

CHAPTER FIVE

TRANSPORT AND COMMUNICATION OF THE VALLEY

Transport and Communications are the means by which agricultural and industrial commodities are moved from internal consumption and for export abroad. Amongst all forms of transport, waterways dominated the scene in Surma-Barak Valley during colonial period. The basic infrastructure for the development of agriculture and industry is transport. Communication in the Surma-Barak Valley was not well developed though all the forms of communication were in use. This is due to the isolated location of the North-East India which is linked with rest of the country by only a narrow corridor between the Himalayas on the one side and Bangladesh on the other.¹⁶⁶

Actually, the development of trade and commerce is entirely dependent on economic infrastructure. Transport and organized markets are the lynchpins of the infrastructural superstructure. The state of transport and communications had been sadly very poor in Srma-Barak Valley particularly in Cachar. The mighty war machine of the English screeched to a halt on the boarders of Cachar on the eve of the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26) because of utterly lack of communications and it took a long year to clear off the oppressive Burmese from an area of 40 square miles only. There was no road which could be used for all the year round. The river Barak and Surma and their large tributaries were the only means of transport of the boats carrying the goods. The tributaries of Surma-Barak were not at all navigable in the upstream and during the rainy season because of strong currents plying of loaded boats were extremely risky. The cost of transport goods was very high. The price of the silken goods of the Lakhipur market was more than double at Katigorah (30 miles of west). The commerce in Surma-Barak Valley during the rule of the Rajas had never been encouraging but the company officials encouraged it, in 1839-40 Cachar exported goods worth Rs. 36,800/-. The military officials of the East India Company recommended good roads for the army movement.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ A. K. Agarwal, *Op. Cit.* P. 18.

¹⁶⁷ Suhas Chatterjee, *Op. Cit.* Pp. 172-173.

The armed forces of the East India Company had also been the most important bulk purchaser of local goods for the sustenance of the security forces. From the letter of E. R. Lyons (28/05/1805) the Superintendent, Cachar to Major Lister, Officer Commanding Sylhet Light Infantry, Cherrapunji we come to know that above regiment's Cachar unit purchased considerable amount of goods from the Silchar merchants.¹⁶⁸

During the Burmese War (1824-26), Colonel Innes, the officer Commanding the Cachar Column constructed in 1824 a workable road from Dudpatil fort (near Silchar) to Jirighat the eastern border of Cachar for the advance of the British forces to Manipur but the heavy monsoon of that year made the road impossible causing the death and destruction of the elephants, horses and bullocks of the army. The said road was, however, made workable by Captain T. Fisher, the first Superintendent, Cachar who happened to be an army engineer. The above road was considered as the high way by the early British authorities. The Lakhipur military post which connected the Dudpatil and the Badarpur post needed a good road. So, Badarpur-Lakhipur highway served as the military life line of the East India Company's eastern most territories. The high way also met the needs of the increasing commerce between Manipur and Cachar. The Government of Manipur maintained the upper portion of that highway from Banskandi to Imphal. Manipur Government repaired the road annually up to Banskandi but the portion of the road from Silchar to Banskandi had not been repaired by the Cachar authorities since 1839 because of resource crunch. Under the insistence of Captain G. Verner, the Superintendent of Cachar the Government of Bengal sanctioned the repairing cost of the highway from Silchar to Banskandi.¹⁶⁹

The excellence of its water communications makes Assam less dependent upon its highways than other parts of India and it was not till 1865 that steps were taken to construct a road through the whole length of the Brahmaputra Valley. This road runs along the south bank of the river from Sadiya at the eastern end to a point opposite Dhubri, where it is connected by

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.* P. 173.

¹⁶⁹ D. Dutta, *Op. Cit.* Pp. 137-138.

a steam ferry with the road system of Goalpara and northern Bengal. At Guwahati it is joined by an excellent metalled road which runs to Shillong. Shillong is connected via Cherrapunji, Therriaghat, Companyganj, and Sylhet with Cachar, though for a distance of about 8 miles down the face of the Khasi Hills, which here rise very sharply from the plains, the tract is not fit for wheeled traffic. From Cachar a bridle path leads to Manipur, and from there a cart road to the Brahmaputra, passing through Kohima, Dimapur. In the Surma Valley two important roads are those from Sylhet to Fenchuganj and thence then Kulaura railway station and from Silchar up to Hailakandi Valley.¹⁷⁰

Generally speaking, there has not been much change during the last part of the 19th century, but the route to Manipur was first made passable for carts after the outbreak of 1891. The ordinary bullock carts of upper India are in common use in the Assam Valley, but here and there carts still to be found whose wheels consist of solid dises of wood. In the Surma Valley carts are very scarce, and heavy goods are chiefly carried by boat and to some extent by pack bullock. A primitive form of wheel-less sledge is sometimes used for the transport of agricultural produce. In 1890-91 there were 293 miles of Imperial, 2,119 miles of provincial and 3,095 miles of local fund roads and the cost of maintenance was Rs. 4,70,000. In 1903-04 the figure for provincial roads was 1,625 miles and for local fund roads 4,483 miles and the cost of maintenance was Rs. 8,87,000.¹⁷¹

Actually there was no pucca road either in Sylhet or in Cachar throughout the 19th century. There was only one semi pucca road from Sylhet to Lakhipur useable only in the dry season. Boat was the only means of transporting commodities. Goods were transported from Lakhipur to Karimganj by country boat and from Karimganj to Sylhet by the same means.¹⁷² There were, however, some transit ghats for loading and unloading goods on the river bank. During the monsoon one village was cut off from the other village. Unlike other parts of Bengal the bullock carts were not used in Barak Valley for transporting the goods. Unsatisfactory road condition and means of transport restricted the trade in regard to type of

¹⁷⁰ *Provincial Gazetteers of Assam, Op. Cit.* Pp. 67-68.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid*, P. 68.

¹⁷² *Assam District Gazetteers, Cachar, Op. Cit.* Pp. 6-7.

goods, volume of goods and the distance.¹⁷³ The people purchased the commodities from the weekly marts which were spread all over the Valley and located in big villages. There were also annual fairs, like Siddheswar, Badarpur fair, Bhuban fair, Bharam Babar fair etc.

Prior to the construction of the Assam-Bengal Railway, Communications with the outside world were kept up by steamer. During the rainy season big steamers came up the Barak to Silchar, but in the cold weather there is often barely three feet of water in the channel, and at this season of the year the journey from Calcutta to Silchar occupied five days. On the opening of the railway, this slow and irksome journey was reduced at once to 33 hours, passengers travelling by steamer from Chandrapur to Goalundo, and thence by the Eastern Bengal State Railway to Calcutta. The steamer service is still maintained, the vessels being owned and managed by the India General Steam Navigation Company and the Rivers Steam Navigation Company. The ports of call in Cachar for the large Steamers which ply on the Barak are Badarpur, Syaltek, Jatingamukh and Masimpur. In the rains, feeder steamers go up the Barak from Silchar to Lakhipur, up the Madura to Chandighat, up the Ghagra to the Hattia rocks, and up the Katakhal to Kukichara.¹⁷⁴

The Assam-Bengal Railway enters the district at a point a little to the east of Badarpur Junction, which is 252 miles from Chittagong. Here the line divides, and a branch line runs south of the Barak. Past Katakhal, Salchapra and Ghagra to Silchar, which is 18 miles from Badarpur. The main line after leaving the junction crosses the Barak on a magnificent bridge, which is 454 yards in length, and had the foundations of its piers carried to a depth of 80 feet below the bed of the river. It then winds its way up the Jatinga Valley and so makes its way through the North Cachar Hills into Assam. The following is a list of the stations in the district north of the Barak; the figures in brackets show the mileage from Chittagong: Bihara (262), Damchara (271), Harangajo (283), Jatinga (294), Haflong (303), Mahur (312), Maibong (327) Langting (343), Hathikhali (355). Lumding in the Nogaon district, which is the junction for the Guwahati branch, is 12 miles beyond Hathikhali.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ *Report on the Rail and River-Borne Trade of the Province of Assam for the year ending the 31st March 1900*, Pp. 3-6.

