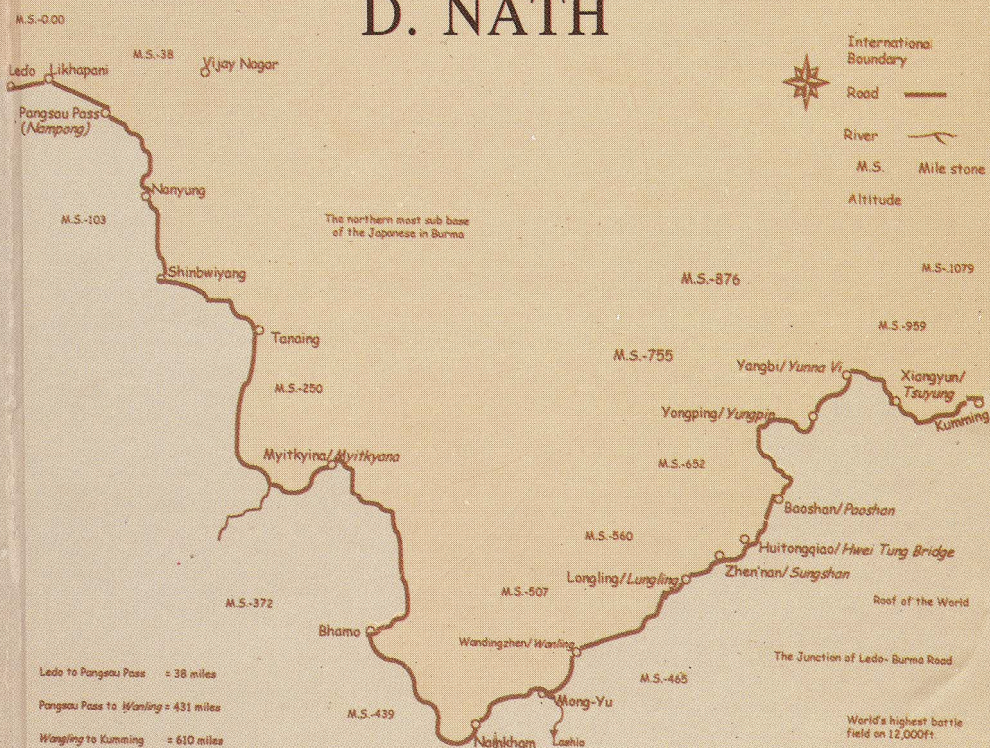


REOPENING OF THE STILWELL ROAD

PROSPECTS AND PROBLEMS

Edited by
D. NATH



The present work contains the papers presented in a national seminar on the subject 'Reopening of the Stilwell Road: Prospects and Problems' organized by the Department of History, Dibrugarh University, in November 2002, under the auspices of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Kolkata. While a few papers throw light on the historical background of the Stilwell Road, others analyse the prospects and problems, such as, economic and political, including regional cooperation, insurgency and security of the region, if this historic road is reopened. It is the contention of these papers that reopening of this road will usher in a new era of development in the north-eastern region of India.

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DR. D. NATH is Professor of History, Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh, Assam. Dr. Nath has authored a number of books of which his *History of the Koch Kingdom: 1515-1615*, *History of Assam*, and *Modern History of Auniati Satra: The Great Monastery of Assam*, are well known. He also has to his credit a number of research papers in both English and Assamese dealing with social and cultural aspects of the north-east of early medieval times.

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MAULANA ABUL KALAM AZAD
INSTITUTE OF ASIAN STUDIES
567, Diamond Harbour Road,
Behala, Kolkata - 34
Ph:24681396, Fax:[033] 24684634
E-mail: makaias@vsnl.net
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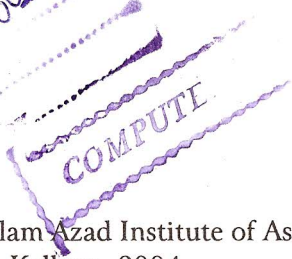
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PREFACE

India had social, cultural, economic and political links with the countries of east and south-east Asia since remote past which it maintained through few trade and migration routes leading from its north-eastern point to Burma (present Myanmar) and China and to other countries of the region. One of those overland routes originates at Ledo in Upper Assam and passing through the territories of the present Arunachal Pradesh reached Mytkina in the Hukoong Valley in Myanmar through the Pangchau Pass on the Patkai. Assamese chronicles bear testimony to the use of this route in the past by many Buddhist and Hindu missionaries to visit countries across the borders and by various immigrant groups entering the Brahmaputra Valley from China and Myanmar. The most well known group of such migrants were the Tai Ahoms who entered the Brahmaputra Valley in the early part of the 13th century and ruled Assam for six centuries at a stretch (1228-1826) till the close of the first quarter of the 19th century when it was taken over by the British after the Treaty of Yandaboo (February 1826).

