

## **The Historical Road for Common Prosperity of South East Asia**

**Dr (Mrs) Juri Gogoi Konwar**

Assistant Professor, Dept of Cultural Studies

Tezpur Central University

Assam

India – 784028

### **Abstract**

*During the Second World War, the road from Ledo, North East Frontier rail station of Assam, India, to Kunming of Yunnan province, China via Lekhapani, Jairampur, Nampong and Pangsau pass of Patkai range, Shindbuiyang, Upper Chindwin, Hukawng and Mogaung valleys, Bhamo, Burma (Myanmar) road and then to Wanting, at China border was constructed by the Allied Forces for maintaining military supply by road. Starting on December 1, 1942 the construction was completed on May 20, 1945. The road passed through some of the most difficult mountainous terrains of the world having 700 bridges over big and small rivers. After the war, for some time the road was maintained, thereafter it remained to be almost completely neglected. In the light of 'Open Market Policy' adopted by the international community, desire of the South East Asian countries to have common economic prosperity and 'Look East Policy' of India, it is important for the concerned countries to reconstruct and reopen the road. The paper presents an account of its possible utilization for the socio-cultural and economic linkages of the connected and nearby countries for peace and prosperity.*

**Keywords:** Ledo-Stilwell road, heritage, prosperity, South East Asia

### **Introduction**

During one hundred twenty one years of British administration of Assam in India, there was a road from her eastern most small town Ledo to Myanmar. This road then known as Ledo road begins at the village-cum-small town of that name, which was the rail-head of the North East Frontier Railway in the valley of the Upper Luit (Brahmaputra) river (Baruah 2012). It walks through the passes (at *ca.* 2,743 m) of Patkai Range (up to 3,826 m) and emerges at Shindbuiyang and then Myitkyina. It crosses the broad bowl of the Upper Chindwin, threads Hukawng and Mogaung valleys, goes down to Bhamo, then Burma road to Wanting at China border which then connects Kunming of Yunnan province, China passing through Wanting, Lungling, Paoshan, Yungpin, Yunnanyi and Tsuyung. This historic road was reconstructed during the Second World War by the Americans connecting Ledo (Assam, India) and Kunming (China) (Geraldine 2012). The road was renamed as Stilwell Road in early 1945 at the suggestion of Chiang Kai-shek (1887–1975), Chairman, National Military Council, Republic of China.

To keep an eye on the Chinese Empire from the strategically located North East part of the British occupied subcontinent, there was a need to have road connectivity. For the purpose, the Ledo road project was prepared and prospected by the British long before the Second World War. In 19<sup>th</sup> century British railway builders surveyed the Pangsau Pass (altitude 1,136 m) on the India-Burma border, the Patkai crest, above Nampong, Arunachal Pradesh. British engineers surveyed the route for a road for the first 128 km. During the Second World War, after Rangoon was captured by the Japanese and before Ledo road was finished, majority of supplies to Chinese were delivered via airlifting over the eastern end of the Himalayan Mountains known as the Hump (Webster 2005).

During the Second World War, Americans leading the Allied Forces desperately wanted to have a road for the transport and communication between China and Burma to liberate Burma from Japanese forces. Ledo (Assam, India) road to Myanmar's (Burma) Mong-Yu junction was projected to be the primary supply route to China.

The construction of Ledo road was undertaken in December 1942. Americans, British, Indian, Chinese and West African mechanical road makers were engaged for the construction through the wild jungles, tangles of swamp-forests, deep valleys-high cliffs, heavy rains-floods across the Indo-Burma mountain range (Webster 2005).

The mountainous terrain having mostly earthen blocks with occasional rock formations caused pressing maintenance problems during the monsoon period. Ledo road passed over 700 bridges; each had to be built to withstand the annual monsoon. The next year's monsoon washed away many of the bridges (Xu, 2001). Ledo road crossed numerous small mountain streams to cut through the Hukawng Valley of northern Myanmar.

The construction of the road was completed on May 20<sup>th</sup> 1945 and named after the American General Stilwell as proposed by the Chinese General Chiang Kai-shek. The road was built by 35,000 local workers and 15,000 American soldiers, 60% of them were African-Americans at a cost of US \$ 13,70,00,000. About 1,100 American and much more than those local workers died during the construction. As most of Myanmar was in Japanese hands it was not possible to acquire information as to the topography, soils, and river behaviour before construction started. The information was acquired during the road construction only (Geraldine 2012; Webster 2005).