¹⁷⁴ B. C. Allen, *Op. Cit.* Pp. 107-108.

¹⁷⁵ *Report on the Trade carried by Rail and River in Bengal, Op. Cit.* Pp. 9-12.

The Hill section runs for the most part through shale of the worst description, often intermixed with bands of Kaolinite, which swells when exposed and causes heavy slips or exerts immense pressure on the sides of tunnels. To counteract this pressure, very heavy masonry was required, cuttings had to be arched in, and special measures taken to allow the drainage to escape. Though the hill section is only 113 miles in length, it contains 24 tunnels, 7 covered ways, and 74 major bridges, the longest being 650 feet, the highest 113 feet above the river bed, while many of the banks and cutting approach 100 feet in height and depth respectively. Apart from the special engineering difficulties, great inconvenience was experienced, owing to the absence of local labour and food supplies, and to the unhealthiness of the country traversed. At one time in addition to the railway material, food for over 25,000 men had to be carried into the hills on elephants, bullocks, panies, and other pack animals. The result is that the cost of construction of the hill section has been extremely heavy. In the plains, the railway has brought Cachar, which prior to 1898 was a remote and isolated district, within easy reach of Calcutta. In the hills it has already begun to attract settlers to the valleys of the Jatinga, the Doiang, and the Mahur, but it has not yet been open long enough for its effects to be fully felt.¹⁷⁶

The early superintendent of Cachar because of resource crunch could not pay much attention to the construction of the roads and highways. Difficulties of local recruit of labour had also been another cause of tardy development. The Superintendents had to import the convicts from other districts to join the labour force in Cachar. Major Stewart, the last Superintendent with an eye of the tea industry took effective steps to construct border roads. The tea planters also did their whack to make all weather roads in their own estates. The programme of road construction, however, gathered full momentum at the hands of the versatile administrator John Edgar (1867-72) who connected the thanas and the principal trade marts of Cachar with the sadar town, Silchar. The highways revolutionized the trade and commerce in Cachar. Edgar also organized the sadly ill managed weekly bazaars of the villages into a viable economic unit and established six big markets in 1870 on the Cachar-

¹⁷⁶ Suhas Chatterjee, *Op. Cit.* Pp. 18-19.

Lushai border under the direct supervision of the administration to boost the Cachar-Lushai commerce. Under his patronage Silchar, Lakhipur and Sonai markets received all kinds of state assistance and they were linked up.¹⁷⁷

The heavy rainfall combined with the extraordinarily tenacious character of the clay, has always rendered the questions of road communications a serious problem in Cachar. In 1853, there was only one road in the district, and that had not been repaired for years. In 1866, there were six roads under the ferry fund board, which had an aggregate length of between 50 and 60 miles. In 1904, there were altogether 201 miles of road and 193 miles of bridle path in the plains portion of the district. In spite of the existence of all these miles of cart road, goods are still, to a great extent, carried by cooly or pack bullock. In the matter of wheeled traffic, the inhabitants of the Surma-Barak Valley have shown a singular lack of initiative and enterprise. Driving roads have been in existence for many years, yet in 1902, there were only 260 carts in Cachar, as compared with upwards of 3,500 in the district of Darrang. In this respect their neighbours on the east have put them quite to shame. Carts were first sent into Manipur in 1886, the people were not slow to grasp the advantage of wheeled transport, and a few years later there were no less than 1,700 carts plying between Imphal and the Assam Valley.¹⁷⁸

The trunk road enters Cachar at Badarpur, 51 miles from Sylhet and crosses the Manipur frontier at Jirighat, 40 miles from Badarpur. There are dak bungalows at Badarpur, Salchapra, and Silchar, and inspection Bungalows at Salchapra, Lakhipur, Jirighat and Banskandi. Most of the minor streams are bridged, but ferries ply across the following rivers, the figure in brackets represents the mileage from Badarpur: Dhaleswari (2), Pola (3), Katakhal (6), Ghagra (12), Barak (20), Chiri (27), and Jiri (40). From Silchar, a driving road runs south, then turns west and passes Hailakandi, and finally runs due north till it meets the trunk road a little to the east of Badarpur. North of Hailakandi, the Burnimukh road takes off on the east to Salchapra railway station. South of Hailakandi, two roads, which ultimately merge in one and sink to the status of a bridle path, run towards the Lushai Hills, and there are

¹⁷⁷ Suhas Chatterjee, *Op. Cit.* P. 175.

¹⁷⁸ B. C. Allen, *Op. Cit.* Pp. 109-110.

numerous minor roads and bridle paths branching off east and west, which have been constructed to serve the various tea gardens in the vicinity. East of Silchar there is the Maniarkhal road, which is not fit for wheeled traffic after Sonaimukh, and several bridle-paths. North of the Barak, there is the Natwanpur bridle path, which runs westward to the Jaintia pargonas, the Damchara, Nemotha Sibarbund, and Baladhan paths with various other minor paths branching from them.¹⁷⁹ The road system is, however, too complicated to be described in detail.

In addition to the onese already mentioned, there are inspection bungalows at Bikrampur and Gumra on the Matwanpur road, at Barkhala on the Jatinga Valley road at Tikalpur on the Durganagar road, at Udharbond on the Scottpur Udharbond road, at Sonaimukh on the Maniarkhal road, at Narainpur on the Burnimukh road, at Lala, Katlicherra, Jalinga, and Maragang on the Jhalnachara road, and at Kanglai on the Aijal road.

In the North Cachar Hills there is a bridle path from Haflong to the hot springs, which is continued through Jowai to Shillong. There are rest-houses at the following places, the figures in brackets show the mileage from Haflong: Gunjong (16), Derebara (24½), Baga (32), Khorungma (40½), Hot springs (52). From Gunjong there is a bridle path to Doiangmukh (42miles), and from Doiangmukh to the hot Springs (40 miles). There are no rest-houses on either of these paths. From Maibong a bridle path runs to Baladhan, 56 miles away, with rest-houses at Guilong (8 miles), Laishung (17½ miles), and Hangrum (26½ miles). From Laishung a path strikes eastward to the border of the Naga Hills district 21 miles away.

The extreme rapidity with which the rivers rise after ruin, renders the construction of permanent bridges. Over the larger steams a matter of some difficulty and of great expense. Ferries are in consequence largely used, and there are over 100 in the plains portion of the district. In the cold weather, when the rivers fall, they are often spanned by temporary bamboo bridges.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁹ B. C. Allen, *Op. Cit.* P. 110.

¹⁸⁰ B. C. Allen, *Op. Cit.* P. 111.

The commerce of Cachar since the days of the Dhean Rajas had always been a riverine one. The only shining feature in the hitherto unwieldy communication system was the well managed ghat system river ports to transit goods and passengers. Those Ferry ghats were situated on the river bank on suitable places. They were the anchorage of boats carrying goods. River police protected the commodities from the river robbers. The merchants also loaded and unloaded commodities in those ghats. Sialtekh ghat and the Raniferri ghat (Katigorah) were such transit ghats ferrying goods and passengers. In the Surma Valley large steamers run to Silchar in the rainy season, but in the cold weather cannot proceed beyond Fenchuganj. Small feeder steamers ply on the minor rivers in both Valleys. Ordinarily native boats, which, when the wind is not favourable, are generally towed up-stream, are largely used in the Surma Valley and to some extent in lower Assam. The typical Bengali craft consists, however, of a canae hollowed out of a large trunk of wood. Steam ferries are maintained on the Surma-Barak at Silchar and Sylhet.¹⁸¹ Elsewhere, the river is crossed in canoes, or crafts made by fastening two or three canoes side by side and laying planks across them and in the rains the passage sometimes occupies more than twelve hours. Most of the minor streams on the important roads are bridged, but a large number of ferries have still to be kept open.

