

# Role Of Automobiles On British Imperialism In Colonial Assam

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**Abstract:** The seventeenth-eighteenth centuries were the crucial periods in the history of India due to the beginning the process of colonial domination in India. Among the all European powers British successfully established their sway and continue expand their imperialist supremacy on the territory of India. As well as railway, the automobiles played an important role in the extension of the British imperialism. Introduction of the Automobiles in India was due to the needs of colonial masters, basically for the political attention. The present paper will focus on the how automobiles played an important role in the gradual expansion of the Britishers in the colonial Assam. The area of study is colonial Assam till 1947 and special focus of the study is limited to the Brahmaputra valley.

**Index Terms:** Automobiles, Innovation, Impact, British Imperialism, Colonial Assam.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The British conquest of India was a part of world political phase when imperialistic countries of Western Europe intruded into the east in search of trade and colonies. At first the British established the colonial domination through the several ways like wars, forced treaties, annexations and alliances with the various regional powers all over the country. The British established their political power in north-eastern region of India in 1826 as a consequence of the treaty of Yandaboo. In the expansion of British imperialism there were lots of things which helped them to reach their goal, among them the automobiles were most credible. In the history of various forms of conveyance, the automobile has a unique place. The invention of automobiles created mobility on a large scale never known before and the total effect on living habit and social customs is endless.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

The proposed study is carried out based on the both primary and secondary sources. The primary data and information has been collected from Assam State Archives, National Archives, the Transport Authority offices and field survey with the help of questionnaire. Secondary data and information are derived from published books, journals, articles, magazines, annual reports of automotive industry in India, electronic business standard magazine etc. The data and information so acquired has been systematically arranged in order to analyze them suitably.

## 3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In early period the railways helped to establish the British raj in India, later it had replaced in some areas by the automobiles.

A genuine automobile, a self-propelling craft, which troubled one with neither schedule nor routes, a pledge of freedom and individual pleasure that was the perception that made automobile so attractive against the background of train stations and tracks. Thus, the excitement was over a new technology growing out disappointment with the old. When the British occupied Assam, most of the areas of the province were covered by thick virgin jungle. The development of the roads in Assam was a very slow process due to the difficulties of overcome the natural obstacle of the region like hundreds miles covered with the hills and deep valleys. Prior to the advent of the British, bullock-cart, horse, boat and palki were mainly the means of communication. The colonial British Raj was instrumental in introducing automobiles in Assam. The automobiles as we know that it was not invented in a single day by a single inventor. The history of automobiles dates back to the fifteenth century when Leonardo Da Vinci made designs and models for transport vehicle. Nicolas Joseph Cugnot built the first self-propelled road vehicles for the French army in 1769. In 1886 Karl Friedrich Benz developed first true gasoline automobile powered by an internal combustion engine in Germany. The establishment of ford motor company in 1903 may be said to be the transition period for the automobile world. The credit for the introduction of the automobile in India in the early 1900s is goes to the Britishers. The Britishers imported automobiles to British India till 1940s and gradually after independence the industry emerged itself in India. In 1898, the first car was seen rolling out in the street of Bombay. At the same way the Britishers brought automobiles to Assam in the early 1900s for their self-interest. The main motives of the Britishers behind the introduction of the automobiles were political, administrative, economic and military purposes which had a great contribution to establish the British imperialism in the north-east frontier region. In 1904, Mr. Newton Gill, a planter of Sibsagar, brought his Darracq car to Assam. As early as, 1908, Sir Lancelot Hare, the Lieutenant Governor of Eastern Bengal and Assam visited to princely state of Manipur to installation ceremony of Maharaja, Chura Chand Singh on the gadi. This particular trip is striking because of Hare motored from Dimapur to Imphal in an Albion car, which take Dimapur to Imphal in two days and back in two days instead of six to ten days for