For centuries, the route through the Patkai Pangchau Pass remained a wild natural path of hazardous journey till the Second World War when its importance was rediscovered, and the part from Mytkina in Burma to Ledo in Assam in India, was cleared and rebuilt under the direction of the American

General Joseph Warren Stilwell, also known as Vinegar Joe for his tactlessness (1883-1946), the Commanding General of All US Forces in China, Burma and India, and Chief of Staff under Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek) of All Allied Armies of the Chinese Theatre of Operations for transport of men and war materials. Thus it was for the first time during the War itself that coal-loaded trucks reached Kunming in China from Ledo in Assam in January 1945. A part of this road (57 kms.) lies within Indian territory, while 1,040 kms. pass through Myanmar and the rest 363 kms. through China. Unfortunately, in spite of its magnanimous importance to the people of this part of the globe, the territories in India and Myanmar through which this road passes have become the play ground of many insurgent groups in the post-War period, and that unfortunate experience led the two national governments of India and Myanmar to close down this road despite its economic, cultural, strategic and political importance. It is interesting that it was through and around this route that early people of Burma, Assam (including those of the present Arunachal Pradesh, notably the Singphos and the Khamtis) and China carried on their trade activities, mainly through barter system in their respective products; and Indian traders received silver bullion from Chinese traders. According to the early British records of the many routes across the mountain ranges connecting north-eastern part of India with Myanmar, the Stilwell Road passing through the Pangchau Pass on the Patkai was the only one through which goods in bundles could be transported. It is further to be noted that almost all the inhabitants living on both sides of the Pangchau Pass in India and Myanmar belong to the same racial stock, and therefore, bear the same cultural traits. This is possibly the reason as to why even after formally closing the road almost since after the Second World War, all informal social and economic relationships among them are known to have been maintained. It is clear that social, cultural

and economic life of those people are intrinsically interwoven, and therefore, closing down of the road has not been essentially effective. Many people in the north-east now believe that this historical link road between India and Myanmar, and through it between India and China and other countries of East and South-East Asia may play a very significant role in the social and economic development of this part of our country.

The Stilwell Road may be equally exploited for the increasing trade ties among the countries of South-East Asia and to explore further prospects of Indian trade with the region of East and South-East Asia. It is to be noted that the route between the production centres in India and the northern districts of Myanmar via India's north-east is much shorter than the route from Kolkata to Rangoon through sea.

Advocates of free-trade zones located in close proximity to international borders for export to Myanmar, South-East Asia and South-West China feel that identity assertion and narrow localism and misplaced theories of parochialism cannot fulfil the aspirations of modernizing societies of north-east India. They argue that the Stilwell Road should be reopened to maintain the traditional economic and cultural relations of the ethnic inhabitants living on both sides of the border across the Pangchau Pass. This will help materialize the Naga and Mizo urge for cementing their relationships with their cousins in Myanmar economically and culturally. It is further argued that it may wean away frustrated youths from making friendship with insurgency and inspire them to build a new and a cooperative commonwealth in which they have a major role to play.

There is a corner to think that the hope of economic development of the north-eastern region of India in particular and the entire country in general is high consequent to the opening of the Stilwell Road. At present volumes of India's exports to its neighbouring countries is very significant consisting of about 2.2 per cent of its exports. It is believed that information of a

free trade area in South-East Asia, like SAFTA, would boost up India's exports to many countries of this region. It is because the present information segment of the commodity outflow would then be regarded as India's exports to these countries resulting from the transportation facilities through short distance on land communications, and withdrawal or reduction of tariff on India's exports by these countries.

After the formation of SAFTA and consequent liberalization of trade between India and Myanmar, exports to Myanmar through north-eastern points is expected to increase, and if communication facilities improve, it would further accelerate. Similarly, trade with other countries of East and South-East Asia including China, Japan, Korea, Thailand and Indonesia would also increase in volumes. The proposed change in India's trade policy has generated high hopes in the north-eastern states which share common borders with a few countries of the SAFTA. It is argued that the tertiary sector would be developed in the region along with the increase in the export-import business, banking, insurance, and agency and exchange activities in the north-eastern states bordering SAFTA. Even the secondary sector has the possibility to prosper in this region as a few Indian producers would establish production units of their export oriented industries to avoid transport costs.

The north-eastern region of India itself is rich in certain sectors, such as tea, coal and other mineral resources. Although the present state of exploration, development and export of those items to the countries of East and South-East Asia is not appreciable, it may be increased after development of road transport facilities through the short-cut points. Even silk from China which is still imported to the markets of Assam through western routes may be easily obtained through the land routes in the north-eastern points. Economists opine that all communication networks would then receive sudden boost in the north-east if the Stilwell Road is opened and rebuilt to an

international standard, and that is the key point from where developments in the region would generate.