**Fig. 1: Ledo-Stilwell Road from Ledo of Assam to Kunming of China through Myanmar**



**Fig. 2: Ledo-Stilwell road over hill tops**



**Table 1: Locations and distances of Ledo-Stilwell Road from Ledo, Assam, India**

Location	Distance in km from Ledo	Location	Distance in km from Ledo
Ledo	0	Wanting*	811
Pangsau Pass	61	Lungling*	896
Tagap Hill	127	Lungling*	896
Shindbwiyang	165	Paoshan*	1,043
Jambu-Bum	287	Yungpin*	1,208
Warazup	304	Yunnanyi*	1,402
Myitkyina	403	Tsuyung*	1,543
Bhamo	595	Kunming*	1,726
Namkham	707		
Mong-Yu (Ledo-Myanmar Road-749 junction)		<b>Length of Road</b>	
		<b>India</b>	<b>61</b>
		<b>Myanmar</b>	<b>1,033</b>
		<b>China</b>	<b>632</b>

\* Lies on Burma Road

### ***Multinational-Multiracial labour force in the road construction***

The engineering parties came first with the back up support given by the soldiers of the Allied Forces. Behind them came the bulldozers, often armour-plated, shoving its way forward wherever it could get, scraping out the road. Mine-detecting crews worked a few yards ahead of the bulldozers. Last came the main highway builders, blasting their track, metaling it, constructing steel bridges that would hold against the floods, cutting a swathe twice as wide as the road on either side of it to let the sun come in and dry the surface (Latimer 2004). Then men would drop the pick and seize the bayonet, or perhaps fight it out with the pick (Webster 2005; Xu 2001).

Americans both black and white, British, West Africans, Chinese, Chins, Kachins, Nepalese and Garos, Nagas, Biharis (Indian) slashed, hauled and piled together. After the day's work when the labourers come to their camps for food and rest, numbering almost 2,000 of them spoke as many as 200 different dialects. The highway beyond Ledo was little more than a foot trail snaking off into the Naga Hills. There was a wide gravelled highway to take the heavy loads of American and Allied military convoys during the Second World War. The colourful Naga head-hunters who lived in the hills around Ledo possessed a striking resemblance to American Indians. They had the same copper colouring, high cheekbones, and hooked noses, and their walking had a natural grace.

### ***Post war Maintenance of the road***

After the Second World War, the road was continued to be maintained by the British Political Officer and then by the Central Public Works Department (CPWD), NEFA (Arunachal Pradesh) from zero mile to the border and kept open for civilian purpose including tourists with a Central Excise and Land customs Post at Nampong from the Indian side. Similarly, the Myanmar Government maintained their part of the road; but later abandoned it. The road became impossible for vehicular traffic due to heavy landslides. The portion between the zero mile and Jairampur - 23 km falling in Assam jurisdiction was handed over to Assam Government some years back for maintenance who in turn handed it over to North East Council (NEC), India. But NEC did not pay attention to it and now the portion is worn out (Choudhuri 2008). The Arunachal Pradesh portion up to the border, about 36 km, is still continued to be maintained particularly up to Nampong from Administrative and Security point of view. At Jairampur, bus services also regularly ply up to Nampong. However, due to insurgent activities the border was sealed by Government of India several years back barring movement of civilians including people living on the border causing hindrance in their cultural relations and village (Hindah 2011; Bhaumik 2013).

### ***Present status of Ledo-Stilwell road***

After Burma was liberated, the road gradually fell into disrepair. In 1955 the Oxford-Cambridge Over-land expedition followed the road from Ledo to Myitkyina and beyond up to Chinese border.

Travel into the region was also restricted for many years on account of an insurgency. India imposed restrictions between 1962 and 1990 on travel into Myanmar.

In course of time, Ledo-Stilwell road had virtually disappeared. However, 61 km of the road lies in India, 1,033 km in Myanmar and 632 km in China. In India out of 61 km, 30 km lies in the state Assam and 31 km in Arunachal Pradesh. The border between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh has 14 km of the road section previously which was in deplorable condition, now it has been repaired and the construction of international trade route is underway to link Myanmar to Pangsau pass. In the case of Indian side, the road is being repaired and renovated up to Nampong and extension up to Pangsau pass, Indo-Myanmar border is underway.

Local border trade takes place with Mynamarese traders being allowed to sell their products at a market on Indian side for two days, and Indian traders on Myanmarese side two days a week. Only local products are traded at these markets. Myanmar Government with the help of China reconstructed the part of the Stilwell road falling in their country.

