

Motor Roads Construction in Upper Myanmar (1886–1948)

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Abstract

This paper is a compilation on the road construction of the British in Upper Myanmar during the colonial period. The British constructed roads after annexation of Lower Myanmar. They constructed roads in Lower Myanmar with the intention of annexing Upper Myanmar. The British constructed roads in Upper Myanmar with political, economical, administrative and military objectives. After annexation of the whole country of Myanmar the British made attempts to connect the roads in Myanmar with those in India, China and Thailand. The British carried out frontier road construction for furthering their economic interests in these countries. In Upper Myanmar, the British did not give priority to the construction of roads in areas where transportation and communication was very difficult. They gave priority to the construction of roads in areas where they expected to get economic profit. Similarly, they extended waterways in areas where Irrawaddy Flotilla Company could get profit in monopolizing the waterway transportation. Construction of roads in Upper Myanmar brought about the movement in transportation and communication together with economic and social changes. But in practice, Myanmar people did not enjoy benefits as much as they should. The ones who really enjoyed the immediate benefits were the British capitalists.

Keywords: Myelan, cartrack

Introduction

The British constructed roads with the objectives of launching military campaign at any place and the effective administration and economic and social reasons. Before the construction of roads in the colonial period, people had to travel from one place to another on foot. In going through forests and over the mountains, people cut roads. When these paths were well used, they became roads after being used for a long time. Later, pack animals were used along these paths. Then, these paths were gradually improved. During the reign of Myanmar kings, people used footpaths, mule paths and cart tracks which were not improved or maintained. Most of the cart tracks were not usable throughout the year. They could be used in the dry season. Motor roads were constructed, as the cart tracks were not inadequate. The Upper Myanmar's the earliest road system was the transportation system of carrying cargo on the shoulder of the people and carrying by cart. Although waterway could be used for relationship between different races for

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economic, social or political reasons, in areas, which were distant from waterway and railway, short-cut roads had to be found and constructed.

In construction of roads, the first built were earth or *dirt* (Mye-Lan) roads. These earth roads were used by people carrying burdens on shoulder and on packs of animals. Later people invented wheeled carts for carrying burdens. Thus with the invention of wheeled carts, inland traveling made an advancement. But after using these earth roads for a long time, the condition of these roads became worse. The private roads appeared and taxes were collected for using the private roads. There was not much development in traveling by road because of unrepaired roads and lack of bridges over streams. For this reason, metalled roads were constructed in the place of cart tracks. Construction of roads and improvement of roads could not be carried out up to 1880. After along time, ways were reached to make connections with short roads. By this means roads were gradually extended. As a result of successive effort, the road construction made another advancement with the appearance of four-wheeled motor vehicles or motorcars. Then roads were further extended with the appearance of motor-driven with crude oil. Before the advent of motorcar in Myanmar, the cart roads were metalled for convenience in traveling in the rainy season.

The British annexed the Upper Myanmar on 28 October 1885 and declared that the whole Myanmar was annexed by the British on 1 January 1886. Starting from that time on, Mandalay Municipal Board was formed and an earth road was led metal for 15 miles in the city of Mandalay for stabilization of administration and for the safe movement of the British troops. The motor-road from Toungoo to Mandalay was constructed in 1886-87 for easy communication between Upper and Lower Myanmar and for the speedy transportation of military supplies and ordinance. Another purpose of the construction of this road was to link up with Yunan, the backdoor of China through Myanmar. The road construction was undertaken for sixty miles from Rangoon side and for forty miles Mandalay side. The earthwork was carried out in 1886-87 and completed on 1890. At the same time roads were constructed for areas which were distant from the waterways and railway lines. Metalling of Rangoon-Mandalay road was completed on 13 November 1931 and so Rangoon-Mandalay could be directly communicated. After completion of Rangoon-Mandalay metalled road, the former villages, Leway and Tatkon became noted as towns. Moreover, the British constructed motor roads in the places of the cart tracks that were in existence during the reign of Myanmar kings.

