

The Internal communication system of Jalpaiguri Town: During the British Period (1869-1971)

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Abstract

This paper examines the development of the internal communication system of Jalpaiguri Town between 1869 and 1971, focusing on roads, bridges, river transport, railways, and municipal infrastructure. Following the establishment of Jalpaiguri as a separate district in 1869, improvements in communication gradually strengthened administrative connectivity and contributed to the town's urban development. In the early period, the Teesta River and ferry services played an important role, while inadequate roads restricted movement. The expansion of roads under the Public Works Department, District Board, and Municipality, together with the introduction of railway communication in 1877, significantly improved regional accessibility. The construction and improvement of bridges and the gradual conversion of unpaved roads into metalled roads further enhanced internal mobility. The study argues that communication infrastructure was closely associated with urbanization, administrative expansion, commercial activity, and changing patterns of transportation in Jalpaiguri.

Keywords: Jalpaiguri Town, communication system, road development, railway communication, urbanization

Introduction

During the Colonial Period, Jalpaiguri emerged as an important colonial town in Northern Bengal. The British established Jalpaiguri as a separate district on 1ST Januari 1869 through a Gazette Notification, (Samatat, 53rd No., p. 12-13) primarily to strengthen and facilitate their administrative control over the region. Following the formation of District, various developmental activities gradually expanded across different sectors. Among these Communication, system became one of the most significant areas of development.

One of the fundamental prerequisites for the growth of any town is the development of an efficient transport and communication network. As the well-known saying goes, "No Road, No Urbanization."

During the initial phase of Jalpaiguri's development, communication between the town and the surrounding regions was extremely poor. The district headquarters, maintained contact with the eastern Duars mainly through the Barnesh Ferry Ghat ^[1], situated on the eastern bank of the Teesta River. Before the construction of the Teesta Bridge in 1964, travel between Jalpaiguri town and the Malbazar area of the eastern Duars depended largely on this ferry crossing. Passengers crossed the river by boat at Barnesh Ghat. Since there was no proper bridge, travellers first reached Barnesh Ghat from Kishanganj, crossed the Teesta by ferry, and then continued their journey by road. During the rainy season, when the river was in full spate, two boats were often tied together to ferry passengers safely across. Gradually, improvements in transport infrastructure connected Jalpaiguri with neighbouring regions and significantly enhanced the town's accessibility.

The construction and maintenance of these roads were primarily the responsibility of the Public Works Department (PWD), while district roads were supervised by the District Board. According to the District Commissioner's report of 1870, the principal roads connected with Jalpaiguri were as follows: A government road extended from Jalpaiguri to Purnia, passing through Maynaguri and continuing up to

Darjeeling, near Siliguri. Another important road ran westward from Jalpaiguri to Dalimkot, extending towards the Himalayan foothills. Both of these roads were under the jurisdiction of the Public Works Department and received regular maintenance. A road from Jalpaiguri to Ferrabari on the district's eastern frontier measured approximately 9 miles. Another road connected Jalpaiguri with Falakata, covering a distance of about 31 miles. A north-western route linked Jalpaiguri with Siliguri via Maynaguri, measuring approximately 27 miles. A road connected Jalpaiguri with Moynaguri, extending for about 30 miles. Another route stretched approximately 29 miles from Jalpaiguri to Dalimkot. A road of about 26 miles connected Jalpaiguri with coachbihar ^[2]. Apart from the roads maintained by the Public Works Department, the District Board was responsible for maintaining approximately 24 kilometres of metalled roads and 778 kilometres of unmetalled roads, linking Jalpaiguri town with different parts of the district. Among the roads maintained by the District Board were the Jalpaiguri-Alipurduar Road, which extended to Alipurduar, and the Alipurduar-Hasimara Road. Together these routes covered approximately 80 miles under the supervision of the District Board. Another important road, about 31 miles in length, connected Jalpaiguri with Siliguri via Ambari and Falakata ^[3].

Besides road transport, river transport played a vital role during the early stages of Jalpaiguri's development. Since the Teesta River flowed close to the town, it served as the principal means of communication with neighbouring regions. Regular ferry services operated across the river ^[4], facilitating the movement of both passengers and goods. However, the importance of river transport gradually declined after the establishment of the railway.

