

## CHAPTER TEN

### COMMUNICATIONS

The opening up of the tribal areas by a carefully planned system of communications is the basis of all development.

In the tribal areas (apart from NEFA and NHTA, where there are a number of landing strips or dropping zones) roads are the only practicable means of communications at present. These roads have utility (a) for marketing of produce, (b) for personal travel and (c) for the ingress of ideas. So far as (a) is concerned, the value of tribal production increases considerably when communications are improved. Timber rises in price; so does agricultural production in general; and the per-capita income of the inhabitants increases. In regard to (b) the problem is not very pressing because there are comparatively few occasions on which the tribal needs to leave his own area, but circumstances are conceivable in which roads would be vital for the quick movement of technical (*e.g.* medical) personnel. Such circumstances could arise during floods or epidemics. Under (c) we would classify all knowledge conducive to progress. The mere existence of easy communications tends to the increase of knowledge. This is particularly so in an area where literacy is negligible; knowledge has to be spread through personal contact.

Our own experience of tribal areas indicates that the order in which (a), (b) and (c) have been placed above is, roughly speaking, the order of priority. The economic prosperity of the area depends on the easy marketing of produce, distances are generally very great and transport by bullock cart is often ruled out. The most important roads must, therefore, be roads linking major centres of production with major markets, and these should as far possible be all-weather truckable roads.

Even after three years, however, there are Blocks (such as Adhaura in Bihar) where poor communications are still a major impediment to progress. Let us pay a brief visit to two such Blocks, for what we will see there vividly illustrates the difficulties which Development Workers have to face.

#### *The Narsampet Block :*

Let us go first to the Narsampet Block in Andhra Pradesh. Here, where much good work has been done, the one sensational failure is under the head of Communications, on which only Rs. 13,338 was spent to the end of November 1959. The result is that even now the majority of the villages are cut off from the Block headquarters for about half the year. There are three serious bottlenecks, one near Ashoknagar, another near Tanapar, where the lack of bridges creates insuperable obstacles, a third where the two parts of the Block are divided for long periods by an unbridged river between Narsampet and Eturnagaram. We would have thought, if a Multi-purpose Block was taken at all seriously, these bridges would have been taken up in the first year of the plan. In the same way, the creation of main roads at least to open up the distant areas should surely have had top priority.

It is not easy, however, to get roads made here. The local people are good at forest work but they are unaccustomed to digging and moving earth. The import of outside labour, even if it was desirable, would be difficult, for the distances are so great that it would be hard to feed them and they would be unlikely to come. Contractors are equally unwilling to take up work of this kind in the interior. There are abundant opportunities for them to make money in the towns or the more accessible Blocks, and they see little point in going into the remote forest and working under considerable hardship. One contractor, who came to inspect a possible project on the way to Eturnagaram, was caught by a sudden flood and was unable to return to Warangal for a fortnight. He naturally abandoned the scheme. In some places there are no villages for ten to fifteen miles and the organization of labour to work in such places is difficult.

There are already roads under the Forest Department running like arteries throughout the Block area. These are little more than jungle tracks. We drove for many miles, actually to the limit of what was possible and found most of the tracks in a deplorable condition. There seems to be a rather curious rule that they will be maintained by the contractors who use them for the extraction of timber. But as this involves a heavy overhead charge on the contractors' profits, they do not seem to do very much about it. If, at the very beginning of the Block period, officials of the Forest Department, the P.W.D. and the Block itself had been able to decide on a joint co-ordinated effort, the position might have been very different today. It is still not too late for something of the kind to be done. Out of the very large sum of money still available, could not, for example, the forest roads be taken over by the Block people and made properly jeepable? It is surely much more important to develop the main lines of communications than to spend a lot of energy on making branch roads to individual villages, which seems to be the present plan. The skeleton roads are there. They simply need a considerable amount of improvement.

#### *The Rongkhong Block :*

From Narsampet to the Mikir Hills of Assam is a long journey, yet the only really difficult part of it is the last twenty miles. The headquarters of the Rongkhong Block is a place called Dongkha, which is reached by a road running from Nowgong to Hojai, a thriving commercial centre in the middle of what has been called the granary of Assam. Up to Hojai, which can also be reached by train from the District Headquarters at Diphu or from Gauhati, the journey is easy. Thenceforward, however, the road rapidly deteriorates and is almost impassable during the rains. The first stage of the journey is to Tumpreng on the far side of a fairly wide river called Kapili which, owing to the absence of a proper ferry, cannot be crossed by car. From Tumpreng to Dongkha is another seven miles covered by a PWD road which was in shocking condition even in the middle of December. While the headquarters of other Blocks are frequently cut off from the villages in the interior, the headquarters of this Block is also cut off from the main current of life of Assam for about half the year. This is perhaps the main reason for the very slow progress which has involved an expenditure in three years of only a little over six lakhs of rupees, for communications are so bad that officials do not like to be posted here and it is only with

extreme difficulty that the materials for development can be brought up to Dongkha, generally by bullock-carts.