The Study of Motor Roads

In Upper Myanmar, the British could build roads only after construction of railroads. This was due to the fact that the waterway and the railways were easier and more convenient in communication and transportation. According to Mr. Bernard's report, the bridges and roads were almost non-existent in Upper Myanmar and that most of the roads were cart tracks and that transportation cost by cart was high. Although waterway transportation of goods was effective along the course of the Ayeyarwaddy River, in areas, which were distant from waterways, the transportation of goods by rail could be much improved. With better transportation system, the administration could be more effective. With these objectives in mind, the British, after annexation of Upper Myanmar, constructed military barracks for the Europeans, hospitals and military headquarters for the soldiers. For security reason, police stations and one biggest prison were constructed in Mandalay. In other words, the British paid special attention to continuous communication and for getting revenues. Accordingly, they constructed railroads and motor roads. By that time, the British had already constructed the roads from Mandalay to the Northern Shan State via Maymyo, the road from Thabaikkyin to the Ruby Mines, and the road from Myingyan to the Southern Shan State, Fort statement through Mahlaing, Meiktila and Hlaingdet. Moreover, the British constructed Kyaukmyaung-Shwebo road, Shwebo-Ye U road, Monywa-Myinmu road, and Minbu-Ngaphe road.¹

Although the construction of roads came after the construction of railroads, the major role of road in the transportation sector can be seen in the policies of motor road transportation. Each means of transportation has its own good points or characteristic features. Rail transportation is good for regular transportation of passengers and goods for long distances. This means of transportation is good for transportation of goods which do not need speedy transportation. The waterway transportation is the cheapest. The transportation by road is good at adjusting time as required. As for the airway transportation, it is good for speedy transpiration of goods for long distances. Among them, road transportation becomes very useful when other means of transportation cannot be employed.²

¹ J.G. Scott and J.P Hardiman, *Gazetteer of Upper Burma and the Shan State*, Part.I, vol.ii, Yangon, Superintendent Government Printing, 1900, p.527 (Henceforth: Scott, 1900)

² U Hla Thein, *Aheik Myanmarpyi hnight Britishto ei Okchokye Panetchapon 1889* (The Laying down of British Administration of Upper Myanmar 1886), *Naingngan Thamaing Thutethana Sarsaung* No.1 (Journal of Historical Research1). Department of Historical Research, Yangon, Sarpay Beikman Press, 1977, p.184

In the report on construction of railroads of Sir. Bernard, the Chief Commissioner of Upper Myanmar mentioned that although motor roads were less expensive than rail road construction, the rail road was constructed earlier than motor roads for cost of annual maintenance, difficulty of procuring motor vehicles and its cost of maintenance. Moreover, excluding construction of bridges crossing over streams and rivers, the construction of road would take eight year. Two thirds of the yearly income must be used for maintenance and one-third in paying the interest. It is mentioned in the report that the income from the road could not get one-fourth of the income from railway which needed large initial capital. That was the reason why the railroad was constructed earlier than motor road.³ On this observation, the British paid preference to financial gain in the construction of transportation routes. Then, Mr. Bernard mentioned that the bridges and roads were almost non-existent in Upper Myanmar. Most of the roads in Upper Myanmar were cart-tracks. As the transportation by train was not adequate to transport military supplies and ordnance, the British gave attention to construction of roads.

Therefore, the British, after the annexation of Upper Myanmar, constructed railway lines all over Upper Myanmar but they did not neglect to continue building roads.⁴ At that time, there were not good roads apart from large towns in Upper Myanmar. The British continue to build metalled roads all over Myanmar to support the communication for sending important information.

The system of road construction was different from railroad construction. The construction of railroad was possible with the financial aids from countries such as Italy, France. But in construction of road, the allotted money appropriated from the local revenue had to be used in construction of road in the area concerned. That was why, the construction of roads was much delayed. There was another difference between construction of roads and railroads. Companies undertook the construction of railroads. But in the construction of roads, it was divided into government roads and local roads depending on the political, administrative and economic territory. The local roads were subdivided into District Council roads, village roads and municipal roads.⁵

The British built roads from Mandalay to Amerapura foreshore, and from Sagaing to Shwebo. The seventeen mile long Shwebo-kyaykmyaung road was built as an earth road in

³ Cathy, Knappen Tippets Abbett AC, *Comprehensive Report Economic and Engineering Development of Burma*, Vol.I, London, Hazell, Waston Vincy Ltd., 1952, p.186 (Henceforth: Cathy, 1952)

⁴ Scott, 1900, 532

⁵ Cathy, 1952, 36-37

1886 and as a metalled road in 1888. It was a supporting road connecting Shwebo with riverine port Kyaukmyaung. It was to transport paddy and other products from Shwebo township to important river ports of Kyaukmyaung, Sheinmaka and Ma-U and to facilitate administration.⁶ The importance of this river port can be seen in the list of the goods shipped from this port.

