

CHAPTER IX

MEANS OF COMMUNICATION

DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNICATIONS

UNTIL the year 1902 there was no railway in the district, and the easiest way of reaching it was to travel by rail to Rānīganj and thence by road. The journey was not only expensive, but tedious. First, the Dāmodar had to be crossed—no easy matter in the rains, with water rushing down in flood, or at other seasons of the year in consequence of the numerous sandbanks. Having arrived on the other side of the river, a weary journey in ramshackle carts drawn by feeble ponies awaited the traveller before he could reach the town of Bānkurā. The difficulties of the journey may be realized from the experience of Sir W. W. Hunter when travelling from Suri to Midnapore in 1866. "The journey," writes Mr. Skrine, in the *Life of Sir William Wilson Hunter*, "was fraught with fatigue and peril, and its incidents contrast strangely with the prosaic features of railway travel now universal throughout India. The Hunters journeyed by road in their own victoria drawn by a pair, their third horse being sent forward at alternate stages. August is the month least suited of the twelve for a flitting, for it is a time of suffocating heat varied by downpours, of which those who have never visited the tropics can form no conception. On arriving at the bank of the river Dāmodar the luckless travellers found it a raging torrent. The only means of transit was a crazy ferry-boat, into which was crammed the victoria flanked by the horses on either side. Each was firmly held by the head, while its master stood behind to manipulate a cunning apparatus of rope, so devised that on either animal showing signs of fractiousness he would at once be force overboard. Then a start was made to cross the Dāmodar at 8 a.m., but it was past ten at night ere the boat was able to make a creek on the opposite bank. The horses were lifted through the sea of mud left by the receding waters

by the help of bamboo leverage, and the family, now fairly worn out, made their way to the embanked high road and started for the rest house. The carriage had not proceeded far ere the driver saw a broad black line bisecting the road immediately in front. This proved to be a chasm made by the floods. There was nothing for it but to unhitch the horses, let the carriage down the bank, and drag it painfully to the summit of the road on the other side of the gap".*

The railway now runs through the district from east to west, but internal communication is rendered difficult by the many unbridged rivers which intersect the district. Beds of sand in the dry weather, with a narrow fordable stream in the centre, they swell into torrents in the rains, and traffic is frequently impeded for three or four days at a time. In the cold and hot weather again they form a serious obstacle to traffic owing to the wide stretches of sand in their dried-up beds; and it is a pitiable sight to see the frantic struggles of the bullocks to drag their carts across them. Where there is a narrow unbridged nullah to cross the difficulty is equally great, for the carter must either unload, and convey the cart and its load over separately, or let cart, bullocks and the load go full swing into the nullah, and take their chance of either being upset at the bottom or of getting sufficient impetus to run up the other side.

Except for the deficiency of bridges, however, the roads of the district are, on the whole, excellent, and practically every part is well-provided with them except the south-west corner round Raipur. The facilities for road-making are naturally good, the lateritic soil affording an inexhaustible supply of metal; and besides the main roads, there are numerous cart roads and tracks intersecting the country in all directions, and rendering the transit of light loads by carts and pack-bullocks easy.

RAILWAYS

The only railway in the district is a branch of the Bengal-Nāgpur Railway, known as the Midnapore-Jherriā extension or the Kharagpur-Asansol branch. Its length within the district is about 50 miles, and there are 7 stations, viz, Piārdobā, Bishnupur, Rāmsāgar, Ondāgrām, Bānkurā, Chhānā, and Jhāntipāhāri. The

* F. H. Skrine, *Life of Sir William Wilson Hunter*, (1901) p.118.

line crosses the Birai river near Bishnupur and the Dhalkishor a few miles east of Bānkurā, the bridge over the river last named being a fine piece of engineering work. There is also a proposal to construct a chord line from Howrah to Bānkurā, which would join this railway at Bishnupur. The principal object of this connection would be to supply Calcutta with an alternative route from the United Provinces and Northern India to that afforded by the East Indian Railway; its immediate effect, so far as this district is concerned, would be to bring it into direct communication with Calcutta.

ROADS

The Public Works Department maintains altogether $58\frac{1}{2}$ miles of roads in the district, of which $55\frac{1}{2}$ miles are metalled and 3 miles are unmetalled; while the District Board maintains 61 miles of metalled and 541 miles of unmetalled roads, besides a number of village roads (all unmetalled) with an aggregate length of 105 miles. The following is a brief account of the principal roads of the district.

RĀNIGĀNJ-MIDNAPORE ROAD

The only road in the district maintained from Provincial funds is the Rāniganj-Midnapore road, of which $58\frac{1}{2}$ miles lie within the district; it is at present kept up by the District Board for the Public Works Department. Starting from the Dāmodar river it passes southwards through Mejiā and Gangājalghāti to the town of Bānkurā. Thence it runs to the south-east, parallel with the railway, through Ondā and Bishnupur, entering the Midnapore district a short distance to the south of the Piārdobā railway station. Near Bishnupur there is a short loop road, which branches off at the Birai river, and passing to the west of the town of Bishnupur, rejoins the main road about a mile from the town. Of the $58\frac{1}{2}$ miles lying within the district, all but 3 miles are metalled. Most of the streams over which it passes have been bridged; but there are no bridges over the Gandheswarī and Dhalkisor near Bānkurā or over the Birai near Bishnupur. The Dāmodar is also unbridged, and consequently communication with Rāniganj is difficult, especially during the rains, the river being often impassable for days together when it is in high flood.