In addition to the lines of steamers to which reference has been already made, country boats play an important part in the transport business of the district. They are of the ordinary heavy type which covers the rivers and steamers of Eastern Bengal. The following statement shows the navigable rivers of the district, and the highest point to which a boat of four tons burthen can proceed in the rains and in cold weather: -

¹⁸¹ Suhas Chatterjee, *Op. Cit.* P. 174.

Name of the River	Highest point to which Boat of 4 tons Burthen can proceed	
	In cold weather	In rains
Amjur	Not navigable	Up to Thaukim Punji
Badri	Do	Narainpur Tea Estate
Barak	Tipaimukh	Kacharbali
Bohali	Not navigable	Thaukim Punji
Chiri	Do	Joypur bazaar
Dalu	Do	Dalugram Tea Estate
Dhaleswari Katakhal	Do	Bhairabicharamukh
Ghagra	Do	Barajalinga bazaar
Jatinga	Do	Balichara Tea Estate
Madhura	Do	Patichara Tea Estate
Mara Dhaleswari	Do	Ainakhal Tea Estate
Rukni	Do	Lushai boundary
Salganga	Do	Derby Tea Estate
Sonai	Maniarkhal Tea Estate	Chhotanatia

Source: - B. C. Allen, Assam District Gazetteers, Pp. 112-113.

The Superintendent of water tax (jalakar) division of the principality during the pre-annexation days had his branch offices in those ghats to collect the water tax from the concerned parties.¹⁸² After the annexation, the system was not discontinued and the Ferry Department had a separate fund known as Ferry fund of Cachar under the direct control of the Superintendent of Cachar. The Ferry Fund of Cachar had been a substantial one (Rs. 2169 - 11-3 in January 1853). Defraying all the expenses of repairing and maintenance, the fund bloated the treasury of the Sadar Tehsil at Silchar. The Ferry Fund of Sylhet was also rich.¹⁸³

¹⁸² B. C. Allen, *Op. Cit.* Pp. 112-113.

¹⁸³ Upendra Guha, *Op. Cit.* P. 55.

Despite all the razz-matazz of the ghat system, the old rulers of Cachar criminally neglected the roads and thereby confining the trade to the ambient of the rivers only. The princely state Manipur on the immediate frontiers of Cachar was also a land locked one and mostly mountainous. Yet the economy of that state was in a much better footing than Cachar because the Raja's administration in Manipur followed sound financial policies and the people of Manipur were better economic organizers who always put pressure upon the state administration for better communication, market management and government subventions in commerce. Interesting to note that the Manipur Raja looked after the market management at Lakhipur areas and maintained the Banskandi-Lakhipur portion of the Manipur highway from their own pocket. They arrogated all those financial burden upon their own shoulder with an eye for Manipur's economy. The clever and prudent rulers of Manipur were nothing if not they were aware of the fact that the territory belonged to an alien sovereign. Political consideration did not blur their economic vision. In fact, the commodities of the rich Lakhipur market and the goods transported through the Manipur-Cachar highway were all monopolized by the Manipuris alone. After the annexation company's administration took over the management of Lakhipur market and its subsidiaries but allowed to continue the old system of the high way management. By all accounts it seems that all along the trade and commerce of eastern Cachar had been the principal concern of Manipur and the Manipuris till the establishment of tea estates by the European investors. The flourishing tea industry, however, affected the monopoly trade transactions of Manipuris. The steamer company piloted steamers up to Lakhipur since 1839 boosting the riverine trade of Cachar and later on the tea trade.¹⁸⁴ The improvement of the Manipur highway added additional vigour to the tea industry in the sixties and seventies of the 19th century.

Another important trade routes and trade relations of the Sylhet District with the Jaintia Hills in the pre-independence period. The contact and exposure between the Jaintia people from the hills and those of Sylhet plains was more explicit in terms of their trade relations and commercial dealings especially in the pre-independence period. This of course, would not have been possible had there been no easy routes of communication between the

¹⁸⁴ Suhas Chatterjee, *Op. Cit.* Pp. 174-175.

two adjacent but different areas. Against this background, it may be mentioned, from the time Sylhet emerged out of the blue waters of what is now known as the Bay of Bengal, the people of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills must have been the first to put their feet on it and as the things started to grow there they must have been the first customers of all the products of the vast-plains that is known as Sylhet and with the background of necessities trade grew up between the hills and plains and continues till the modern period.¹⁸⁵

On the basis of the account of trade relations and commercial dealings between Sylhet and its highland neighbours referred to above, two important factors were explicitly noticeable in which the Khasi and Jaintia people contributed to the neighbours living in the Southern plains, one is they were 'the first from the hills to put their feet on the soils of Sylhet,' and secondly, they were 'the first customers of all products' in the plains of that district. This, therefore, further explained and confirmed the extent of trade and the closer ties in terms of trade relationships between the Khasi-Jaintia people with that of the plains of Sylhet district in the pre-independence period. Moreover, trading between the two was not a one sided affair but rather there was an equal exchange of goods and commodities from both sides.¹⁸⁶ Thus, besides trade in limestone and oranges, the natural outlet for the latter being the plains, there were hosts of other things that went to the plains and an equally good number of essential commodities were brought by the hills people from the plains.

During the British period, the fast development of trade and commerce between the Jaintia people and that of the plain of Sylhet was possible and encouraging because of the presence of different means and types of communications like bridle paths, navigable rivers up to certain points and roads. Though some of these means of communications were in crude form, but they served a useful purpose in transportation of essential goods and materials to and from the hills and plains.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ *Assam District Gazetteers, Sylhet, Op. Cit.* P. 24.

¹⁸⁶ *Proceedings of North East India History Association*, 16th Session, Shillong 1986, Pp. 485-486.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.* P. 486.

As far as bridle path is concerned, we found the presence of one such which connected Jowai, the sub-divisional headquarters from the hills with Jaintiapur, the capital of the Kingdom, in the plains of Sylhet. The length of this bridle path is 30 miles. Besides these bridle path which were properly maintained by the British, we also found all over the country the Khasi paths which were generally possible by a mounted man. S. M. Ali also mentioned of the presence of a 'foot track from amchoi (in Kholahat) in Nowgong district leading to Jaintiapur. It goes southwards through Bar Amni, Bara Rangkhai, Umpanai, Nartiang, Jowai, Jarain, Muktapur up to Jaintiapur.....This bridle track is maintained by the Public Works Department. The same track seems to have been the high way connecting Nijpath, the capital, with the outlying parts of the dominion. J. H. Hutton travelled along this track during his visit to Jaintiapur in 1925. Through these bridle paths and foot tracks, the people from the hills walked a long distance carrying their goods on headload.¹⁸⁸ This was the traditional way the hill people transported their produce from one place to another and from one market to another for sale of the same.

In Jaintia Hills, the two rivers, Myntdu or Hari and Lubha, being navigable, provided the means of communication between the hills and that of the plains of Sylhet where goods were transported by means of canoes up to certain points possible. Against this background, it may be mentioned thus: 'the rivers of the district (Jaintia Hills) are not very largely used for the purpose of navigation, but penetrate for a short distance into the hills from the district of Sylhet. The Hari or Myntdu is navigable for canoes carrying from 25 to 30 mounds as far as Borghat, the Lubha is navigable for canoes as far as Lahalein but is dangerous, when the river is swollen in the rains. Besides these two rivers, the river Surma itself after entering British territory on the north has a number of chief confluent in Khasi and Jaintia Hills like the Hari and Lubha, Piyain, Bogapani and Jadukata.¹⁸⁹ Thus these rivers provided necessary means of communications for easy transport of commercial and essential goods between Sylhet and Khasi-Jaintia Hills.

¹⁸⁸ A. R. Choudhury, *Sylhet and its Trade with Highland Neighbours*, Shillong, 1972, P. 41.

¹⁸⁹ *Proceedings of North East India History Association, Op. Cit.* P. 487.

