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# **THE 'EASTERN IMPERIAL HIGHWAY' AND ITS VARIANT ROUTES DURING THE MUGHAL PERIOD**

By Prabuddha Biswas

## **INTRODUCTION**

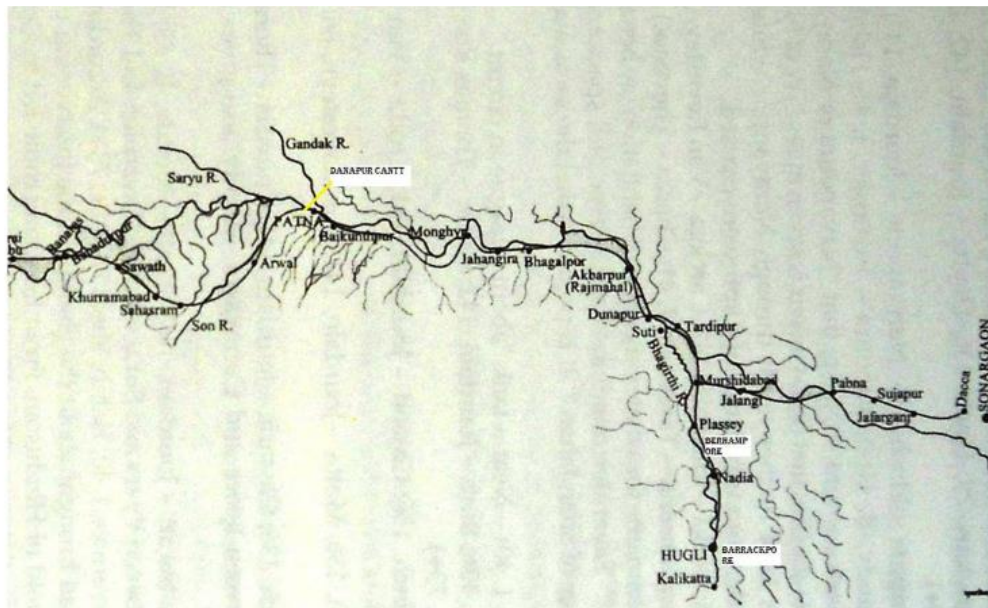
During the Mughal Period, the city of Agra was the imperial capital up to 1648; and all the three major Mughal Highways fanned out of Agra in three directions: -

- (i) **The South-western Imperial Highway** connected cities of Agra with Surat and other port cities in the Western coast via Burhanpur. <sup>(1)</sup>
- (ii) **The North-western Imperial Highway** connected cities of Agra – Delhi – Lahore – Peshawar – Kabul <sup>(2)</sup>
- (iii) **The Eastern Imperial Highway** connected cities of Agra – Illahabas (Allahabad or the 'City of Allah') - Benaras - Patna – Murshidabad – Sonargaon (Dacca) – Chittagong. <sup>(3)</sup>

Interestingly, the concept of construction, maintenance and sustenance of ‘Imperial Highways’ and road side ‘*sarais*’ (motels for night halts)”, under central department, were conceived and executed by Sher Shah <sup>(4)</sup> and later it was carried forward in a big way by Emperor Akbar and his successors. <sup>(5)</sup>

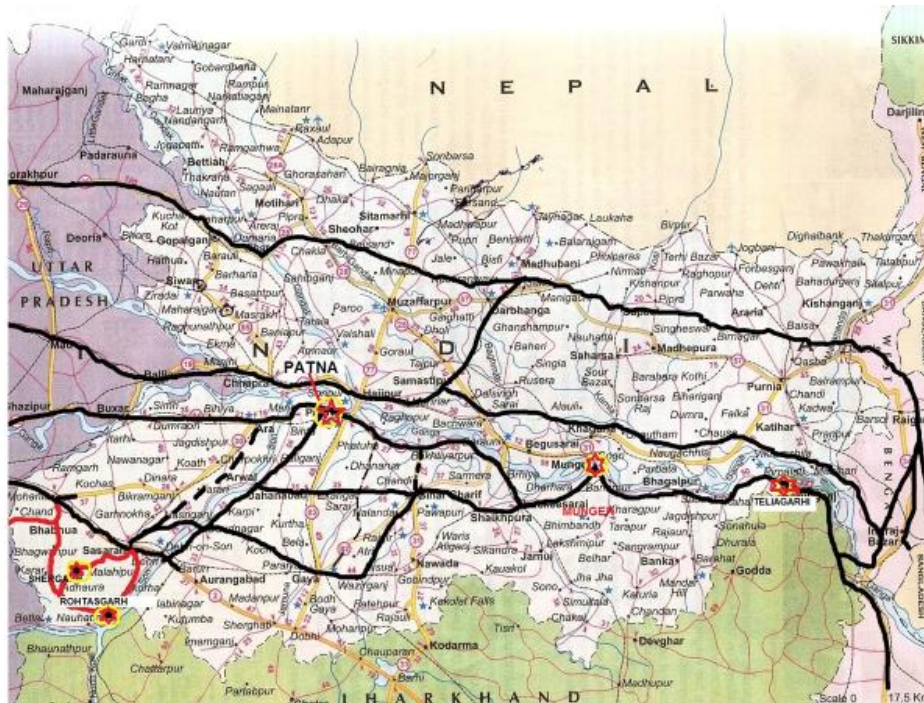
The Eastern Imperial Highway of Mughal India started from Agra, and passed through the middle of lower Ganga-Yamuna Doab touching Allahabad and Varanasi towns; and then move along the right bank of the River Ganges, in the Bihar region. <sup>(6)</sup>