### **Objectives**

On the basis of the construction history presented above, there is great prospect for use of the road for socio-economic related peace and prosperity of the connected and adjoining countries. The prospect of the road has been highlighted with the following objectives:

1. Possible use of the road for boarder trade and other commercial activities of the connected and adjoining countries.
2. Better socio-cultural exchange among the connected countries.
3. Development of an axis for regional collaboration and cooperation.
4. Strengthening of India's Look East Policy

### **Research Methodology**

Primary and secondary information were collected for the present investigation. People from different strata of society like school/college/university teachers, Government officials, business community, citizens from villages and towns of the state of Assam at random were contacted and obtained their opinion about the possible use of the Ledo-Stilwell road. The questions asked were:

1. Are you aware of a road from Ledo to China known as Stilwell road?
2. Do you know about its present condition?
3. If the road is repaired/ reconstructed, how it would be beneficial?
4. Is there a need to open up this road, if so how?
5. What would be the impact of this trans-continental road on
  - (i) Economy through commerce and tourism
  - (ii) Regional cooperation
  - (iii) Socio-cultural exchange
  - (iv) Insurgency related issues
  - (v) Peace and prosperity

A total of 200 respondents were contacted on our several visits to Tinisukia, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar, Jorhat, Sonitpur and Kamrup districts, also Guwahati Metropolitan City of Assam, India. We divided the respondents into the following groups:

- (a) Those unaware of the Ledo road, they are mostly villagers and workers in towns and cities.
- (b) Those aware of the Ledo road, but not of Stilwell road, they are mostly from Sonitpur and Kamrup districts.
- (c) Those fully aware of Ledo as well Stilwell road, they are mostly teachers, Business workers and Government officials from Tinisukia, Dibrugarh, Jorhat and Guwahati Metropolitan city.

## **Result and Discussion**

Travel between India and Myanmar has improved and tourism has begun near Pangsayu pass, at the 'lake of no return'. The road on Myanmar side is now fit for vehicular traffic. Myanmarese from Pangsau village saunter nonchalantly across Pangsau pass, down to Nampong in India for marketing as the border is open despite the presence of insurgents on both sides (Hindah 2011).

Majority of the respondents (52%) aware of the Ledo-Stilwell road opined that opening up of the road by the concerned three countries will not only increase transportation of goods and people, but also tourism. The trade through the renovated Ledo-Stilwell road will reduce the transportation cost of goods shipped between China and India to almost 30%, as reported by Indian Chambers of Commerce. According to Government officials and teachers, major production centres of goods and finished products shall come up in the North Eastern states of India and also in Northern Myanmar if this road is opened. This will give a positive impact on the economy of both the countries.

This road is likely to become International Highway for trade route to link Myanmar, China, Thailand and other South East Asian countries. The reopening of this road as trade route will increase the interaction between the people of neighbouring countries and maintain good relationship among the member countries. It will also boost trade and attract inland and foreign tourists as the road itself is historically famous and significant due to Second World War, which in turn will boost socio-economic development of the area and will benefit the local people. The North East Region of India is geographically isolated and its economic development is lagging behind as compared to the other parts of India due to several factors even though the region is endowed with natural resources. There is already approved trade route with Myanmar from the state of Nagaland and Manipur, and from Assam and Tripura to Bangladesh which could become significant means of foreign trade and regional co-operation towards economic development of the region.

In the recent years, Myanmar Government has focused on the reconstruction of Ledo road as an alternative to the existing Lashio-Kunming Burma road. Chinese Government completed construction of the Myitkyina-Kambaiti section in 2007 and one Rangoon based Company is constructing the section between Myitkyina and Tanai.

### **India's Look East Policy and reopening of Ledo-Stilwell road**

In India, there appears to be divided opinion on whether or not to reopen the road for trade with Myanmar and China, as the potential commercial benefits are weighed against the national security concerns. Statesmen and administrators have been repeatedly and strongly arguing for the reopening of the road so as to enable trade and traffic with these two countries (Khaund 2005; Bhaumik 2013).

In the context of India's 'Look East Policy', there is a need for the country to develop, reconstruct and reopen its own part of the road. Indian Prime while addressing a conference on India's 'Look East policy' at the National University of Singapore highlighted the potentiality of trade and commerce among China, Thailand, Myanmar, Bangladesh and India for mutual economic gain (Life Magazine, 1944; The Myanmar Times, 2002). Only 61 km of the road belongs to India so it does not really matter whether India reopens the road or not. Chinese goods and people will be able to reach the Indian border in any case as the Myanmar part of the road is opened. India has been reluctant to open the road due to military and commercial considerations (Hindah 2011; Bhaumik 2013). According to economist Gogoi (2003) 'North East India and India as a whole could established direct road link with Hong Kong if the Ledo-Stilwell road is well developed. Since Kunming is already connected with Hong Kong by an express Highway. While China has upgraded its part of the Ledo-Stilwell road into a highway that can easily handle modern container traffic, Myanmar has already renovated its part of the road. Of late, the Indian part of the road has been under construction, one stretch of about 12 km still remains to be covered. One of the great travellers from Assam, Purna Kanta Buragohain about seventy years back walked through this road up to Hukong Valley of China and opined in his travelogue '*Patkair Hipare Na Basar*' [Nine years in the other side of Patkai Range] this road will not only create greater socio-cultural understanding among the people of the connected countries but will also bring economic prosperity through commercial and tourism links.