Besides the presence of the above mentioned bridle paths, foot tracks and river communications, Jaintia Hills and the Sylhet plains were also linked by roads. Subsequent upon the decision to get themselves totally involved in the administration of the hill areas of the Jaintia country, the British introduced a number of measures, both administrative and otherwise to improve the administration as well as develop the area for their own interest. One such measure undertaken was the construction of roads to link the areas, both in the hills and plains particularly with the sub-divisional headquarters at Jowai. One of the British officials responsible for this innovative plan was Henry Hopkinson. He strangely advocated the construction of roads in order to open up the Jaintia hilly country for proper and easy movements throughout the country for administrative supervision of the area concerned. In this regard, it is worthwhile to quote him.¹⁹⁰ He said: “We must have roads, we can do nothing, we can set nothing properly going without them, we cannot have proper supervision, we cannot introduce police, we cannot efficiently administer justice even without roads. All military and political administrations urge the construction of roads upon us. We shall never have real possession of the country until we have roads. In the absence of roads the strength of a barbarian enemy is increased tenfold, and commerce, the great civilizer, cannot find him out”.¹⁹¹

Subsequently, Hopkinson made repeated requests to the higher authorities of his government and the Public Works Department in particular to sanction necessary amount of fund for road construction in Jaintia Hills and other parts of Khasi Hills too. During the time when captain Morton was the Deputy Commissioner in charge of Khasi and Jaintia Hills, he prepared a memorandum of the roads chiefly required, one such road would connect Jowai with Jaintiapur covering a distance of thirty two miles.¹⁹² W. J. Allen in report of 1858, recommended the annual repairing of the old road between Sylhet and Assam which passed through the hills viz. Jaintiapur and Jowai to Jagjee Chowkey in Nogaon. This was a very useful road to the people of the Jaintia Hills and was their direct communication with Sylhet

¹⁹⁰ S. M. Ali, *The History of Jaintia*, Dacca, 1959. P. 5.

¹⁹¹ *Proceedings of North East India History Association, Op. Cit.* Pp. 487-488.

¹⁹² *Ibid.* P. 488.

and Nogaon. A considerable traffic passed along this road to Sylhet and Nogaon.¹⁹³ There has also been a well maintained motorable road which connected Shillong and Sylhet through Dawaki, one of the main market centres in the Jaintia Hills since 1933 when this road was declared open by His Excellency, Sir Michel Keane, the Governor of Assam at that time. This same road also connected Shillong with Guwahati. This road by linking Sylhet-Shillong Guwahati, thus became the life-line of trade and Commerce. Besides this, it played an important role because of the fact that it connected all the major and important administrative centres, both in the Surma and the Brahmaputra Valleys.

The presence of these various means of communications opened to the Jaintia people a better avenue and an encouraging opportunity to venture for the exchange of their local produce even outside their own territory. The commercial crops produced by the people from the hills were therefore with much ease traded to the plains which has a tremendous demand and ready customers to purchase them. Their produce also found suitable markets in the Southern plains. It is important to note that before the partition of 1947 took place, there was free trade and commerce between the hills and plains, and on this basis, the Jaintia people lived a somewhat prosperous life.¹⁹⁴ Hills plains trade was therefore at the peak of its flourishing height during the British period. Deterioration of trade especially in the border area of Jaintia Hills started soon after 1947. The reason being the closure and sealing off of the border markets which led to the dwindling down of the border trade.¹⁹⁵

Almost the whole of the trade of Surma-Barak Valley with other parts of India is carried on with Bengal, principally with Calcutta, that with other provinces being less than one percent of the whole. The great bulk of the goods are still carried by river, though in the Surma Valley the amount carried by the Assam-Bengal Railway is increasing year by year. River-borne trade from the Assam Valley goes chiefly by steamer, but in the Surma Valley, and especially in Sylhet, country boats are largely employed. There is very little road traffic

¹⁹³ W. J. Allen, *Report on the Administration of the Cossyah and Jynteah Hill Territory*, Shillong, 1858, P. 73.

¹⁹⁴ L. S. Gassah, *Effect of partition on the Border marketing of Jaintia Hills, in marketing in North India*, Delhi, 1984, P. 65.

¹⁹⁵ *Proceedings of North East India History Association, Op. Cit.* P. 489.

between Assam and Bengal and the only commodities brought into the province by road are cattle, ponies, sheep and other live stock.¹⁹⁶

Foreign trade is carried on with Bhuttan and Towang and the tribes inhabiting the lower Himalayan Hills and the eastern end of the Assam Range. The Bhotias of Bhutan and Towang bring down their goods on sturdy little ponies to fairs held at Darranga and Subankhata in the North Kamrup and at Udalguri and Ghagrapara in Darrang and spread from these centres over the surrounding country. The trade is largely carried on by barter and the statistics which are collected by the local police and revenue officials must be received with caution. The tribes to the east export little but rubber, which is carried down by collies. Elsewhere the principal imports are rubber, wax and Ponies, the exports cotton cloth and yarn and silk. The total foreign trade is, however, only worth about 4 lakhs of rupees per annum.¹⁹⁷

The principal railway of Surma-Barak Valley is the Assam-Bengal Railway which runs from the port of Chittagong to Silchar at the eastern end of the Surma Valley. A second branch of the same line runs along the south of the Assam Valley from Guwahati Tinsukia, a station on the Dibru-Sadiya railway, and is connected with the Surma Valley branch by a line that process the North Cachar hills, the points of junction being Lumding in the northern and Badarpur in the Southern Valley. Work was begun on this railway in 1891, and five years later a length of about 115 miles from Chandura to Badarpur was opened to traffic, but the hill section has presented difficulties of a most exceptional character and not finally completed till the end of 1903.¹⁹⁸ This section runs for the most part through shale of the worst description, often intermixed with bands of Kaolinite, which swells when exposed and causes heavy slips or exerts immense pressure on the sides of tunnels. The principal engineering difficulties in the plains were the bridge, 500 yards in length, which crosses the Kapili and the marshes which fringe its banks, and the bridge over the Barak at Badarpur, which though shorter, was even more costly, as its foundations were carried 80 feet below the river bed. The line which

¹⁹⁶ *Provincial Gazetteers of Assam, Op. Cit.* P. 65.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.* P. 65.

¹⁹⁸ *Report on the Rail and River- Borne Trade of the Province of Assam for the year ending the 31st March 1900*, Guwahati, 1901, P. 9.

is on the metre gauge, has a total length within the province of 571 miles, and has been constructed by a company working under a Government guarantee. The bulk of the capital has, however, been found by Government.¹⁹⁹

The other important railway line for Surma-Barak Valley is the branch of the Eastern Bengal State Railway, which connect Dhubri with the Bengal System, and was opened for traffic in 1902. Fifteen miles of this line, which is on the metre gauge, lie within the boundaries of Assam. Sufficient time has not yet elapsed for the effects produced by the completion of the Assam-Bengal Railway to be fully seen. Silchar, which was formerly extremely inaccessible in the dry season, has been brought within 33 hours of Calcutta, and it is hoped that population may pass by the hill section from the densely peopled plains of Sylhet to the extensive tracts of good land now lying waste in the Assam-Valley. A line from Golakganj near Dhubri to Guwahati is under construction and there will soon be through railway communication between the eastern end of the Brahmaputra Valley and the more densely populated parts of India from which the province draws its labour. In 1891, only 114 miles of railway were open in the province, by 1903 the figure had risen to 715 miles, 617 miles of which represented the mileage of state lines. The total capital which by 1903 had been expended on the minor railways, the whole of which lie within the boundaries of the province. In that year 567,000 passengers and 3,17,000 tons of goods and minerals were carried by these railways, the gross working expenses were Rs. 5,95,000 and the net revenue yielded 5 percent on the capital employed.²⁰⁰

Another important road of the Surma-Barak Valley was the Cachar-Chittagong Road. Edgar with reference to letter dated 9th April 1871 by the Commissioner Dacca division stated that he was of opinion that the Cachar and Chittagong authorities should maintain close contact and a Cachar-Chittagong Road be constructed through chepoowee. He disfavoured the route through the Chumfai valley for the geography of that place was not fully known and besides the proposed project was to be divided into sections. The first of these sections would

