainly connected with Central Range, Sanfan Range and Logging Range with full infrastructures.⁶⁰ Tramway was not only useful for extraction and transportation of timber from the forests but also supplied water to labourers who were working in the waterless Bhabar tract during summer and cold session. So, Tram became as lifeline for the labourers. Several attempts were made in the Bhabar tract to get water by digging wells but the presence of large boulder beds in 30 feet deep shown great hindrance. Water wells were sunk near the Hel river where water was found at a reasonable depth.⁶¹

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

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None.

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⁵⁶ E. S. Carr, Progress Report of Forest Administration in the Province of Assam for the Years 1903-04, Shillong, 1904, Appendix, p.1

⁵⁷ A Working plan for the Forest of Goalpara Division, Western Circle of Assam, 1929-30 to 38-39, Assam Secretariat Press, Shillong, 1939, p. 18.

⁵⁸ Quinquennial Review of Forest Administration in the Province of Assam for the year 1919-20 to 1923-24, Assam Secretariat Press, Shillong, 1924, p. 2

⁵⁹ E. S. Carr, Op. cit, p. 1

⁶⁰ Memory of Tramway, Extracted article from Ishron Narzary, Retd. D.F.O, Kochugaon Division.

⁶¹ N. L. Bor , A Working plan for the Forest of Goalpara Division, Western Circle of Assam, 1929-30 to 38-39, Assam Government press, Shillong, 1939, p. 14

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