Then, the British continued to build Shwebo–Ye–u road as an earth road in 1886 and completed as a metalled road in 1888. This road was constructed for making a connection with the military headquarters at Shwebo and for transportation of goods. As a consequence of construction of this roads, Ye–u came to be noted as a town.⁷ Another difference between road and rail construction was that roads were constructed in parts locally and metalled when there was benefit. Probably, it may be due to the cost of yearly maintenance.

The British built a cart-track from Mandalay to Pyinoolwin which was forty-two miles distance in 1886.⁸ In 1887 the English Major May built a town in Pyinoolwin village, as the climate was similar to European climate. The new town came to be known as Maymyo after Major May. The British established a military headquarters intending to use it as a military base. Therefore, priority was given to construction of road to Maymyo for smooth communication and transportation. The British established Maymyo as a summer hill resort. Thus Mandalay–Maymyo road was begun construction in 1893 and completed in 1902. Mandalay–Maymyo–Lashio road, 117 miles in length, was begun building in 1893 and completed in 1902. This long road was constructed to open a trade route with the western part of China and to establish a good communication between military base at Mandalay and Maymyo and the administrative headquarters in India. The construction of this road was undertaken in three sections. The first sect was a thirty-seven mile long Myamyo–Chaungson road. The second section was twenty miles long road from Chaungson to Chaungson chaung. The third section was from Chanson chaung to Lashio.⁹ Another objective of this road to get good communication with the headquarters of Shan Sawbwas in the Southern Shan State. During the British colonial rule, the headquarters of Engineer

⁶ R.S Wilkie, *Burma Gazetteer*, Yamethin District, Vol.A, Rangoon, Government Printing, 1934, p.135
(Henceforth: RS Wilkie, 1934)

⁷ Willason, *Burma Gazetteer*, Shwebo District, Vol.A, Rangoon, Government Printing, 1929, pp.138–139
(Henceforth: Willason, 1929)

⁸ H.F. Searle, *Burma Gazetteer*, Mandalay District, Vol.A, Rangoon, Government Printing, 1906, p.233
(Henceforth: Searle, 1906)

⁹ Scott, 1900, 532

for controlling the North-eastern Zone was established at Myamyo as a district town for improvement of communication by road. Maymyo, being located on the trade route between the capital of Upper Myanmar, Mandalay and the western China, was well known as an important town.¹⁰ This was an instance of a town becoming a district town as a result of construction of road.

The purpose of construction of Mandalay-Maymyo-Lashio road was quite extensive. The main purpose was to open a trade relation with the western part of China through the Shan state. The British thought that they could gain much financial advantage from the trade with China. That was why, the British searched routes through Upper Myanmar to western China. Therefore construction of metalled road, digging drainage ditches, and construction of buildings for the British officers were undertaken by Chinese architects and carpenters. As the Chinese labour was used in the construction of the road, Myanmar nationals lost chances of employment. The importance of this road came to an end when the Mandalay-Lashio railway line emerged in 1903.¹¹ Regarding the trade relation between Myanmar and China at that time, cotton, salt and ruby were exported from Myanmar and silk, dry tea leaf and gold foils were imported from China. Ohnkhun located on the Mandalay-Lashio road was a noted township in 1895.¹²

At the close of 1886, due to scarcity of food and high prices of rice, the British carried out construction of roads and bridges to give employment to solve the problem of food and clothing. It can be deduced from this that people faced great hardship during the colonial rule. With the objective of keeping law and order, quarries were opened at Madaya, Yankin Taung and Kywetnapha Taung in the neighbourhood of Mandalay to provide employments.¹³

Conclusion

The main purpose of road construction was for transportation of goods to neighbouring railway stations and river ports and for distribution of imported goods within the district and for transportation of the local products to other areas. It is also found that the British built roads, which were beneficial to them. The British put great effort to exploit the mineral resource of Myanmar. After the annexation of Mandalay royal capital and its environs, they made attempts to occupy the ruby land. But as it was time when the whole

¹⁰ Searle, 1906, 184

¹¹ *Maymyo-Hmattan* (Maymyo Township Record), 1978, p.7

¹² *Report on the Division of Mandalay-Kunlong Railway*, 1907, p.1

¹³ *Report on the Administration of Burma (Annual)*, 1886, Similar Government Central Printing Office, p.8

of Upper Myanmar under the leadership of patriots resisted the occupation of the British. They were busy with pacification in Upper Myanmar. As it was the period of monsoon, they had to wait for the end of the monsoon. Furthermore the road to Mogoke was difficult and hazardous during the monsoon and influenza and malaria were rampant. For these reasons, the road construction for occupation of ruby land was delayed. It is found that they chose the easiest communicable route based on the military bases in Mandalay.

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