The situation here exposes in a vivid way one of the great difficulties of the present scheme of Multipurpose Blocks. There is a great deal of money available, for out of an allocation of three and a quarter lakhs of rupees for communications in Rongkhong only Rs. 41,065 have been spent in the past three years. Here are three problems--the road from Hojai to Tumprong, the ferry at Tumprong and the road from Tumprong to Dongkha--which urgently need to be solved; indeed if the Block had been taken really seriously these should have been solved at least two years ago. It is apparently not possible to use some of the ample funds available under the Block budget because the first road is outside the Block area, the second road is in the hands of the P.W.D. and the provision of ferries is not included in the scheme of the Central Government. But surely this is one of the things about which we should be much more flexible. Unless the approach to the headquarters is made easy it will be impossible for this Block to make much progress and, of course, there can be no question of spending the allotted money within the five-year period. The progress of a Block is more important than adherence to the rules, and we strongly urge that these should be liberalized and that some portion of the Block funds should be diverted to improving these roads and also to providing a proper ferry capable of carrying cars and trucks at the earliest possible moment. The local Mikir leaders and members of the Block Development Committee were unanimous in giving this top priority above all other aspects of development.

#### *Expenditure in the Blocks :*

The financial statistics reveal a rather curious situation. While some Blocks have done very well and have clearly taken the matter seriously--Araku, for example, has already spent 97·56% of its allocation for Communications, Akrani Mahal 96·20%, and Tamenglong nearly two lakhs of rupees, other Blocks, particularly those that are in most need of roads, have made very slow progress.

Utnur has spent only Rs. 6,967 or 1·74% of the four lakhs in its schematic budget; Borio, which has used Rs. 3,73,354 on the items under Project Headquarters, has spent only Rs. 20,528 on roads; Rongkhong has used only 12·64%; Bagicha only 9·57%; Kundahit 12·11% as against 99·88% on Education; Amarapur, where communications are unusually bad, has used only Rs. 70,915 for roads as against Rs. 87,421 on Social Education--surely an odd reversal of priorities, repeated by Narsampet, which has spent Rs. 8,757 or 2·19% of its four lakhs available for Communications but Rs. 34,835 or 46·45% on Social Education. Sukhsar has spent only 20·93% on roads but 102·40% on Housing. Bharatpur has spent 5·20% against 68·50% on Social Education: Dharampur has used 12·93% against 51·84% on Housing. Kushalgarh too has spent only 15·73% on roads, but 72·42% on Housing. Aheri has spent only 8·93%, and in its revised budget has cut this item from four to three lakhs, although there is no Block where there is greater need to open up the interior.

Yet everyone agrees that Communications are far more important than Social Education, Arts and Crafts and, above all, Housing.

We recommend accordingly that first priority should be given to the construction of Class I roads, even though these will be bound to be comparatively few in number in view of their much higher cost. We are confident that such roads will pay for themselves in a relatively short time, through the indirect benefits which they will bring to the area. Here will be something of obvious and tangible benefit, about which there can be no dispute and where expenditure can usually be carefully controlled. The cost of the main roads, and certainly those linking the Block with the District headquarters should be a charge on the general State budget.

Our colleague, Shri Noronha, who has had considerable practical knowledge of conditions of the tribal areas of Madhya Pradesh, feels strongly that there is little advantage 'in wasting time over second and third class roads, usually of the fair weather type, which are almost useless for heavy truck traffic and which merely serve the purpose of making movement by jeep and car a little easier for those who are fortunate enough to possess such conveyances. If the tribal is to be helped, he needs all-weather roads which will transport his produce at cheap rates, which will be usable by buses throughout the year and which make movement cheap.'

Shri Noronha, therefore, feels that there is little point in constructing Class II and Class III roads in the tribal areas. If it is felt, in the circumstances of any particular area, that some type of communication is essential even though an all-weather road is not practicable, then he suggests 'very narrow (4' wide) metalled roads suitable for fast cycle traffic in emergencies and for pedestrian traffic in all weathers.' From what he has seen of the Multipurpose Blocks 'any kind of *katcha* road is a waste of money. There is no provision for its maintenance and up-keep and such roads being in the remote interior cannot be effectively supervised or repaired by the P.W.D. They fall into disuse within a very short time.'

While the other members of the Committee agree that this policy would be the ideal, they doubt whether it will be altogether practicable. It is obvious, of course, that it is most important that every Block headquarters should be connected with a main highway by a good Class I road. It is astonishing that this has not yet been done everywhere. In good time before a Block is opened there should be a survey to ensure that such a road is planned and started; this will be particularly important if our suggestion of pushing the headquarters of the Blocks further into the interior is accepted.

But it will take a very long time to construct Class I roads throughout the whole area of a Block—and it is, as we point out elsewhere, just the inaccessible and difficult areas that we must reach if we are to bring the benefits of development to the really poor people. If we are to rely on Class I roads, only the more developed tribal folk near at hand will benefit.