According to Baruah (2005), the prospect of building a cross – border region linking North East India with its eastern neighbours become brighter if one imagines linking the Kunming Initiative with the Mekong - Ganga project. Sino-Indian rapprochement can bring benefits that can scarcely be imagined at present.

Along with the renovation and reopening of Ledo-Stilwell road, there lies the importance of establishing suitable major production and commercial units in Assam plains and other seven hill states of North East India targeting the marketing prospect in Myanmar, Thailand, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and China. The establishment of production units and commercial centres in the North Eastern region would be more economically viable effecting significant reduction in transportation costs (Baruah 2012; Choudhuri 2008; Khaund 2005).

Though the road has been reconstructed for military purposes, its main contribution of the pre-renovation phase will be its socio-cultural and economic importance for all three and other adjoining countries. It is an important episode of the cartographic and strategic history of the frontier. Beside this road has a prosperous past and potential future; the potentialities are to be properly utilized for the benefit of the region (Dutta, 2012).

### **Conclusion**

Ledo-Stilwell road had been an idea in man's brain; the indomitable human spirit and hard working made it a reality with stone and steel (The Myanmar Times, 2002). Some of the finest fighting materials of five nations: America, British, China, India, Nepal and West Africa were employed in the construction of the Road; and they were backed by all-powerful Allied Air Force, and an impressive park of mechanical road makers. The road passed over 700 bridges and each of them had to be built to withstand the annual monsoon flood. The available American technology used for the construction of the bridge abutments and approaches having sturdy footing over the Missisipi river had to be used in the case of the bridges of Ledo-Stilwell road to withstand floods of the mighty Luit (Brahmaputra) river of Assam valley, small but strong mountain streams of Hukawng Valley as well as Chindwin river of northern Myanmar and Huwangho river of China. The road was built by 50,000 workers drawn from more than six countries. The road passing through some of the most difficult mountain terrains of the world with 700 bridges is indeed an engineering marvel and symbol of human spirit and strength.

### **References**

- Baruah, S. (2005). *Durable Disorder, Understanding the Politics of Northeast India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Baruah, S. (2012). The Stilwell Road a historical review on the website of Tinsukia District in India.
- Bhaumik, S. (2013). India and China can bond along the Stilwell Road. *The Economic Times*, October 17.
- Buragohain, P. (1994). Patkair Hipare Na Basar. Dhemaji: BOPLMT
- Choudhuri, A. (2008). Monumental neglect of war graves - Discovered in 1997, Jairampur cemetery gets entangled in red tape, *Calcutta Telegraph*, 29 January.
- Dutta, T. (2012). India's Look East Policy and Economic Prospects of North East India – A Stilwell Road Prospective. *Indian Streams Research Journal*, Vol II, Issue X.
- Geraldine, H. S. (2012). "Highway to Freedom": African Americans in World War II China, the Gillem Board, the Ledo Road and U.S. Racial Integration, (ed. W. R. Allen, R. T. Teranishi and M. Bonous-Hammarth), *Advances in Education in Diverse Communities: Research, Policy and Praxis*, Vol. 7, Emerald Group Pub. Ltd., pp. 225-234.
- Gogoi, J. K. (2003). Border Trade in North East India", *Assam Tribune*, 24th October.
- Hindah, R. (2011). A profile of Changlang District: Stilwell Road, the website of the Changlang District in India.
- Khaund, S. (2005). Kalam urged to reopen Stilwell road to reach Burma. *Mizzima News* ([www.mizzima.com](http://www.mizzima.com)) 28 March 2005.
- Latimer, J. (2004). *Burma: The Forgotten War*, Chapter 13: 'Stilwell in the North'. London: John Murray.
- Life Magazine (1944). The Ledo Road; "Pick's Pike" follows Stilwell's advance in Burma. *Life Magazine*. 14 August issue.
- The Myanmar Times. (2002). A war-time engineering miracle. *The Myanmar Times*. Vol. 5, No. 99, 21–27 January issue
- Webster, D. (2005). *The Burma Road: The Epic Story of the China-Burma-India Theater in World War"*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux
- Xu, G. (2001). *War Wings: The United States and Chinese Military Aviation, 1929-1949*, Praeger: West Port.