Railway communication between Calcutta (Kolkata) and Jalpaiguri was introduced on 28 August 1877, greatly reducing the dependence on river routes. This railway connection was inaugurated under the initiative of Ashley Eden, the then Lieutenant Governor of Bengal ^[5]. Subsequently, in 1893, the extension of the Bengal-Duars

Railway established a direct rail link between Jalpaiguri and the western Duars ^[6]. The expansion of the railway network marked a significant phase in the region's transport history.

During the Second World War, the strategic importance of North Bengal led to the rapid development of transport infrastructure, particularly for military purposes. The noted writer Prasanth Nath Choudhury in his novel 'Preme Apreme Tista ^[7]', vividly described the transformation of Jalpaiguri's communication system during this period. According to his account, the British administration constructed new railway lines and roads to facilitate the swift movement of military personnel and supplies. A new railway alignment branched off from Jalpaiguri Road Station, crossed the Teesta Railway Bridge, and extended through Paharpur, Falakata, and New Cooch Behar towards Gitaldaha. In addition, a new road bypassed Jalpaiguri town, crossed the Teesta over the Korola Bridge, and connected with Paharpur. Prafulla Roy notes that ministers, senior officials, and many distinguished people attended the inauguration of this bridge.

The construction of the Teesta Bridge in 1964 fundamentally transformed Jalpaiguri's transport network by establishing a more reliable connection with the north-eastern region of India. However, the devastating flood of 1968 severely damaged the approach roads to the bridge. Consequently, the bridge had to be reconstructed and reconnected with the main highway.

In the post-Independence period, the construction of another Teesta Bridge during the 1960s and the development of National Highway 34 further strengthened Jalpaiguri's connectivity with the district headquarters and neighbouring regions. Important roads linking the town included: Maynaguri–Changrabandha Road, Dhupguri–Falakata Road, Jaldaka–Ranirhat Fidar Road, Mandalghat–Jalpaiguri–Paharpur Link Road, Berubari–Jalpaiguri Link Road, Chawlhati–Jalpaiguri Link Road, Jalpaiguri–Rangdhamali–Belakoba Link Road, etc ^[8]. The completion of the Teesta Bridge and the subsequent expansion of the road network significantly improved regional connectivity, integrating Jalpaiguri more effectively with neighbouring towns, districts, and the wider transport system of North Bengal.

The construction of National Highway 34 established a direct road connection between Jalpaiguri and the rest of the country. Consequently, the town became more closely linked with Siliguri, which had by then emerged as the principal commercial centre of North Bengal. This development gradually reduced Jalpaiguri's earlier economic prominence, as Siliguri increasingly assumed the role of the region's leading commercial hub.

Alongside the expansion of roads, the Jalpaiguri District Board also undertook the construction and maintenance of numerous internal roads within the town. The Board was responsible for developing several important roads, bridges, and culverts to improve urban communication. One of its major achievements was the construction of a bridge over the Korola River to facilitate movement within the town. The bridge was initially built in 1878, and according to the proceedings of the District Board, approximately ₹4,500 was sanctioned for the project ^[9]. As the original structure deteriorated over time, a new bridge was constructed in 1907 under the supervision of the Municipal Authority at a cost of ₹7,758 ^[10]. Later, in 1938, the bridge underwent extensive repairs at an additional expenditure of approximately ₹32,000 and named "Brebourn Bridge" ^[11].

During this renovation, the bridge was widened and strengthened to accommodate the increasing volume of traffic.

Initially, the bridge was reportedly accessible only to the Europeans. Professor Shesadri Prasad Basu has mentioned this in his research paper. Subsequently, the bridge was opened to the general public ^[12]. The proceedings of the Municipal Board meeting held on 6 May 1911 provide some information regarding the important roads within the town. At this meeting, the approximate expenditure incurred on the repair of the metalled roads was recorded in a brief statement. In the early period, all the roads within the municipal area were unpaved. Towards the beginning of the twentieth century, the Municipality began laying stone chips and gravel on the roads. The roads were subsequently metalled.

