

Development of Road Transport during British Administration in Sikkim

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Abstract

Colonial penetration into Sikkim gradually led to the transformation of Sikkim's social and economic set-up. Two treaties, namely, the Treaty of Titalia, 1817 and the Treaty of Tumlong, 1861 gave British colonialism a strong foothold in Sikkim. From 1861 onward, the British began with surveys of the mountainous areas of Sikkim for road construction. In 1889, John Claude White, a British Political officer was appointed to look after the administration of Sikkim after which earnest attempts were made for road construction. Surveys were carried out and difficult hills and terrains were cut for road access. Soon the country was opened up by a system of roads and the torrents were bridged. In a few years time it was possible to ride from one end of Sikkim to the other. This also broke down the isolation of the traditional villages of Sikkim.

Keywords: Colonial penetration, Political Officer, Isolation, Traditional Village

Introduction

Road transportation is an important determinant for economic growth and social integration of a country. It is considered to be one of the most cost effective and preferred mode of transport keeping in view its level of penetration into the vastly populated areas. Historical studies show how roads have broken down isolation of society and its economy by connecting it with different areas within and outside thus paving the way for growth as well as exploitation.

Prior to the establishment of British administration, the hilly and mountainous country of Sikkim had few difficult tracks in the name of roads. The native paths and tracks may be described as narrow, steep and circuitous to a degree. Ladders of cane and bamboo were the only means of scaling the steep sides of ravines or surmounting boulders. The smallest landslips would send the hillside, and a slight rise in any river or stream would wash away most of the flimsy bridges composed of canes. (Military Report, 1935)

After consolidation of their political power in India, the British authority had been advocating a more dynamic commercial policy in Central Asia on strategic and commercial grounds. As stated earlier, Sikkim was transformed as a British protectorate in 1817 through the Treaty of Titalia signed between the ruler of Sikkim and the British Government. In 1861, another treaty was forced upon Sikkim known as the Treaty of Tumlong through which colonial hold over Sikkim became very strong. British entry into Sikkim and their political hold over the country was mainly aimed at realising their long cherished dream of a profitable Indo-Tibetan trade because through Sikkim ran the shortest route to Tibet. For fulfilling their objective, the British transformed Sikkim into a 'Protectorate'. (Kharel,2006)

In 1889, the British took over the administration of Sikkim on the pretext of maladministration and appointed John Claude White, an engineer in the Public Works Department of Bengal as the political

officer for Sikkim. The change in administrative set-up reduced the power of the then king of the Namgyal dynasty, Maharaja Thudop Namgyal (Basnet, 1974)

Immediately after his appointment, the British political officer initiated steps for construction of roads and communication. Therefore, the following study will show how change in administrative setup of Sikkim since 1889 marked an effective transformation in road communication (Kharel, 2006)

For the British, road construction in Sikkim was the most important agenda in their policy of infrastructure development because it served their objective of smooth Trans-Himalayan trade through the Tibetan passes. In response to their commercial needs the British had already made some improvements in the modes of transportation system in the Sikkim frontier between 1861 and 1889 (Kharel, 2006). J.W Edgar, an English officer then posted as the Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling, had highlighted in his 'Special Report, 1876', (Special Report, 1876) on road construction work done till 1876 along the Tibet Road through Sikkim which was considered important for the purpose of profitable trade. The description of the works as highlighted in the 'Report' is as follows:

- (1) Between Darjeeling and Teesta there was the Rangeet Road maintained by the Public Works Department of Bengal.
- (2) The road from Teesta cane bridge to Sikkim frontier had been realised beyond Kalimpong.
- (3) The first section of the road to the Jelep pass through Sikkim had been opened and partially constructed and all the streams bridged.

The Indo-Tibetan trade also showed tendency to increase with the establishment of a permanent route over Jelep Pass.

