

## ROAD SYSTEM IN ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL ASSAM

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In ancient times Assam had a good link with other regions of India. Population structure was predominantly Hindu with a good deal of tribal elements. This population was familiar with the soil and they had their technological expertise for the proper utilisation of the soil and its resources. Road building was known. From ancient times this remained as a cardinal aspect in the civilization of Assam, although there was remarkable changes in population due to religious adjustments between primitive animism and Hinduism. In the Tabakat-I-Nasiri there is a reference to routes which connected Assam with the west. There were several roads on the western border. "One of these extends from Coach Behar (Kuch Behar) through Rangamatty to the western limits of Assam (Asham) and was found when the Muhammedans first penetrated into that remote corner", writes Major Raverty. He is of the opinion that there were military causeways and these existed in good condition before the invasion of the Muhammedans. These served twin aspects and these remained as a practice in the civilisation of Assam throughout the ancient and medieval times. Broad royal roads, and road squares find mention in inscriptions.

Pragjyotishapura, the capital of ancient Assam was well known to other regions. In the west it maintained a good system of road link. The Eastern routes were through inaccessible hills. The hill passes through the Patkai ranges connected Assam with Burma. In the middle of the 16th century, Bar Ali road was constructed. It was a link of Upper Assam with Naga Hills towards this direction.

The plains of Assam, i.e., the Valley of the Brahmaputra was a centre of attraction to

all peoples of the North Eastern region and outside. Earliest geographical note on Assam is found in Ptolemy's Geography. Col. Gerini has mentioned the important places of the east, south and southwest by utilising Ptolemy's work; these were close to the frontiers of modern Assam.

Facilities of road travel with security was provided by the kings of Pragjyotishpura. In the thirteenth century A.D. Pragjyotishapura lost this glamour. During this time the Ahoms established their capital in Charaideo (Upper Assam). From this time Upper Assam became prominent in route geography. In Ptolemy's Geography there is a specific reference to Sadiya, an important place of Upper Assam. These regions now gained importance once again. A road built at Salaguri by the Ahom King Sunampha (1641-44) gave boast to the road system.

In Assam, road building was an essential part of State duty, this was sometimes contributed by ethnic groups. Gosain Kamala Ali, a prominent road, connected Koch Behar with Assam. This was constructed by the tribes loyal to Gosain Kamal, a Koch prince, during the course of his invasion of Assam. This contributed to the existing system. The Ahoms took care for construction of road bridges also. Rudra Singh (1696-1714) built masonry bridges over Namdang and Dimau rivers.<sup>10</sup> E.T. Dalton has mentioned these tribes in his "Descriptive Ethnology".<sup>11</sup> They were associated with the construction works.

During medieval times there was an adjustment of other tribes with the Hindus. The Ahom Officers commanded these composite elements in construction works. Money was not paid as a rule, in lieu they were allowed land. Roads and bridges of Sibsagar area speak of this even to this day.<sup>12</sup>

## Notes &amp; References

1. E.T. Dalton, **Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal**, Calcutta, 1872, pp. 82-91.
2. Major Raverty, **Tabakat-I-Nasiri**, Volume I, New Delhi, p. 586.
3. M.M. Sharma, **Inscriptions of Ancient Assam**, Gauhati, 1978, pp. 103-104, 263-264.
4. E. Gait, **A History of Assam**, Calcutta, 1967, pp.37-38.
5. **Ibid.**, pp.1-10,78-79,101.
6. Col. Gerini, **Researches on Ptolemy's Geography of Eastern Asia**, New Delhi, 1974, pp. 51-54.
7. E. Gait, **Op.cit.**, pp.71-81.
8. Col. Gerini, **Op.cit.**, pp.51-54; E.Gait, **Op.cit.**, pp.124-125.
9. E. Gait, **Op.cit.**, pp. 52-53.
10. **Ibid.**, p. 186.
11. E.T. Dalton, **Op.cit.**, pp.82-91.
12. E. Gait, **Op.cit.**, p.49; **Assam District Gazetteers (Sibsagar)**, Shillong, 1967, pp. 226-229.