According to the information provided by J. F. Grunning ^[13], the Municipality was responsible for maintaining 25 miles of metalled roads and 9 miles of unpaved roads. In addition, another 7 miles of roads within the town were under the supervision of the District Board. During 1885–86, that is, in the first year after the establishment of the Municipality, no new roads were constructed within the municipal area. During that year, an expenditure of only Rs. 200 was incurred on road repairs. However, in the following year, 1886–87, municipal records indicate that Rs. 91, 12 annas and 6 pies were spent on the construction of new roads.

The available expenditure records for 1894–95 and 1895–96 concerning road repairs and the construction of new roads within the municipal area reveal a considerable increase in expenditure. In 1894–95, Rs. 2,150 was spent, whereas in 1895–96 the expenditure increased substantially to Rs. 4,016. In 1916, the road connecting the Police Station with Karla Bridge, passing through Dhopapatti and the Girls' School, was widened and extended ^[14]. This extension undoubtedly contributed significantly to the improvement of the internal communication system of the town.

By this period, several important roads of Jalpaiguri town had been converted into metalled roads. Among them were the present Teesta Bank Road, then associated with Race Course Para, Stand Road, now known as D.B.C. Road, Kachari Road, and Kerani Para Road. The metalling of these roads marked a significant improvement in the physical infrastructure of the town. At the same time, the nature of transport operating on these roads remained relatively limited. Only a few four-wheeled petrol-driven motor vehicles were in use. In addition, there were a small number of three-wheeled rickshaws, a considerable number of bicycles, and some two-wheeled bullock carts. These different forms of transport were used for carrying both passengers and goods. Thus, the road network was gradually being modernized, although the means of transportation remained largely dependent upon traditional and manually or animal-powered modes of mobility.

The subsequent development of Jalpaiguri's road infrastructure can be clearly observed from the available municipal statistics. In 1971–72, the total length of metalled roads within the municipal area had increased to 29.7 kilometres, while the length of unpaved roads stood at 29.8 kilometres. The figures indicate that, even in the early 1970s, paved and unpaved roads existed in almost equal proportions within the municipal area. This situation demonstrates that although considerable progress had been

made in road development since the establishment of the Municipality, the process of converting the entire road network into paved roads was still incomplete.

A marked transformation became evident by the closing years of the twentieth century. In 1999, the total length of metalled roads within the municipal area had increased to 46.4 kilometres, while an additional 1.5 kilometres of roads had been constructed with concrete surfaces ^[15]. The increase in the length of paved roads, together with the emergence of concrete roads, reflects a significant improvement in the quality as well as the extent of the municipal road network. Compared with the situation in 1971–72, when the lengths of paved and unpaved roads were almost identical, the situation by the end of the twentieth century had changed substantially. By this stage, a major portion of the roads within the municipal area had been converted into paved roads.

The development of roads in Jalpaiguri therefore illustrates a gradual process of infrastructural transformation extending from the colonial period into the twentieth century. In the early years following the establishment of the Municipality, municipal attention was primarily directed towards repairing existing roads, while the construction of new roads remained limited. Over time, however, increased expenditure, the widening and extension of important roads, and the conversion of unpaved roads into metalled roads transformed the internal communication system of the town. The expansion of roads also corresponded with changes in transportation, from bullock carts, bicycles, and rickshaws to the increasing use of motor vehicles. By the end of the twentieth century, the predominance of paved roads and the introduction of concrete roads demonstrate the considerable modernization of Jalpaiguri's urban transport infrastructure. Thus, the history of road development in Jalpaiguri Municipality reflects more than merely the physical improvement of streets. It was closely connected with the broader process of urbanization, the expansion of municipal responsibilities, the growth of administrative and commercial activities, and the changing mobility requirements of the urban population. The gradual transition from predominantly unpaved roads to an extensive network of metalled and concrete roads represents an important dimension of the town's long-term physical and infrastructural development.

SL. NO.	Municipal Roads	Rupees
1.	Kamarpara Road	1,160
2.	Ukilpara Road	1,100
3.	21 No. of connecting Road Siliguri and Boda Road	1,270
4.	Telipara Road	1,170
5.	Club Road	825
6.	Connected Road with Karala River	780
7.	Karala River to Jalpaiguri Road connecting 15No. Road	570
8.	Road No. 16	274
Total Amount		6,369

Source: Sharma Umesh, Jalpaiguri Pouroshabhar 150 Bochorer Itihas, 38-39.

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