

INDO-CHINA WAR AND THE TRANSPORT AND COMMUNICATION OF NORTH BENGAL

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Abstract: India engaged in war with its biggest neighbour i.e. China within fifteen years of its independence. Though the war lasted for a few months, its significances were felt tremendously in India. Policies of Government of India from military and strategic point of view, were rapidly changed. As North Bengal is a bordering region and its strategic importance is tremendous from military point of view, therefore communication and transportation policy of the region was bound to be changed after the war. As there is a research gap in this matter, the object of the article is to find out what was the effects of Indo-China war in North Bengal particular in terms of transport and communication of the region.

Key words: Indo-China War, North Bengal, Effects, Transport and communication.

Introduction: Within the spell of fifteen years of independence India engaged in two wars with its neighbours- one was fought for 'Kashmir' with Pakistan and other for 'border disputes' (1962) with China. While the first was the episode of unending tag of sentiment that seems to have been chronic between India and Pakistan since 1948; later was the naked example of Chinese aggression to Indian territory. Though India under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru always stood for mutual co-existence and cooperation with China, in return it thought aggressively.¹ It was the 'Chinese betrayal' or more precisely according to Rana Satya Paul, "Chinese militarism and its policy of expansionism was again out for a hunt...what other countries in Asia had witnessed from China during the long course of history...and this time China's vicious eyes fell on India".²

Researches since the beginning of the Sino-Indian War on 20th October, 1962; have been made by the scholars on the probable causes for Chinese invasion in India. The Chinese version regarding this war always has accused Nehru responsible for the war.³ Even, Neville Maxwell, reputed Australian journalist in his famous book 'India's China War' and in his

interview to The Times Of India holds Nehru and the 'Indian Forward Policy' responsible for the Chinese attack as an act of self-defence.⁴ However, the Indian official commentary and most of the Indian scholars do not support this view.⁵ India regarded that invasion as a neo-imperialist aggression. Most of the reasons provided explaining China's attack on Indian soil, may be briefed as China's diplomatic strategy for emerging herself as the leader of Asia.⁶ For achieving its desire to dominate the whole of South-East Asia and to browbeat India, China had been working on pronged strategy against India and the Sino-Indian War of 1962 was a part of this.

After the fall of Lhasa into the hands of the Chinese, Jayaprakash Narayan (JP), a reputed Indian politician might have been rightly observed the Chinese attitude towards India and perhaps one of the probable cause for the Sino-Indian border conflict. He says, "Tibet is the palm of the hand and now that the Chinese have it, they want the 'five fingers' without which the palm is useless. The five fingers are Ladakh, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and the North-East Frontier Agency".⁷

Sino-Indian Border issue came to the light since China had conquered Tibet in

1950. The question was acute in Eastern and Western sectors where the borders between India and Tibet were undefined but mutually recognised long before the problem arose. Though, a treaty of friendship popularly known as 'Panchsheel' or following five principles between India and China was signed in 1954, it was found that there were several instances of provocations from the Chinese side for arising border issues. Even, the maps published by the Chinese Government of that time showed 50,000 square miles of Indian territory as Chinese territory and the Chinese troops in several times intruded into the Indian territory to hold their demand without facing any serious protest and resistance from its Indian counterpart.⁸

War clouds between India and China began to gather since the beginning of 1959. A series of talks between the Government of India and its Chinese counterpart or Jawaharlal Nehru and Chou En-Lai had been conducted to settle the border disputes amicably in the midst of series of border fighting between two forces since 1958. Moreover, a joint committee was set up to submit a report by September, 1960 on disputed border issues. But all the official and unofficial efforts proved to be futile.⁹

Ramachandra Guha perhaps has rightly observed, "while the end of the war can be thus explained, its origins are harder to understand".¹⁰ Though a series of recorded and unrecorded border skirmishes between border forces of conflicting nations were going on since the occupation of Tibet by China, it was not since 1961 when the possibility of large scale border conflict arose by the order from the India Government to its army to counter possible Chinese attack.¹¹ From April to August, 1961, and followed by January, April, May, June and July, 1962; the Chinese forces intruded into Sikkim, Ladakh and NEFA. However, the Chinese were unable to

penetrate deep into Indian interior due to 'Forward Policy' of the Indian forces.¹²

On 20th October, 1962, the Chinese started their massive attack on Indian soil in NEFA from the direction of Tawang and Kibithoo; in the Chip Chap Valley and the Pangong Lake areas of Ladakh. By 24th October, as stated by V.D.Mahajan, "the Chinese were well across the McMahon Line through a 25 –mile wide sector to a depth of 8 miles into the Indian territory".¹³ On that day, the Chinese premier Chou En-Lai approached Nehru to come to an negotiation which was refuted by India.¹⁴ China again started a massive attack across most of NEFA on 15th November, but except taking the advantageous situation to intrude into the plains of Assam, it declared a unilateral ceasefire to be effective from the midnight of 21st and 22nd November, 1962; withdrawing its frontier guards behind 12.5 miles of line of actual control in NEFA and on Ladakh front existed between India and China.¹⁵

The Sino-Indian Border conflict left deep consequences on India. In the eve of declaring cease fire, the Chinese forces had possessed the mountain gateways and key passes in the plains of Assam and threatened the whole of Assam and its oil fields. All the nook and corner of NEFA was under direct threat of Chinese subjugation. In the extreme part of war an 'Emergency' was declared in India. The Central Government faced a nation-wide criticism and the non-alignment policy of Nehru was highly condemned by the opposition.¹⁶ Moreover, the strategic policy of India towards its neighbouring countries had also been changed due to Chinese Border Conflict. India since then came to be closer to the 'Western Block' for having military aid, even India's relation with Soviet Russia remained same as it before.