DISTRICT BOARD ROADS

The most important roads maintained by the District Board radiate from Bānkurā and Bishnupur. To the west of Bānkurā is a road 17 miles long, known as the Bānkurā-Raghunāthpur road, which leads to Bāmunshāsan, and establishes communication with Raghunāthpur in Mānbhūm. Two important roads branch off from this road, one running from Dalpur to Mohesnā (9 miles) on the south-west and thence to Puruliā, while another strikes north from Chhātnā to Susuniā and thence through Kustholiā to Mejiā (21 miles). On the south of Bānkurā there are two main roads, one, the Bānkurā-Khātrā road, running south-west through Indpur (6 miles) to Khātrā, $21\frac{1}{2}$ miles from Bānkurā; while the other the Bānkurā-Raipur road, goes south-east to Tāldāngrā ($15\frac{1}{2}$ miles) and thence via Simlāpāl ($8\frac{1}{2}$ miles) to Raipur, which is situated $36\frac{1}{2}$ miles from Bānkurā. To the north-east a long road, known as the Bānkurā-Burdwān road, leads from Bānkurā through Beliatore ($12\frac{1}{2}$ miles) to Sonāmukhī (25 miles) and thence through Krishnanagar to Burdwān; its length within the district is $41\frac{1}{2}$ miles. This used to form part of the direct route between Bānkurā and Calcutta, a total distance of $85\frac{1}{2}$ miles.

From Bishnupur two important District Board roads branch off. The first, known as the Bishnupur-Pānāgarh road, runs due north through Sonāmukhī to Rāngāmetiā on the Dāmodar river and thence to Pānāgarh, its length in the district being 25 miles. The second, known as the Bishnupur-Howrah road, runs through Jaypur and Mirzāpur to Kotalpur and thence into the Howrah district, 23 miles lying within this district; from Kotalpur a road branches off to Indās and thence to Rol, ultimately joining the Bānkurā-Burdwān road a little distance beyond the north-eastern boundary. The only other roads calling for separate notice are those in the north-west of the district, viz, a road from Gangājalghāti to Sāltorā $13\frac{1}{2}$ miles long, which passes through Kustholiā where it crosses the Chhātnā-Mejiā road, and a road from Mejiā via Sāltorā to Marulu ($14\frac{1}{2}$ miles), which is part of the Rāniganj-Puruliā road.

MILITARY GRAND TRUNK ROAD

In concluding this account of roads of Bānkurā, mention may be made of the old Military Grand Trunk Road from Calcutta

to the north-west. It enters Bānkurā from Burdwān, and traversing the southern half of the district, runs in a north-westerly direction south of and nearly parallel to the Dhalkishor, and enters the Mānbhūm district near the village of Raghunāthpur, passing on its way through Kotalpur, Bishnupur, Ondā, Bānkurā, and Chhātnā. A reference to the map will show that this road is now divided into three sections, viz, part of the Bishnupur-Howrah road, part of the Rāniganj-Midnapore road and part of the Bānkura-Raghunāthpur road. Formerly, the section from Bānkurā to Bishnupur was much used by pilgrims on their way to the great temple of Jagannāth at Puri, but most of the passenger traffic, as well as part of the cart traffic, has now been absorbed by the railway.

Not far from the road at Rāmsāgar, a few miles west of Bishnupur, and at Sālgātā, a short distance from Ondā, some lofty towers may still be seen. These are interesting relics of a scheme entertained by the Indian Government early in the nineteenth century (1820-30) for the construction of a series of towers, 100 feet high and at intervals of 8 miles, for semaphore signalling all the way from Calcutta to Bombay. In those days the word 'telegraph' was applied to the method of signalling by means of a semaphore, and we therefore find these towers marked on old maps as telegraph stations.

CONVEYANCES

The conveyances in common use consist of bullock carts, packbullocks and *pālkis*, which call for no special description. One conveyance is, however, peculiar, viz., the ordinary tumtum or dogcart with bamboo shafts, the peculiarity being that, instead of a horse, there are one or two men in the shafts, who draw the vehicle along by pushing against a rope tied between them.

WATER COMMUNICATIONS.

The only navigable rivers in the district are the Dāmodar and Kāsai, but there is practically no river-borne traffic except timber, which is floated down the Dāmodar. During the rains numbers of logs are fastened together by ropes to form rafts known locally as *mārs*, with three or four men to steer them. The

rafts are sometimes 50 to 60 yards long, and generally ten or twelve are launched together from the timber-yielding tracts higher up the river. The trade, however, is declining on account of the denudation of the forests towards the sources of the Dāmodar.

FERRIES AND BOATS

The District Board maintains 18 ferries, of which the most important is that across the Dāmodar at Rāngāmetiā. Most of the ferries ply only during the rains when the rivers and streams are in flood, the passengers and goods being transported in ordinary country boats and dug-outs. Floats resting on inverted earthen pots, and rafts made of sola pith, are used for crossing the smaller streams, and the latter are also used by fishermen to stand on when throwing their nets.

POSTAL COMMUNICATIONS

There are altogether 400 miles of postal communication in the district and 67 post offices, i.e., one post office for every 39 square miles. The number of postal articles delivered in 1906-07 was 1,951,482 including letters, postcards, packets, newspapers, and parcels; while the value of money orders paid was Rs. 9,39,429 and of those issued Rs. 6,45,251. The number of Savings Bank deposits in the same year was 6,345, the amount deposited being Rs. 2,53,760. There are 4 postal-telegraph offices, from which 5,998 messages were issued in the same year; these offices are situated at Bānkurā, Bishnupur, Gangājalghāti and Sonāmukhi.