¹⁹⁹ *Provincial Gazetteers of Assam, Op. Cit.* Pp. 65-66.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.* Pp. 66-67.

be from Lakhipur to Mynadhur tea garden, the second would be from Mynadhur to TipaiMookh to the Tooweebhoom, and the last from the Tooweebhoom to Chepoowee.²⁰¹

We should make a through probe of Edgar's policy. Edgar was shrewed administrator, had an economic perception of British imperialism and considered administration as the necessary tool to further the interests of the British Capitalists. The colonial economy was the bedrock of British Empire in India and as a civil servant he was to protect the interest of the ruling class. He never hesitated to bend the rules whenever necessary to encourage prospective entrepreneur in industries to keep buoyancy in the sluggish capital market. Because of his administrative measures Cachar became the cynosure of the tea magnates and there had been unprecedented investment boom in the Cachar's tea industry, money in tea had always been an attention-grabber, provoking envy and disgust. However, in colonialism relationship between money and administration is more straight forward. Later on Edgar became very powerful as the Divisional Commissioner of Dacca and finally as the Chief Secretary, Bengal Government, the most powerful economic bastion of British imperialism and a member of Governor General in Council. He controlled the administration to serve the interest of economic development in Bengal on the colonial line. As a clever bureaucrat with a keen historical perception he was conscious of the fact that the root of independent British enterprise in Bengal was embedded in the civil service. Formerly, the company's servants and now the crown's servants invested their savings into indigo, jute and tea industries. Tea industry became the most attractive field of investment of the rich British Bureaucracy to which Edgar belonged. The chambers of commerce in Calcutta was in the alert and when their interest had clashed with the bureaucracy they cried foul and the English press, the mouth piece of British capitalism, supported them. But unflappable Edgar remained unfazed as he was expert in walking a metamorphical tight rope between reassurance and panic. However, the most significant contribution of Edgar towards Indian economy of his time had been his theory of aggressive marketing of exports as an effective means of financing the Indian imports. This led to market growth. Edgar was a rare civil servant in the 19th century who took

²⁰¹ Suhas Chatterjee, *Mizoram under British Rule, Op. Cit.* P. 67.

keen interest in India's economic development and attempted to give direction to it according to his knowledge and capacity.

Edgar was a civilian with characteristic imperialist mould and always kept a significant distance from the natives including the native juniors. But, this he did with the dignity of a shrewed administrator and never made it public that he hated the natives. In fact, he had high regard for the merit of his Bengali juniors like Hari Charan Sarma etc. About Hari Charan Sarma wrote Edgar, "He deserves special notice he has I may add, one qualification for such work in a rare degree. He seems absolutely devoid of physical fear. I have had the opportunity of seeing him more than once under fire, and each time he was calm and self possessed as if he had been in his tehsil catchery". Despite his attachment of Burland, the Assistant Civil Officer to the Cachar Column in the Lushai Expedition he unequivocally praised the services of Surma again and again.²⁰²

The greatest contribution of Edgar as Frontier officer had been his suggestion to an integrated Lushai policy of the Government of India. He criticised the existing the Lushai policy as piecemeal, ineffective and an impolicy. In his famous report at the close of the Lushai Expedition he wrote, "we cannot hope for success, or even for safety, if we allow ourselves to be misled by what really are accidents of political geography, and threat the relation of each district or dependent state with the Kookis on the border as a separate question, in dealing with which measures can be taken without any reference to any of the others". His suggestion was that Manipur, Tripura, Chittagong, Sylhet and Cachar's authorities must act in unison for the defence of the frontiers touching the Lushai country. He also wanted to involve the authorities of British-Burma into the process. This concrete suggestion had been the coup de grace of his Lushai policy which had further spin off effect on the Government of India's North-East Frontier policy.²⁰³

The extension of cooperation of Cachar's administration to the tea gardens of Cachar was the outcome of the policy of the defence of the British frontiers. The tea estates were

²⁰² Suhas Chatterjee, *Op. Cit.* Pp. 19-20.

²⁰³ *Ibid.* P. 20.

established in Cachar in 1856 but upto 1863 the tea entrepreneurs managed their own affairs according to their own effort and resources and did not cooperate with the local administration resulting into deterioration of much needed frontier security. Major Stewart, the predecessor of Edgar realized it and requested the tea planters to cooperate with the administration so that Government could reciprocate in return. In industrial and administrative cooperation which had its beginning during the regime of Stewart received its finishing touch at the hand of Edgar. The Lushais on the Cachar frontier now could directly intercourse with the Deputy Commissioner, a much more important glorified person than the individual planter. The planters were also happy as the administration provided the adequate security to the tea estates at Government cost. Thus, Edgar kept both the Lushai chiefs and the tea magnates in good humour. The talented civilian by the stroke of his diplomacy developed a participative culture among the parties involved leading to a change in the attitude of the private entrepreneurs and the wild tribes, neither of whom had been friendly to the local administration. The increased payment of dividend by the tea companies from 12% to 85% was a pointer to the success of Edgar's diplomacy.²⁰⁴

Edgar was rewarded for his brilliant service in the Lushai Expedition. He was awarded the title 'THE STAR OF INDIA' by the viceroy in Calcutta. He was promoted to the post Commissioner, Dacca and soon the chief secretary, Government of Bengal. Government of India decided to create a new province Assam. Cachar and Sylhet of the Dacca division of Bengal were incorporated into the new province (1874). As per recommendations of Edgar Silchar was chosen as the office and residence of the Commissioner of the new division, Surma Valley and the Hills.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁴ *Notes on Forest Industries for Assam*, Guwahati, 1909. Pp. 44-47.

²⁰⁵ Suhas Chatterjee, *Op. Cit.* Pp. 20-21.

The following table shows the relative values of the steamer and boat trade from 1850 to 1880: -

Year	Steamer Rs.	Boat Rs.
1850 – 1860	1,46,07,193.00	1,21,94,320.00
1860 – 1870	1,79,92,795.00	1,36,37,657.00
1870 – 1880	1,69,19,394.00	1,24,56,048.00

Source: - Report on the River-Borne Trade of the Province of Assam, from 1850-1880, P. 28.

These figures indicate that steamers carried nearly 58 percent of the total trade during the year under report, or an increase of one percent in the ratio of steamer-borne trade to boat-carried as compared with the previous year.²⁰⁶

The following statement compares the main imports through boat and steamer traffic of the Surma Valley from 1850-1880: -

Imports							
Name of article	Denom-ination	Boat traffic		Steamer traffic		Total	
		1850 - 55	1855 - 60	1860 - 65	1865 - 70	1870 - 75	1875 - 80
Cotton piece goods	Rupees	6,68,020	4,32,520	60,14,380	47,66,560	66,82,400	51,99,080
Turmeric	Mounds	6,375	7,158	649	890	7,024	8,048
Coconuts	Numbers	1,015,675	1,351,050	---	---	1,015,675	1,351,050
Wheat	Mounds	15,360	14,045	241	431	15,601	14,476
Gram and other pulses	„	224,637	250,600	6,475	9,659	231,112	260,259
Liquors	Rupees	---	---	3,02,664	4,52,519	3,02,664	4,52,519
Brass	„	86,300	76,000	93,737	96,440	1,80,037	1,72,440
Iron	„	41,316	51,270	1,48,774	1,45,500	1,90,090	1,96,770

²⁰⁶ Report on the River-Borne Trade of the Province of Assam, from 1850-1880, Published by the Government of Bengal, 1896, P. 28.