Now, let us look at the road policy of Government of Bengal with communication

statistics of North Bengal at the early years of achieving freedom. The objective of road development programme in West Bengal since 1947 was to 'lay a network of road connecting every village, every industrial centre and every market of the state'.¹⁷ A new organization was set up exclusively in the First Plan period, for constructing and improving roads.¹⁸ At that phase importance was given to connect every district headquarter with Calcutta and every subdivisional town with the district headquarter by road.¹⁹ However, the Government of West Bengal could not achieve its goal in any district of North Bengal till the beginning of 1960's.²⁰ Rather, the district communication system of that time mostly depended upon the pre-independent road networks with a minimum channelized modification due to partition.

Works were taken up for development of National Highways directly financed from the Central Government and a large number of other roads from Cooch Behar Development Fund, from state's share of allocation from the Central Road Fund and from other allotments made from the state's own revenue resources.²¹ However, during the First Plan period progress in the mileage as well as developmental works of National Highways in North Bengal except the district of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri was very marginal in comparison to the southern part of West Bengal. In spite of non-availability of year wise data for all the years of First Five Year Plan period, the following table on degree of accessibility by roads in the districts of North Bengal as on 31st March 1956 gives an idea about the road development in rural and suburban areas till the beginning of Second Plan period.

Degree of Accessibility by Roads as on 31st March, 1956

Name of District	Total area in sq.km.	% of total area within / beyond			
		5 km.	5 to 10 km.	10 to 15 km.	15 km.
West Dinajpur	3586.63	48	36	14	2
Malda	3646.46	36	37	13	14
Jalpaiguri	6159.8	59	28	10	3
Darjeeling	3003.6	49	34	14	5
Cooch Behar	3455.32	37	22	19	21

Source- Sukla Bhaduri. *Transport and Regional Development: A Case Study of Road Transport of West Bengal*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, First Publication, 1992 p. 125.

Now, let's have a look to the road development programme in North Bengal during the Second Plan period. In that phase trace was given upon setting up direct road communication between police stations within the districts in the Second Plan period and that was restored almost all the all the districts of North Bengal accordingly.²² Annual Administrative Report of Public Works Department for the

year 1958-59, Government of West Bengal clearly indicates that the Department had almost completed all of the original road construction works in terms of the 5 year Road Development plans which were administered by the Development (Road) Department.²³ However, the Public Works Department used to devote a considerable portion of its time in constructing important roads and bridges, which were left out of

consideration in the development plans. Side by side, schemes under Central Road Fund Works projects were also taken up by the PWD for execution. The following table shows the mileage of roads (in miles) of various categories e.g. National Highways,

State Highways, Major District Roads and other metalled and unmetalled roads in North Bengal under the maintenance of Public Works Department as on 31st March, 1961.

Mileage of roads (in km.) maintained by Works and Buildings Department in North Bengal during different Plan period (1951-1961)

District	31 st March 1951						31 st March 1956						31 st March 1961					
	NH	SH	MDR	ODR	VR		NH	SH	MDR	ODR	VR		NH	SH	MDR	ODR	VR	
West Dinajpur	-	-	-	50	-		45	-	-	50	-		141	128	13	83	35	
Malda	-	-	-	-	-		58	-	56	2	-		58	18	149	24	2	
Jalpaiguri	139	80	-	155	-		139	69	18	155	-		139	86	64	280	-	
Darjeeling	83	80	-	368	-		99	80	14	368	-		99	80	37	389	-	
Cooch Behar	-	-	-	-	-		-	-	-	-	-		-	-	-	-	-	

Source- Sukla Bhaduri, Transport and Regional Development, A Case Study of Road Transport of West Bengal, Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi, First Publication, 1992, pp-248-50.

NH- National Highways, SH- State Highways, MDR- Major District Road, ODR- Other District Road, VR-Village Road.

- denotes data not found.