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each journey by ordinary means. This indicates that automobile make easy to Britishers to establish their mastery in the north-east region. In 1912, Sir Archdale Earle, the Chief Commissioner of Assam became the proud owner of a new "38 horse power, 4 cylinders Daimler." One of the first, if not the earliest, official cars of the Assam province, the Daimler was declared as the most suitable cars for smooth working on the hilly roads of the region. The railways and waterways helped the Britishers to establish them in Guwahati, the gateway of Assam province. But, to further expansion in the frontier region of north-east, automobiles played great role and established Shillong as their administrative epicenter. Where the railway and water transport were not available. Before the motor service the tonga service was existed between Gauhati-Shillong roads. Its primary object was to carry government mails and small number of passengers. Gradually, the tonga service was converted towards the motor service and the transportation system was drastically changed. Motor service was introduced in Gauhati- Shilling road between 1907 and 1911. The Ford was considered the only vehicle declared by H. A. Antrobus, which could negotiate the rust and potholes of the soft Assam roads. As ways stretched out by 1920s and 1930s, the British officials steadily switched to use of motor vehicles. The use of range of automobiles from the swift transfer of officials, colonial troops, settling disputes, tax collection etc. increased which facilitated the establishment of British paramount power. The Government obtained profound concentration to afford motor facilities to officials. In 1929, the Ambulance car facilities enter on the Gauhati-Shillong road. The Government also paying concessions and privileges for police officers in travelling by the Pandu- Shillong motor service. The automobiles became more important tool to maintain the law and order very quickly which specify the increase the military and administrative influence in Assam province. Motor cars could enable the colonial officials to reach conflicted spot and restore order and peace in regarding situations. One such case occurred in 1925, threatening fight between Songshong and kalenamei, two villages in a Mao group. After receiving the news, C.G. Crawford, the political agent in Manipur, travelled through the night by a Car provided by His Highness the Maharaja, which enabled him to arrive within a small hours, whereby the serious trouble was averted. Similarly, the Assam Government relied on motor vehicles, especially for swift movement of the police force to quell collie or labour strikes in tea gardens as well as different operation in the frontier. Thus, for instances, in 1928, Assam administration hired a motor lorry to transport police officers from Dibrugarh to Balijan Tea Estate to suppress a coolie disturbance in tea garden. At the same way, in June 1928, Assam Government sanctioned to hire a motor lorry to facilitate police force to travelling from Tezpur to Dibru- Darrang Tea Estate to curb a labour unrest in that garden. Further, in March 1928, through a motor lorry Assam police carry 19 constables from Gauhati to assist in a raid connection with an excise case. These instances indicate the significance of the motor vehicles in the everyday practices of the colonial rule.



*Fig: Colonial period's vehicle preserved in Treasured Wheel, Sonapur, Assam*

Automobiles as a means of communication, has a great impact on the industrialization like railways which further supported incidentally to consolidate the British imperialist power. Economy is the sole source to strengthen the political power. North-east was very rich in natural resources which make lucrative to the Britishers. Assam is a hub of Tea. The tea industry has an excessive contribution to expansion of the infrastructure which aided Britishers to use of motor vehicles in their own interest. The planters of Assam generally cooperate very willingly in the maintenance of communication which serves their own interest. In Kamrup, where the tea industry was of small importance no roads were maintained by planters at their own cost, and in Nowgong where the number of tea gardens was not large, only one mile of road was maintained. The important tea districts of Darrang, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur planters maintained at their own expense a very considerable mileage of road outside their tea estates. The commercial carrying company carried a lucrative business of goods carriage. In 1927, the Company secured a permit from the Assam Government to run 16 lorries on the Gauhati- Shillong route during the potato season, which by 1934 was increased to 18 motor lorries. Oranges, coal, and timber were transported by lorries from Khasi Hills to railroads at Gauhati and Pandu, for distribution to markets in upper Assam and Calcutta. British Oil market also expanded through the automobiles. The petrol lorries were run between Gauhati-Shillong road to fulfill their demands. Automobiles played a vital role to development of British economic imperialism. From the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century along with India, Assam also witnessed with tremendous increase in the number of automobiles. In spite of the dissatisfaction of the Indians British joined in the Second World War. During the Second World War, government has given priority to construction of road due to defense requirement. During the war 90 percent of vehicles engaged in military work. At that time the automobiles played an important role as a source of mail courier which facilitated service to a large number of American troops who employed in the border areas of Assam. This proved the influence of the British in the north-eastern region which was more far away from the center.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

Automobiles played an important role to change the communication outlook and make life more comfort. Automobiles totally transformed the social, political, economy and the cultural structure of the society. As a means of communication automobiles provide enough facilities to consolidate the British imperial power.

Automobiles basically connected the remote areas which helped to extend the British imperialism in the nook and corner of Assam province. Due to the geographical structure of the region it was not possible to connect the whole region with the railways and waterways but it make probable through the new advanced technology, automobiles.

## 5 REFERENCES