Other metals	„	---	8,400	5,15,336	6,13,536	5,15,336	6,21,936
Kerosene	Mounds	148,377	92,068	4,100	24,180	152,477	116,248
Other oils	„	24,055	26,354	2,411	2,936	26,466	29,290
Oil-cake	„	27,010	24,405	---	---	27,010	24,405
Opium	„	---	---	30	73,20	30	73-20
Ghi	„	216	495	349	424	565	919
Provisions, other than ghi and dried fruits and nuts	„	10,062	31,627	3,749	5,628	13,811	37,255
Salt	„	305,170	238,230	---	27,399	305,170	265,629
Tea Seed	„	4,490	152	---	---	4,490	152
Betel nuts	„	28,161	19,177	63	155	28,244	19,332
Other spices	„	163,251	123,574	1,815	3,566	165,066	127,140
Sugar Drained	„	34,571	34,767	750	734	35,321	35,501
Sugar Undrained	„	126,739	132,799	2,096	909	128,835	133,708
Tobacco	„	102,741	89,241	270	171	103,011	89,412

Source: - Report on the River-Borne Trade of the Province of Assam, from 1850-1880, P. 14.

There was an increase in the imports of turmeric, cocoanuts, gram and other pulses liquors, iron other metals, other oils, opium, ghi and other provisions except dried fruits and nuts and sugar. The increase under other provisions is mainly due to the grouping under that head of potatoes and other fruits and vegetables which in the return for the previous year were shown separately. As in the Brahmaputra Valley, the import of liquors is annually increasing. All the cocoanuts, oil-cakes, and tea-seed were imported by boat, and liquors and opium by steamer. Cotton piece-goods and metals came up almost entirely by steamer, while boats were the principal agency in importing all other commodities.²⁰⁷

The following table gives details as to the more important exports, through boat and steamer traffic of the Surma-Barak Valley from 1850-1880: -

²⁰⁷ *Report on the River-Borne Trade of the Province of Assam, from 1850-1880, Op. Cit. P. 14.*

Name of article	Denomination	Boat traffic		Steamer traffic		Total	
		1850 - 55	1855 - 60	1860-65	1865-70	1870 - 75	1875 - 80
Lime	Mounds	1,760,285	2,195,185	1,085	103,930	1,761,370	2,299,115
Rubber	„	563	77	209	58	772	135
Jute, raw	„	9,705	9,500	---	---	9,705	9,500
Oranges	Number	51,980,000	36,868,000	---	---	51,980,000	36,868,000
Potatoes	Mounds	103,496	110,144	---	10	103,496	110,154
Rice Husked	„	41,612	41,145	2	2,732	41,614	43,877
Rice Unhusked	„	1,918,115	2,646,946	---	7	1,918,115	2,646,953
Hides of cattle	Rupees	4,66,030	3,49,300	17,812	1,700	4,83,842	3,51,000
Mats	„	72,861	93,444	---	---	72,861	93,444
Ghi	Mounds	1,561	2,909	---	---	1,561	2,909
Dried fish	„	26,205	25,906	---	---	26,205	25,906
Linseed	„	142,780	40,550	17,322	20,146	160,102	60,696
Mustard	„	49,045	2,970	11,572	5,670	60,617	8,640
Tea-Seed	„	---	---	4,840	338	4,840	338
Tea	„	2,160	1,350	187,011	175,398	189,171	176,748
Bamboos	Number	961,000	275,000	---	---	961,000	275,000

Source: - Report on the River-Borne Trade of the Province of Assam, from 1850-1880, P. 15.

There was a marked increase in the exports of lime, potatoes, rice, paddy, hides, mats and ghi. The increase in the export of ghi amounted to 86 percent, and of hides to 7 percent, but a fall in the price of the latter during the year under report reduced the total value of the article exported by 27 percent.²⁰⁸

During the colonial period Boat was the only means of transporting the commodities. Goods were imports and exports by steamer and boat. There were, however, some transit

²⁰⁸ Report on the River-Borne Trade of the Province of Assam, from 1850-1880, Op. Cit. P. 15.

ghats for loading and unloading the goods on the river bank. During the monsoon one village was cut off from the other village. Unlike other parts of Bengal, the bullock carts were not used in Surma-Barak Valley for transporting the goods. Unsatisfactory road condition and means of transport restricted the trade in regard to type of goods, volume of goods and the distance.

The table below gives the estimated value of the trade of the last decade of 19th century in the Surma Valley. The imports of spice in the last part of the 19th century was Rs. 1,26,800 and in the first part of the 20th century it has gone up Rs. 6,49,500.

Imports				
	1880 - 86 Rs.	1886 - 90 Rs.	Increase Rs.	Decrease Rs
By Steamer	74,14,356	79,91,590	5,77,234	---
By boat	63,54,105	88,52,213	24,98,108	---
Total	1,37,68,461	1,68,43,803	30,75,342	---
Exports				
By Steamer	95,05,038	1,13,66,352	18,61,314	---
By boat	61,01,943	32,21,819	---	28,80,124
Total	1,56,06,981	1,45,88,171	Net	10,18,810

Source: - Economic Report of South Assam, P. 21.

There was a rise in the total value of the trade amounting in the aggregate to 7 percent. The increase occurred entirely in the imports, amounting to 22 percent and affecting both the boat and steamer traffic. In the exports the steamer traffic rose by 19 lakhs or nearly 20 percent, while the boat traffic fell off by 29 lakhs or 47 percent, thus showing in the aggregate a fall of nearly 7 percent.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁹ *Economic Report of South Assam*, P. 21.

The heavy floods in Sylhet, which lasted from July to September 1886, as already noticed, were mainly instrumental in bringing about an increase in the imports and decrease in the exports. The Deputy Commissioner of Sylhet thus describes the effect of the floods: -

“Where the rainfall is heavy all round the district, all the rivers running through it are in flood at one and the same time. The water is, in consequence, banked up in the large rivers and their tributaries and when the haors and bhils are filled, village sites go under water. In 1886, one such flood had only begun to subside when another like to took place. Hence it was that the country in many places resembled a sea for weeks together not a few village sites being abandoned for a time”.

“The floods of May 1883, though severe, were not so injurious, as they lasted a shorter time, thus interfering less with agricultural operations”.

“Prices rose in consequence of the loss of crops and of the difficulty of communication, whole tracts of country being under water. Cattle suffered greatly for want of fodder, and many persons were reduced to one meal a day. Even when there was paddy, it was difficult in the low lying parts of the district to get a dry spot to husk it upon. The damage was more or less general, except in the south of the district, along the Hill Tipperah boundary. Excellent crops were obtained there. That for a time there was scarcity, and that this was severely felt in parts, is undoubted”.

“The distress was temporary. Abundance of rice was available for sale at different bazaars before long, most of it imported and only want of money to purchase it with was felt”.²¹⁰

It was thus that the import of rice and paddy increased enormously, resulting in a rise in the total imports, while the export of paddy fell in value from 36 lakhs to 7 lakhs only, of

²¹⁰ *Report on the River-Borne Trade of the Province of Assam, from 1850-1880, Op. Cit. P. 16.*

which latter sum 5 lakhs represents the traffic for the first quarter of the year, i.e., before the occurrence of the floods.

The following table exhibits the relative values of the steamer and boat trade for the last ten years from 1880-1890.: -

Year	Steamer Rs.	Boat Rs.
1880 - 83	1,46,07,193	1,21,94,320
1883 - 86	1,79,92,795	1,36,37,657
1886 - 88	1,69,19,394	1,24,56,048
1888 - 90	1,93,57,942	1,20,74,032

Source: - Report on the River-Borne Trade of the Province of Assam, from 1850-1880, P. 17.

Thus, during years, under reports steamer carried nearly 62 percent of the total trade, in 1885-89 they carried 58 percent, in 1880-84, 57 percent. The ratio of steamer-borne trade to boat-carried is altering the favour of the steamers.

It must, however, be remembered that though the decline in the export of paddy consequent on the floods told heavily in reducing the value of the boat traffic, the value of the steamer traffic was much affected by the reduction in the price at which tea has been valued during the past year. In 1880-86, as in the two years preceding it, tea was valued at 10 annas a pound. During the year, under report, the estimated price was 7 annas 8½ pie per pound. Had the former rate been retained last year, the steamer traffic, instead of indicating a total of about 194 lakhs, would have amounted to over 224 lakhs.