The journey to the road development programme in West Bengal till the beginning of 1960's had not gone always smoothly. Khagendra Nath Dasgupta, Minister, Public Works and Housing Department, Government of West Bengal comments, 'every river has not been bridged, every part has not been connected. We are far away from our mission, but we are on the right tract'.²⁴ Side by side, progress of works were also greatly hampered by the unprecedented floods of every year which were very common to North Bengal.²⁵ In spite of increasing demands from the public for more roads and Governmental efforts to meet up the same, the progress of works was consistent with the availability of funds from year to year.²⁶

Let us have a look to the means of road transport system of North Bengal of that time. The common means of transportation of that time were carts pulled by bullocks or ponies. In some areas of Malda district two wheeled *tangas* also transported the passengers as well as commodities. The well to do people used to have hoses, bicycles and even motor bikes for daily convenience. Government officers were provided jeeps for daily uses. In the Duars region and Cooch Behar higher level Government officers were provided elephants for the same.²⁷ Inter district and intra district passenger as well as some amount of commodity transport system was provided chiefly in all the districts of North Bengal by 'North Bengal States Transport Corporation' (NBSTC).

The China War had left deep consequences to the communication system of the country. Getting lessons from Chinese war strategy, India also followed the same by improving its road communication system in the borders for supplying heavy artillery and troops to the borders urgently. Thus, 'following the

invasion of India by her neighbour China', as 'West Bengal- 1964', official publication of Government of West Bengal cites, '223 miles of National Highways have been widened to 7 metres (23 ft.) pavement width including improvement of hard crust twenty miles of new construction are in progress with another 4 miles already completed. This is in addition to construction and reconstruction of 27 major bridges on the National Highways'.²⁸ In 1963, thirteen bridges 14 to 90 metres in length in Gazol-Raiganj Division of NH34 had been constructed expediently.²⁹ In 1964 one of the most important bridge on Tista near Jalpaiguri town was completed and opened for traffic. It can be assumed that the Government policy after the China War was to bridging the NH 34 and NH31 all through for smoothening prompt military movements. Thus, Jaldhaka, Torsha, Dayna, Sankosh and Raidak – the most prominent rivers of North Bengal were bridged all along within 1960's.³⁰ A bridge (52.46 metre) on Little Rangeet on Pulbazar-Darjeeling-Bajanbari road was also completed in 1964. Though, the Farakka Barrage was not the by-product of the Sino-Indian War, its pace of development of construction was fastened by this war heavily.

Respecting the patriotic sentiment of the people, the Government of West Bengal introduced a scheme for village uplifts for immediate execution by the Village Volunteer Forces where schemes were adopted for construction and repair of village roads with many other village improvement works. Though detail statistics of that scheme have not been found, the available data shows that Fifty-two thousand man-days' labour had been contributed to the Defence Labour Banks by members of 60 Village Volunteer Force units in Kalimpong subdivision of

Darjeeling district and the Gram Panchayats in Kalimpong subdivision had drawn up 141 schemes for village uplifts till the beginning of 1963.³¹

In this connection, it is important to mention that the direct result of the China War was to introduce a new road project termed as 'lateral Road Project' by the Government to connect East Assam and New Delhi directly through roads. A series of roads through that project was constructed in North Bengal specially in the Jalpaiguri Duars. One example of that road is the road from Telipara more-Banarhat-Chalsa which connected NH31 towards Assam through the points of Gairkata and Chalsa.³²

The railway communication of North Bengal was greatly influenced by the Sino-Indian War. It was found earlier that the railway communication was restored in North Bengal by the successful completion of Assam Railway Link Project in 1950. But that new communication was carried on mostly through meter gauge lines. But the meter gauge railway is a weaker railway than broad gauge in terms of its loading capacity and speed. This weakness was greatly felt at the time of war. Hence, the broad gauge project was taken in hand by the Government. The first station of this new line in North Bengal was at Khejuria, opposite Farakka. It reaches Barsoi Jn. Through Malda and Kumedpur, thence to NJP through Kishenganj. From NJP the line enters the district of Coochbehar through Belakoba, Raninagar, Mainaguri, Dhupguri and Falakata. From thence through New Coochbehar, New Alipurduar from where it enters to Assam. The whole line was opened for traffic on 1st January, 1964.³³

The strategic importance of North Bengal had increased to several times more after the China War in 1962. Strength of Bagdogra airbase had been increased. A

new air base was set up at Hasimara in 1963. Both the bases were developed to combat air operations over a large area including North Bengal and for providing air support to Sikkim and Bhutan due to Indian Governmental ties with these foreign countries. Again a helicopter unit at Sevoke had been attached to Indian Army's XXXIII Corps based at Sukna in Darjeeling district. All these units also provide military air services to adjacent military units. During Bangladesh Liberation War all of these air bases with their units provided all kinds of military assistance and services to help the Indian Army and *Mukti Bahini* as they could.

Conclusion: Needless to say that issue of road development in North Bengal during and after the Sino-Indian War of 1962, seems to be a demand for time for overcoming the situation. Therefore, most of the road development projects of North Bengal were abandoned when the war clouds between India and China have been disappeared. It is not clearly known while perceiving the strategic importance of North Bengal for situating common boundaries with four foreign nations and the North Bengal Corridor- a passage for entering Northeast India, the Government of India has been tightening the military strength of the region from strategic point of view, the Government at the same time ignored the infrastructural development of roadways for achieving its required level in this region. Thus, while the Sino-Indian border issue was raised again in 2017 (Doklam skirmishes), the Government of India highly realised the paucity of roads for military transportation.

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