CHAPTER- IV

EVOLUTION OF PUBLIC TRANSPORT IN GUWAHATI

4.1 Elements of Transport Linkages

A well-laid transport network can provide answer to many problems of urban life and effects immensely the city’s economic and socio-cultural life. For a balance regional growth it is essential to have advanced linkages (forward as well as backward) and efficient modes of transport. Any urban center or rural area may form a region, which fulfill the aspirations of the people. The integration, co-ordination and inter-connection among the regions accelerate the growth of all the regions, which is depend mainly on efficient transportation.

In the process of regional development, the interaction between the urban centers and surrounding rural areas plays significant role. Interaction between rural and urban areas reflects the inter-dependence among the various units of settlements in a given region. In India, agriculture is the main sector that provides the livelihood to the majority of the population. Trade in agricultural produce is the most important channel accomplishing such an interaction. Another factor responsible for growing interaction is the development of industries. Around these stimuli, develop the necessary infrastructural facilities and amenities, which tend to tie hierarchic system of settlements into the chain of dependent units. Inter-regional linkages provide the scope for bridging the deficit gap and for the sale of surplus produce generated in the region. Linkages and mobility are the two axes that connect top with the base. It is therefore, necessary to define these elements before dealing with their concepts:
Space relations: Space relations may be defined as the connections between or among the places in a continuous expanse extending in all directions within which all things exist.

Regional economy: Regional economy is an orderly arrangement of an economic system of the territory or region having almost homogeneous characteristics.

Linkages: Linkages are the system of links organized in a place.

Mobility: Mobility refers to the movement of the people in which passengers move from one place to another.

Interaction: Interaction deals with the act on one another at a given time.

4.2 Background of Transportation

The Guwahati city as well as other urban centers in the state developed under certain geographical situations. The dominant physical feature of Assam is the mighty Brahmaputra, which flows through the entire length of the valley. This river together with a large number of tributaries formed the most important transport and communication network during the ancient and medieval periods. In fact it was the only major route, which connected this part of the country with rest of India. The Ahoms, who ruled Assam for almost six hundred years, supplemented the waterways by constructing wide roads of great height and connected the villages through numerous pathways. Rutherford, the Principal Assistant Central Assam, commented in 1835 that “Perhaps no country in India has been provided with such a splendid system of highways which were carried uninterruptedly throughout the whole country from Goalpara, on either banks of the river, to Sadiya to the great crossroads between the principal towns and minute ramifications which connected all the villages”. The Ahom
rulers believed that it was essential to maintain an effective communication link between important places and 'Chokey's of the kingdom with the capital cities of Gargaon and Rangpur. Roads and embankments not only served as lines of communication for economic and social intercourse but were also often necessary as a security measure in order to protect the people at the foot of the hills from the constant threat of the raids of the surrounding hill tribes. The Gargaya Raja (1539-52) for instance, built the Naga Ali while Pratap Singha (1603-41) raised the Dhupgarh embankment at Silpani and the Daflagarh embankment at Lakhipur as a protective measure against Naga raids. Hence, like the Romans of ancient Europe, the Ahoms laid considerable stress on road building and also had a Public Works Department for the purpose. Of the more important roads built by Ahoms and Koch kings were the Gohain Kamal Ali which extended from Cooch Behar to Narrayanpur in Lakhimpur, Bangal Ali from North East Darrang to Guwahati, Jayantia Ali from Raha Chokey to Jayantiapur, Bar Ali from Rangpur to Jaipur, Dhodar Ali from Golaghat to Jaipur and the Ladoigarh Ali in Jorhat Subdivision.

It is significant to note that during the time of Ahoms the road system was intimately connected with waterways and many roads were constructed on the raised embankments of the rivers thereby lending the name garh. Most of these were raised by around 8 feet to 10 feet. The urge of ensuring transport and communication facilities, which had impelled the Ahom monarchs to construct roads, also stimulated them to construct bridges. Several masonry bridges, commonly known as Silsakos, which were constructed during those days stand testimony to the engineering skill of the Ahoms. However, most of them are now in ruins, but a few are in use even today.