The following statement gives particulars as to the imports by boat as well as steamer traffic during the year under report and compares the figures with those of the preceding year: -

Imports							
Name of article	Denomination	Boat traffic		Steamer traffic		Total	
		1885 - 86	1886 - 87	1885 - 86	1886 - 87	1885 - 86	1886 - 87
Cotton piece goods	Rupees	4,32,520	6,22,580	47,66,560	47,26,860	51,99,080	53,49,440
Turmeric	Mounds	7,158	5,855	890	1,020	8,048	6,875
Coconuts	Numbers	1,351,050	1,007,750	---	---	1,351,050	1,007,750
Wheat	Mounds	14,045	11,690	431	711	14,476	12,401
Gram and other pulses	„	250,600	265,113	9,659	15,828	260,259	280,941
Rice husked	„	4,120	---	17	---	4,137	---
Rice unhusked	„	---	---	2	---	2	---
Liquors	Rupees	---	11,100	4,52,519	4,52,885	4,52,519	4,63,985
Brass	„	76,000	53,200	96,440	86,040	1,72,440	1,36,240
Iron	„	51,270	70,470	1,45,500	2,64,174	1,96,770	3,34,644
Metals other than tin and the above	„	8,400	4,560	6,13,536	9,21,247	6,21,936	9,25,807
Kerosene	Mounds	92,068	124,215	24,180	30,671	116,248	1,54,896
Oils other than castor and kerosene	„	26,354	32,774	2,936	8,102	29,290	40,876
Oil-cake	„	24,405	14,051	---	---	24,405	14,051
Opium	„	---	---	73-20	69	73-20	69
Ghi	„	495	65	424	415	919	480
Provisions, other than ghi and dried fruits and nuts	„	31,627	30,080	5,628	8,773	37,255	38,853
Salt	„	238,230	256,165	27,399	33,898	265,629	290,063
Tea Seed	„	152	272	---	---	152	272
Betel-nuts	„	19,177	20,491	155	24	19,332	20,515
Spices other than pepper	„	123,574	124,540	3,566	4,294	127,140	128,834
Sugar Drained	„	34,767	40,762	734	958	35,501	41,720
Sugar Undrained	„	13,799	130,653	909	547	133,708	131,200
Tobacco	„	89,241	105,595	171	163	89,412	105,758

Source: - Report on the River-Borne Trade of the Province of Assam, from 1850-1880, P. 17.

There was an increase in the imports of cotton piece-goods, gram and other pulses, rice, both husked and unhusked, liquors, metals other than brass, kerosene and other oils, salt, tea-seed, betel nuts and other spices, drained sugar and tobacco. There was a falling off in

turmeric, cocoanuts, wheat, brass, oil-cake, opium, ghi and undrained sugar, the last of which has already been dealt. The decrease under oil-cake and ghi was serious, though the cause is unknown. The falling off in other cases was not serious, and calls for no special remarks. All cocoanuts, oil-cake and tea-seed were imported entirely by boat and opium by steamer only. Almost the whole of the cotton piece-goods, liquors, metals and ghi come also by the latter means of conveyance, while boats were the principal agency in carrying the other commodities.²¹¹

The table below gives particulars as to the more important exports of the Surma-Barak Valley for the last four years: -

Name of article	Denomination	Boat traffic		Steamer traffic		Total	
		1885 - 86	1886 - 87	1885-86	1886 - 87	1885 - 86	1886 - 87
Lime	Mounds	2,195,185	2,025,340	103,930	6,385	2,299,115	2,031,725
Rubber	„	77	165	58	240	135	405
Jute, raw	„	9,500	7,580	---	---	9,500	7,580
Oranges	Number	36,868,000	40,104,800	---	---	36,868,000	40,104,800
Potatoes	Mounds	110,144	104,940	10	---	110,154	104,940
Rice Husked	„	41,145	105	2,732	4	43,877	109
Rice Unhusked	„	2,646,946	488,045	7	---	2,646,953	488,045
Hides of cattle	Rupees	3,49,300	2,99,300	1,700	110	351,000	299,410
Mats	„	93,444	1,39,067	---	409	93,444	139,476
Ghi	Mounds	2,909	2,066	---	49	2,909	2,115
Dried fish	„	25,906	32,320	---	---	25,906	32,320
Linseed	„	40,550	29,925	20,146	12,696	60,696	42,621
Mustard	„	2,970	10,320	5,670	42	8,640	10,362
Tea-Seed	„	---	---	338	360	338	360
Tea	„	1,350	9,555	175,398	283,987	176,748	293,542
Bamboos	Number	275,000	527,000	---	---	275,000	527,000

Source: - Report on the River-Borne Trade of the Province of Assam, from 1850-1880, P. 18.

There was an increase under rubber, oranges, mats, dried fish, mustard, tea and bamboos. Of these oranges, mustard, and tea have been dealt with already. Thrice as much as rubber was exported as in the preceding year and the export of bamboos nearly doubled but

²¹¹ Report on the River-Borne Trade of the Province of Assam, from 1850-1880, Op. Cit. P. 17.

the figures for the latter are far below the exports of 1884-85 or the year preceding it. The traffic in mats showed an increase of 49 percent and in dried fish 25 percent.²¹²

Besides the articles named above, all other commodities exhibited a falling off in the exports. The decrease in the export of lime, jute, raw, potatoes, and rice, husked and unhusked has already been noticed. The exports of hides and linseed have been declining gradually for the last three years. The decrease under the other heads was not serious, and requires no notice. Raw jute, oranges, potatoes, paddy, dried fish and bamboos were exported entirely by boat while steamers carried the entire quantity of tea-seed. The other commodities went down mainly by boat, with the exception of tea.²¹³

The following statements show in a comprehensive form the more important features of the river-borne trade of the province: -

Synopsis of Exports

Name of block in order of value of total export trade of the province	Total value of exports		Main exports from Brahmaputra Valley	Brahmaputra Valley		Main exports from Surma-Barak Valley	Surma-Barak Valley	
	From Brahmaputra Valley	From Surma – Barak Valley		Percentage which this forms of total exports to the block from Brahmaputra Valley	Percentage which this forms of total exports of the commodity from the Brahmaputra Valley		Percentage which this forms of total exports to, from Surma-Barak Valley	Percentage which this forms of total exports of the commodity from Surma-Barak Valley
	Rs.	Rs.						
Calcutta	1,72,75,371	1,24,12,599	Tea	89.00	99.99	Tea	91.81	98.29
Chittagong Division	8,57,933	16,79,403	Timber	77.60	60.18	Rice	41.05	92.03
Northern Bengal	12,90,050	1,56,860	Mustard	51.96	36.13	Provisions other than ghi and dried fruits and nuts	63.11	6.36
Eastern Bengal	8,83,268	3,32,549	Silk, raw	23.75	89.03	Tea	59.75	1.71
Other districts	637	6,760	Rice	100	2.08	Stone and lime	15.59	0.17

Source: - Report on the River-Borne Trade of the Province of Assam, from 1850-1880, P. 18.

²¹² *Report on the River-Borne Trade of the Province of Assam, from 1850-1880, Op. Cit. P. 18.*

²¹³ *Ibid. P. 18.*

During the colonial period, the principal railway of Surma-Barak Valley is the Assam-Bengal Railway which runs from the part of Chittagong to Silchar at the eastern end of the Surma Valley.

The following statements gives particulars as to the imports by rail during the last part of 19th century and the 1st part of 20th century.