Besides, developments in social and cultural aspects too may be expected due to easy movement of peoples and their culture. Social ties which is, in any way, the key characters of the north-eastern peoples and those of East and South-East Asia, would be more refreshing and strong. Social scientists believe that if the Stilwell Road is opened and all kinds of developments take consequent to it, governments of all countries around the region would be able to tackle the problem of insurgency more successfully. Development of communication system and establishment of direct link road may bear the possibility of achieving a greater regional cooperation too and this would be a turning point in opening up of a new China-India and India-Myanmar relationships.

PROBLEMS

Opening of the Stilwell Road may bring in its trail a series of socio-political and economic problems to Assam and other states of the north-east. Free and easy communication systems connecting the region with the Golden Triangle connecting Myanmar, Hongkong and other lands may lead to the growth of illicit trade in narcotics and drug trafficking and contribute even to free passage of the lethal diseases like AIDS which may occur due to increase in volumes and frequency of transport from one to the other country. The possibility of increase in supply of arms and ammunitions by the various insurgent groups may also not be ruled out. Some corners even believe that re-opening of the Road may not necessarily give greater advantage to India to control South-East Asian commerce which may also affect its political interest.

Under the circumstances, a two-day national seminar was held in the Department of History, Dibrugarh University,

Dibrugarh, on 29 and 30 November 2003 which was sponsored by the Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Kolkata, in order to examine through extensive deliberations and cross questioning the pros and cons of the reopening of the Stilwell Road with participation of experts from various academic disciplines and departments of administration including representatives of governments, private enterprises, and trade and banking organizations. There were altogether twenty-five papers presented during the two-day deliberations in the seminar most of which were based on genuine research and experience although a few were in the form of abstracts, and two in form of explanatory points. The present volume consists of the papers presented in the different sessions of the seminar and accepted by the respective chairpersons for deliberations and scrutiny. While preparing the Press copy of the volume therefore those papers which we did not receive in full form are deleted; and the two papers presented in the form of explanatory points but which provoked much interest and deliberations in the house, have been put in form of appendices. The two-day deliberations resulted in drawing a recommendation favouring the reopening the historic road to the appropriate authorities. This recommendation has also been appended to this volume.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I take this opportunity to acknowledge my gratitude to the Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Kolkata, and its Director Prof Mahavir Singh who so kindly sponsored the Seminar on the *Reopening of the Stilwell Road – Prospects and Problems* indicating his and his Institute's interest in exploring the prospects of development of north-eastern region of the country. The Institute under the agies of Prof. Singh also took keen interest in publishing the present volume in order that 'such an important subject bearing relevance on the present context of developments' may be well publicised to the world academic communities and policy making bodies. In this context Prof. D. Kaushik, Chairman, Executive Council, MAKAIAS, Shri A.K. Ray, former Ambassador and presently Executive Council Member, MAKAIAS, and Dr. J.N. Phukan, formerly Professor and Head, Department of History, Guwahati University and presently Coordinator of the north-eastern programmes of the MAKAIAS, deserve my gratitude and thanks for their cooperation, guidance and help. It was exactly in the same degree of interest that my parent institute the Dibrugarh University and its present Vice-Chancellor Prof. K. Pathak and the Registrar Dr. K.K. Daka, encouraged the Organizing Committee by way of planning the academic schedule of the Uiversity for the period to accommodate the seminar. Prof.

Pathak was the Chairman of the Organizing Committee, and presided over the Inaugural Session of the Seminar.

It will be my sincere duty to accord my thanks to Sri Prithibi Majhi, Honourable Speaker, Assam Legislative Assembly, who kindly accepted our invitation and attended the Seminar as the Chief Guest and delivered a written speech containing his views. I must equally thank Sri C.C. Singpho, Minister of Information and Public Relations and Veterinary and Animal Husbandry, Government of Arunachal Pradesh, who incidentally belongs to the tribe inhabiting both the sides of India-Myanmar border, for gladly accepting our invitation and kindly inaugurating the Seminar. Thanks are also due to Sri Pradyut Bordoloi, Minister of State for Forest, Government of Assam, and Sri Pradeep Hazarika, Ex-Minister of Transport, Government of Assam, who not only attended the Seminar as our invited guests but also presented interesting papers in its first business session. It will be my humble duty to extend my thanks to all the scholars who presented papers in the Seminar and are past of this book. I must also thank Dr. J.K. Gogoi, Professor, Department of Economics, Dibrugarh University, who all along helped me in the process of organizing the Seminar. I am sincerely grateful to the media persons, the Press, and the north-east T.V. in particular which took the subject of the Seminar as significant and therefore gave due publicity to it. Last but not the least in importance is the cooperation and help which I obtained from the staff members of my faculty – Dr. A. Hussain, Dr. (Mrs.) Jahnabi Gogoi Nath, Dr. B. Barua, V.K. Dutta, C.K. Sarma, Nivedita Sarma and Pallavita Das, who deserve my sincere thanks for their cooperation and help in organizing the Seminar.

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