We agree, however, that to attempt to cover the entire area with inter-village motorable roads may well be a waste of time and money. In practice, the tribal people themselves very rarely use the roads that are made for them, for they prefer their traditional foot-paths which, though often more difficult, are generally shorter. Sometimes they prefer to go by a foot-path through a difficult area in the hope of obtaining some game, and to pick leaves or gather firewood on the way home.

Every Block area should, therefore, be carefully and imaginatively surveyed very early, and only those Class II and Class III roads which will be of direct advantage to the people should be constructed. Officials

will have to forget their own touring requirements. For example, it is more important to make roads linking the interior of the hills with the plains than to unite remote villages with one another or with the main road.

Culverts, bridges and causeways should be taken up first along the roads that are aligned, and for the present we will have to be content with making them as well as we can. Even if they are open only during the favourable months of the year, much will be gained.

We should not only think of motorable roads for touring purposes. Bicycles should be used much more in future than they are today, for this useful velocipede can be carried over streams and rivers and is, in fact, used very widely by the merchants and others who go into the tribal areas. Bullock-carts, as suggested elsewhere, can also be usefully employed by officials, and ponies and even elephants might well play a bigger part in all tribal development schemes than they do at present. This, of course, raises problems of upkeep, yet they should not be unsurmountable.

### *Funicular Railways*

We consider that in places where transport of produce is essential to the economic development of a tract, and where an all-weather road cannot be built with the financial resources available, the possibility of funicular railways should be investigated. We understand that although they are slow, they are relatively cheap and the maintenance cost is very little. We have seen fairly long railways of this type used in mines and we understand that they have proved successful for cheap transport of non-perishable commodities over distances up to 30 miles. There are, of course, in view of import restrictions, difficulties about this, but the matter deserves consideration.

### *Finance*

The Inaccessible Areas Committee has made the important point that the cost of road construction in the more difficult tribal areas is abnormally heavy and that, therefore, normal formulas of financial justification of road construction will need special exemption. Since this Committee is making recommendations regarding each area separately we need not do more than emphasize this point and express our agreement with it.

Even within the area of a Multipurpose Block, if important roads or highways have to be built, it is desirable that funds for them should be allotted from the general sector and not be a charge on the Block budget.

### *Labour Co-operatives*

It has often been pointed out that the season during which the tribal people are available for work on construction is short. Sometimes they are not very happy about working on the roads at all and in actual fact, most of them live a fairly busy life and are as anxious to observe their festivals, weddings and funerals as anybody else. On the other hand, it is not desirable to bring in too much imported labour. A plan followed in NEFA is to allot to every village along the alignment of a road so many furlongs or miles and to place the construction and the maintenance of each bit of road in the hands of its Tribal Council, which serves as a sort of labour co-operative and distributes the money received.

We may sum up our recommendations as follows :—

(1) Road-planning for the entire Block area should be taken up at a very early stage and should ensure, in the first place, that the headquarters (which should itself be in the heart of the Block) will be connected by an all-weather motorable road to some main highway and secondly, that one or two main Class I roads should run through the entire area of the Block.

(2) Culverts, bridges and causeways should in the first place be made to cover all the obstacles in the roads that are planned and while many of these will have to be fair-weather roads in the first instance, there should be a carefully considered plan for progressively transforming them as soon as possible.

(3) It is more important to make roads linking the interior of the hills with the plains than to join remote villages in the interior with one another.

(4) It is essential that some provision for the maintenance and progressive improvement of roads should be made, for otherwise they may fall into disuse and much effort and money will be wasted. We cannot rely on the tribals to maintain the roads themselves for, in the first place, they have not the resources to do so and, secondly, they may not be particularly interested unless a road is of really vital importance to themselves.

(5) The Co-operative Extension Officers should make it their special care to organize the tribal people into labour co-operatives to whom construction works will normally be given. Contractors should be eliminated as far as is humanly possible. This policy has been successful in the Araku Block and in parts of Assam.

(6) The resources of the C.P.W.D., the State P.W.D., the Local Board and the Forest Department should be pooled for the planning, construction and maintenance of roads, and schemes should be drawn up on a ten-year rather than a five-year programme.

Roads, of course, can be a curse as well as a blessing to the tribal people. In some places they have been the means of corruption and exploitation. They have brought new diseases, moral decline and cultural decadence. They have made it easy for the money-lender, the rapacious merchant, the liquor-vendor, the lawyer's tout to penetrate deep into the hills and forest. They can bring money in, but they can also take money out. They have helped to destroy the hand-loom industry by the import of cheap bazaar cloth; they have brought vulgar and inferior goods to the very doors of the people. Difficult though it will be, we must try to ensure that this does not happen any longer and that every road is a pilgrim's way to a better and richer life, bringing health, food and enlightenment to the villages it serves.