Imports				
Name of articles		Year	Quantity	Value
			Mds	Rs.
Coal		1896 – 1909	96,69	57,693
Cotton, raw			8,33,595	1,11,24,623
Cotton twist and yarn			4,111	2,46,072
Wheat			8,74458	7148712
Rice in the husk			87,667	1,75,269
Rice not in the husk			3,85,726	13,21,429
Brass (ditto.)			49	1,225
Copper (wrought)			1,381	60,243
Iron and steel: -	(a) Cast		1,203	24,464
	(b) Unwrought		321,940	6,068
Fruits and vegetables			321,940	12,89,057
Grain and pulse			25,374	97,958
Lac			19,943	9,91,364
Metallic ores			15,938	1,79,299
Mineral Substances: -	(a) Chalk and Lime		1,013,364	3,16,677
	(b) Marble and stone		739,161	4,15,778
	(c) Castor	2,590	41,034	
Railway Plant and Rolling stock: -	(a) Carriages and trucks and parts thereof	1,728	50,785	
	(b) Locomotor engines and tenders and parts thereof	1,503	72,131	
	(c) Materials	9,465	1,57,355	
Sugar: -	(a) Unrefined	40,667	2,97,073	

Source: - Report on Trade carried by rail in Bengal, 1890 – 1920, Pp. 8-22.

These are important articles which were imported into the Surma-Barak Valley from 1896 to 1909 by rail.²¹⁴

The following statements show the important articles of exports from Surma-Barak Valley by rail from 1890-1909: -

Exports			
Articles	Year	Quantity Mds.	Value Rs.
Betel nuts	1890 -1909	11,003	1,14,455
Tea		1,779	84,503
Rice in the husk		5,02,694	---
Rice not in the husk		35,26,329	---
Bamboos		16,62,000 (Number)	---
Mats		2,00,444 (Number)	---
Oranges		491,104,800(Number)	---

Source: - Report on Trade carried by rail in Bengal, 1890 – 1920, Pp. 22-25.

These are the important articles which were exported from Surma-Barak Valley in 1890-1909 by rail.²¹⁵

The following statistics of the value in rupees (thousand omitted) of the Rail and River Borne Trade of Surma-Barak Valley with the other provinces of India for the official year 1890-91, 1900-01, and 1903-04.

²¹⁴ *Report on Trade carried by rail in Bengal, 1890-1920, Calcutta, 1920, Pp. 8-25.*

²¹⁵ *Report on the Rail-Borne Trade on the Province of Assam, 1890 – 1909, Calcutta, 1909, Pp. 6-15.*

Imports			
Articles	1890 - 91	1900 - 01	1903 - 04
Cotton, twist and yarn	955	908	908
Cotton piece - goods	8,677	8,666	8,956
Gram and pulse	972	1,384	1,425
Metals	2,714	3,968	2,883
Oils, Kerosene	939	1,171	1,038
Oils, others	1,217	2,141	1,409
Rice not in the husk	615	3,841	1,987
Salt	2,055	2,065	1,445
Sugar	1,924	2,214	2,810
Tobacco	884	1,397	1,261
All other articles	6,158	12,550	13,168
Total	27,110	40,305	37,290

Exports			
Articles	1890 - 91	1900 - 01	1903 - 04
Caoutchouc	363	382	118
Hides and skins	217	565	932
Jute	852	1,510	1,799
Lac	113	199	492
Oil seeds	3,608	2,590	3,551
Oranges	230	121	1,358
Rice in the husk	3,274	3,136	4,218
Tea	33,974	44,666	55,181
Wood	---	1,499	1,657
All other articles	3,824	6,875	5,100
Total	48,348	63,465	76,560

Source: - Provincial Gazetteers of Assam, P. 104.

And the following statistics of the value in Rupees of the Rail and River borne trade of Surma-Barak Valley with the other provinces of India for the official year 1930-31, 1940-41 and 1945-46.

Imports			
Articles	1930 - 31	1940 - 41	1945 - 46
Cotton, twist and yarn	2,859	2,729	2,645
Cotton piece - goods	26,042	26,001	28,012
Gram and pulse	3,015	4,156	4,277
Metals	8,053	10,903	8,449
Oils, Kerosene	2,939	3,613	3,214
Oils, others	3,551	7,442	3,852
Rice not in the husk	1,914	11,504	6,061
Salt	4,455	4,563	4,129
Sugar	6,024	6,719	8,457
Tobacco	2,948	4,279	4,061
All other articles	18,749	38,650	41,503
Total	80,547	1,20,559	1,14,660

Exports			
Articles	1930 - 31	1940 - 41	1945 - 46
Caoutchouc	2,262	2,382	1,918
Hides and skins	817	1,734	2,032
Jute	2,552	4,941	5,450
Lac	449	459	1,729
Oil seeds	9,824	7,707	10,563
Oranges	730	312	3,985
Rice in the husk	9,722	9,408	13,645
Tea	99,922	1,23,989	1,53,554
Wood	1,702	4,437	5,171
All other articles	12,472	22,625	14,030
Total	1,40,452	1,77,994	2,12,077

Source: - Report on the Rail and River Borne trade of the province of Assam, Pp. 7-19.

Thus, these are the important means of transport and communication of the valley and the important articles of imports and exports of the Surma-Barak Valley during the colonial period.²¹⁶

To remove the difficulties of the postal communication the road between Silchar to Phulbari, in Katigorah was also improved in the same year. Verner demanded Rs. 300/- for that purpose. He suggested the deduction of that amount from the Ferry Fund. Verner had been a farsighted administrator and realized that the old high way connecting Dudpatil from Banskandi had been a circuitous one passing through low land. He suggested to the Government of Bengal that Banskandi be connected with Silchar Sadar in a straight line passing through the Rongpur Mauja. He convinced the land owners of Rangpur to sell the land to the government (price Rs. 200/- only). He further pointed out that the total cost of making the new portion of the road would not exceed Rs. 800/-. His proposal was accepted. The new road shortened the distance by one third and helped increasing the Manipur-Cachar trade. The road transport has a pivotal role to play in transportation of Agricultural, industrial and essential commodities needed not only for Surma-Barak Valley but for all the other parts of North-Eastern Region due to insufficient railways. It is the roadway which provides a very effective channel of transport for goods and passengers over short and medium distances and to some extent, even over long distances.²¹⁷ The economic integration of the region can be accelerated by enlarging the net work of roads. Any damage and disruption in the road communication system, therefore, seriously affects the economy of the region.

During the colonial period, the postal system in Surma-Barak Valley is maintained by local boards to provide postal communication between the headquarters of Districts and Subdivisions, and revenue and police stations in the interior, in cases where the maintenance of the necessary lines of communication would not be warranted by the commercial principles of the post office. The expenditure from local funds averaged Rs. 48,000/- per annum for the five years ending with 1902-03. The number of District post offices on the 31st March 1904

²¹⁶ *Provincial Gazetteers of Assam, Op. Cit.* P. 104.

²¹⁷ Suhas Chatterjee, *Op. Cit.* Pp. 173-174.

was 58 and the total mileage of District post mail lines 1,387. There has been a steady growth in the mileage of roads in the district, the total now being 402 miles of road and 269 miles of bridle path in the plains portion of the District.²¹⁸ Carts are still however very rare, most of the trade going by water inspite of the fact that in the last ten years so many miles of new cart road have been constructed and that 43 miles of these have been, and 33 miles are now being metalled.

The following statements shows how enormous was the development of postal business during the last forty years of the century, nearly 35 letters and post cards being delivered in 1903-04 for every one that came to hand in 1861-62: -

Number of post offices in 1903-04	Number of letters and post cards omitting thousands delivered in			Number of Savings Bank accounts is		Balance at the credit of the depositors	
	1861-62	1870-71	1903-04	1871-72	1903-04	1871-72	1903 - 04
30	20	71	694	11	3,808	Rs. 6,300.00	Rs. 7,08,000.00

Source: - B. C. Allen, Assam District Gazetteers, P. 135.

The mail is brought by the Assam-Bengal Railway from Calcutta to Silchar, and distributed by runners to the different post offices in the plains.

The savings has also made much progress, and considering the low rate of interest allowed and the scarcity of capital in the district, the volume of deposits is considerable. The figures given for 1872 were returned after bank had only been open for a short time, but on the data then before him the collector hazarded the opinion that the bank was not likely to succeed at all.²¹⁹

²¹⁸ *Provincial Gazetteers of Assam, Op. Cit.* P. 70.

²¹⁹ B. C. Allen, *Op. Cit.* Pp. 134-139.