Unfortunately, such a good network of roads completely disintegrated as a result of the neglect during the closing years of Ahom rule and in the event of the Burmese invasion. Most of the roads were overgrown with jungles and having broken
down for want of repair. Thus when the British arrived on the scene, the communication network in Assam was in a sorry state of affairs. It was indeed a Herculean task to reopen, reconstruct and maintain these roads. The huge labour force that had made the construction of these roads possible under the Ahoms was no longer available. Hill ranges, innumerable rivers, high rainfall, flood, seismic activities made construction of road very difficult. In spite of that, tea companies have developed and maintained many of the inter-garden roads. But development of the public roads was sadly neglected. As a result wheeled traffic in Assam, even in the form of a bullock cart, made a very late appearance. The first motorcar, in fact came only in 1904 when Newton Gill, a planter, brought his Darrac to Assam.

In the year 1865, steps were taken to construct a Trunk Road through the whole length of the Brahmaputra valley. It was designed to make it a first class metalled and embanked highway of 24 feet wide. Moreover it was aligned in such a way that it would be possible to convert it to a railway at any time. As it was found to be very expensive the decision was changed and the work continued in a smaller scale with 16 feet top width. Eventually, the road that was constructed ran along the south bank of the Brahmaputra from Sadiya to Dhubri. Guwahati was joined by a metal road to Shillong which was further connected via Cherapunjee, Theriaghan and Companyganj with Sylhet and Cachar. A second trunk road was subsequently constructed along the north bank of the Brahmaputra. Apart from the Trunk Roads the other important feeder roads were the roads from Guwahati to Disangmukh, Rangamatighat to Mangaldoi, Dhodar Ali and Tura to Brahmaputra. Till 1903-04 in whole of Assam 3173 miles (5077km) of roads had been constructed of which 42 miles (68km) were metalled i.e. 1.3 percent to the total road length. The situation remain unchanged till 1939. Out of the 5412 miles (8643km) of roads in the province, only 732 miles (1172km) were metalled i.e. 14 percent to the total. Of the remainder, 20 percent were graveled and 66 percent earthen roads.
After the District Cesses Act was passed in 1871 road development and maintenance at local level gone to the District Committees. But this measure was also not fruitful because the funds available from tolls and other miscellaneous sources were totally inadequate for the amount of work involved. Moreover, the District Committees had little independence in making the expenditure or in suggesting measures for raising additional fund. Thus the road development in Assam continued to be neglected for a very long time. Only those roads which were considered to be absolutely necessary for strategic and commercial reasons were opened up and maintained.

The city of Guwahati like other cities of the country survives without adequate infrastructures. It is first and foremost a center for communication and its very existence depends on the development of its transport facilities. Food and other consumer goods necessarily been brought in while other goods must be carried away from the ware houses and factories of Guwahati to its surrounding areas as well as other parts of North East India. Over 3 lakh people need to be carried each day between their places of work and their residence in and around the city.

Guwahati is linked with whole of Assam as well as with rest of India by railways and airways. It is also linked with certain parts of Assam by waterways. Therefore, it is rightly called the gateway of Assam as well as North East India because one can go to any place of the region through Guwahati.

Until few decades ago there were no modern means of transport in Guwahati or any parts of Assam. At that time people traveled on foot, on horseback or elephant back and bullock carts etc. In the first three decades of 20th century there were two kinds of carriages drawn by horses. One was the fashionable one called ‘Tom-tom’ and the other was the common ‘Bogey’. A few number of ‘Tom-tom’ cars which were
drawn by one or two horses were used by merchant and other well-to-do persons of Guwahati. But the box type 'Bogey's, drawn by two horses were used by the general people against payment.