Construction of roads entailed heavy expenditure. Immediately after taking over the administration of Sikkim, the British political officer saw that the financial condition of Sikkim was deplorable. He therefore turned his attention towards revenue reforms. A commencement was made to raise the revenue by roughly surveying the different districts and assessing them by taking into account the nature of the soil. This was an arduous task in a mountainous country. It was however accomplished in five years, and thus a basis for taxation and revenue was established. At the same time the forests were placed under control, excise was introduced and by these means in about ten years the revenue was raised from Rs.8,000 to Rs.2,200,000 (White,1909). The increased revenue was channelised mostly for road construction as it was the most important concern for the Colonial authority (Kharel,2006). The budget for building and roads escalated each year. In 1905 it was Rs.23, 425 which rose to Rs.24,306 in 1906 (Administration Report,1906-1907).

In 1904, a military-cum-commercial expedition to Tibet was dispatched under Col.Younghusband. To facilitate the British expedition to Tibet, road connecting Tibet via Gangtok known as the Gangtok-Tibet road was begun. Since early 20thc. studies were being carried out by the colonial authority on easiest passes to Tibet for trade and since then the importance of Nathu-la route had come to light. (Kharel,2006). The Government of India therefore ordered for the construction of a cart road from Rangpo, the gateway of Sikkim to Gangtok and another road for mules and ponies from Gangtok to Chumbi over the Nathu-la. (Administration Report, 1907-1908). By the end of 1904 the cart road from Siliguri, the terminus of the Northern Bengal State Railway, to the door of the British Residency at

Gangtok was completed (White, 1909). The upkeep and maintenance of Gangtok-Nathu-la road was undertaken by the Government of India (Plan Report, 1954).

A part of the public works in the state was carried out with the help of the Government of India which maintained for the Darbar 25 miles of Cart road from Rangpo to Gangtok and 70 miles of bridle path from Rhenock to Lachen besides about 50 miles of trade route between Rhenock and Jelep-la. (Rhenock and Jelep-la were traditional trade routes to Tibet). The Sate bungalows on these highways were also maintained by the funds of Government of India. The Engineer in charge of the British Government acted also as a State Engineer. The Sikkim Darbar used to contribute roughly about one third towards his emoluments. Both the Government of India and the Darbar used to employ their own subordinate executive staff, i.e overseers and sub-overseers in the public works department (Administration Report, 1929-30)

As the country was opened out and with further needs requiring the construction of roads and bridges something was accomplished each year. By 1950, Sikkim had a network of roads as depicted in the Table 1.

Table 1: Total Mileages of Roads Till 1950

1.	Tista-Gangtok Highway	25 Miles	Maintained by the Government of India
2.	Roads other than the Tista - Gangtok highway	167 Miles	Maintained by the Government of India
3.	Main Metal Roads	1.5 Miles	Maintained by the Sikkim Darbar
4.	Jeepable Bridle Paths	52 Miles	Maintained by The Sikkim Darbar
5.	Bridle Paths	163 Miles	Maintained by the Sikkim Darbar
6.	Other Roads	138.5 Miles	Maintained by the Sikkim Darbar

Source: Report on the First Five Year Plan, 1954, Government of India

Within the capital, road construction was planned to facilitate British administration and for access to the military cantonment, the Maharaja’s palace and the market. The political officer initiated a constructive policy to meet up the requirements. By 1920s, the circular road joining the palace to the Residency, to the Ridge park market and the bazaar area came into existence. It is pertinent to mention here that these market places had come into existence to cater to the British needs (Kharel, 2006).

Conclusion

It can be analysed from the above study that British administration in Sikkim transformed the system of road communication by replacing old traditional tracks with new roads. By the middle of the 20th century, the country of Sikkim which had remained isolated from the rest of the world could boast of a labyrinth of modern roads connecting it with Tibet and British India. Also, within the country, modern

roads gradually broke the isolation of several villages on the highways. Although, the objective for the creation of modern roads was to fulfil British trade and other requirements, it nonetheless gave impetus to Sikkim for growth and development.

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