The advent of road transport in modern Guwahati as elsewhere in India, has developed during the British Period. Though the Britishers developed transport facilities giving priority in their benefits it brought a great change in pattern and trend of transport development. It is mentioned in the Assam Administration Report for 1874-75 and 1875-76 that 'During the last ten years, the improvement effected in the communication in Assam, both by land and water, has been very great' (W.W. Hunter, A Statistical Account of Assam (London: Trubner & Co., 1879, p. 85). In 1866 the project of making a connected trunk road through the province of Assam had been started. By the end of 1873 about one fourth of this road i.e. 96 miles (155 km) from Agia through Guwahati to Kalong river was completed. The road was begun with the design of a first class metalled road of twenty four feet to width. Some old roads had however been improved during this period. The principal lines of roads constructed by the Britishers which provided direct route between important centers were the Assam Trunk Road (presently the National Highway-37), Guwahati- Shillong Road, North Guwahati- Barpeta Road and North Guwahati- Tezpur Road. Several branch road and ‘town road’ added to the network provided easy transportation in and around Guwahati.

In 1942, at the time of World War II, all educational institutions of Guwahati were used as hospitals, army camps and for other war activities. At that time, a military bus was used to run through the heart of Guwahati for their own use. This germinated the idea to introduce city bus services within the city.

After independence the development took place in many directions, numerous
new roads were constructed. Existing roads were also repaired and improved. The National Highway No-31 enters into the city through the Saraighat Bridge over the Brahmaputra near Pandu and merges in the National Highway No-37 (west) forming two wings. The newly constructed part runs all along the length of the southern boundary of the city and joins the Guwahati-Shillong Road in the east at Khanapara. The old part which passes through the heart of the city is still known as the Assam Trunk Road. Perhaps it is the oldest road of Guwahati.

In the month of April, 1947, in Guwahati the first city bus was placed on the Guwahati road. A Ford-L Land bus, number ASA 1148, named ‘Shuttle-Service’ later renamed as ‘Navayuga’ was the first city bus plying from Bharalumukh to Silpukhuri. The first entrepreneurs of this city bus were late Subha Barua, late Taubuddin, late Rohini Choudhury and Sri Deviram Das, late Indramohan Chakravarty was said bus route was later extended to Chandmari in the eastern side and to Kamakhya on the western side.

In 1961 the city bus service was introduced in the route from Jalukbari to old Steamer Ghat and from Jalukbari to Khanapara. With the establishment of the Guwahati Oil Refinery Complex in 1962, a new township started growing up and this called for the main city bus route to be extended to Noonmati in the eastern side and to Pandu in the western side. This Noonmati- Pandu route remains the busiest city bus route till today. At that time another seven new routes had been introduced. G. N. Bordoloi Road, M.C. Baruah Road, Strand Road and A. T. Road form the main inter-city bus route of Guwahati. The width of these roads was very narrow which nowhere exceeds 11.6 meters. At certain places the courtyards and private buildings encroached the road land such a way that it hopelessly narrowed to even less than 7 meters. This was due to unplanned growth of settlement and construction of the houses along the roads.
Some section of the city bus routes such as A.T. Road –Zoo Road, Lakhtokia Road – G. S. Road, Strand Road etc the road width varies from 6 to 11.6 meters. The path of all these roads was meandering and hence these are not at all favourable for the high-speed traffic.

During the early sixties, with the establishment of subsidiary industries of the Oil Refinery, the construction of the railway-cum road bridge over the Brahmaputra and the establishment of the military cantonment at Satgaon, a significant development took place in the evolutionary history of Guwahati. During the early seventies, with the setting up of temporary capital complex at Dispur and establishment of several banks, godowns, wholesale tea market and several offices, the growth and development of the city became faster. As a result of this the number of city bus routes have been increasing year after year. It has been observed that in 1975 there were eight city bus routes viz. Noonmati to Pandu, Noonmati to Chandrapur, Noonmati to Satgaon, D.C.’s court to Khanapara (via Ulubari), D.C.’s court to Dispur (via Zoo Road), D.C.’s court to Dispur (via Ulubari) and D.C.’s court to Airport. Upto 1978 a few more places were included in the map of Guwahati city bus service routes. Kahilipara, Rehabari etc. were also connected by the city buses in phases.