This article deals with “**The Eastern Imperial Highway of Mughal India from Varanasi towards East.**” **(Fig.1)**



**[Fig. 1. Eastern Imperial Highway]**

The Communication across Bihar has been decided by the alignment of the River Ganges; which flows from west to east. Generally, there were two major land routes from west to east; - (i) Firstly, the ‘**Northern Ganges Route**’ and (ii) Secondly, the ‘**Southern-Ganges-Route**’ and (iii) the **riverine traffic** is through the river Ganges and all other subsidiary routes align themselves with these routes. <sup>(7)</sup> **(Fig.2)**



[Fig. 2. Northern and Southern Ganges Routes in Bihar Region]

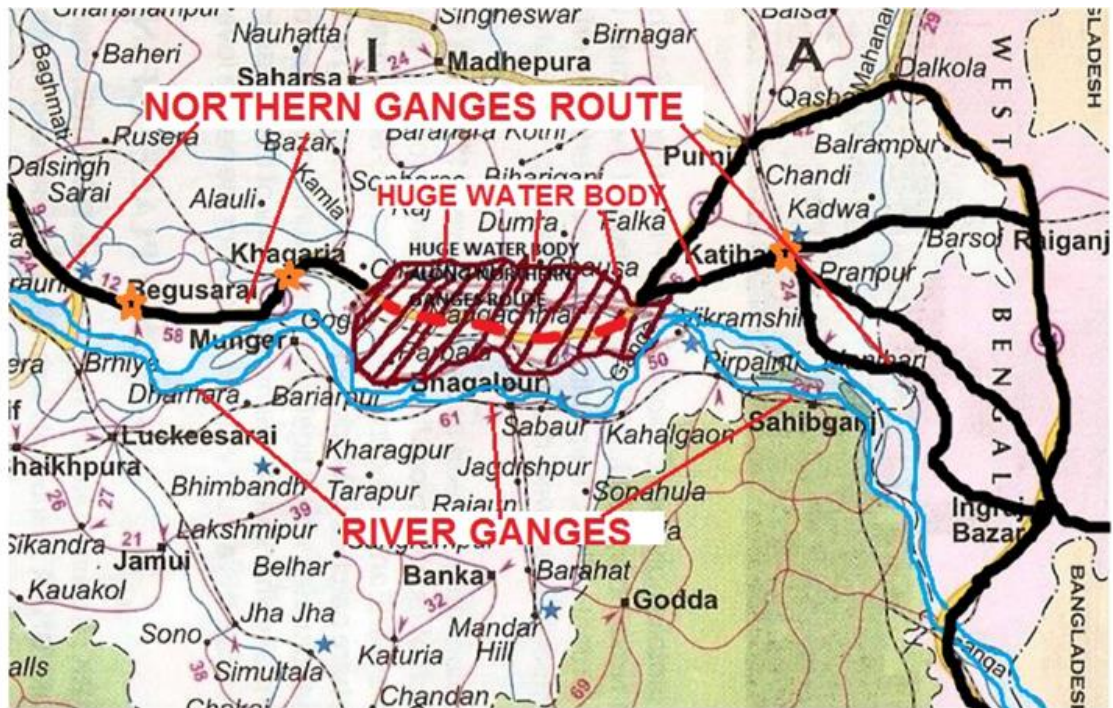
## NORTHERN GANGES ROUTE

The two ‘**Northern – Ganges – Routes**’ were in use during (i) the Turko-Afghan Period and during (ii) ‘the first phase of Mughal period’. They were: -

1. **Route through North Bihar districts (west to east):** - It started from **Awadh** region followed by Gorakhpur ..... crossing River Gandak (in its upper reaches), and then through **Champaran - ‘Sitamarhi – Darbhanga and Madhubani districts’**..... then crossing River Kosi and straight march towards North Bengal and reaching **Lakhnauti** (Capital of Bengal) from the North. <sup>(8)</sup>
2. **Route along the Northern Bank of Ganges:** - In the later period, another route was initiated from **Jaunpur** (founded by Firuz Shah Tughlaq). After crossing River Ghaggar (Ghaggra), the route entered Saran and passed along the Northern bank of Ganges. <sup>(9)</sup> After crossing River Gandak, the route pass through **Hajipur - Begusarai – Samastipur - Khagaria** region and goes further east. After crossing



watery barrier of Kosi and other rivers (present day Khagaria and northern blocks of Bhagalpur districts), the route pass through **Kursaila** and reached **Lakhnauti** from the west. **(Fig. 3)**



**[Fig. 3. Watery Barrier on the North Ganges Route]**

**Both North Bihar routes came into disuse** from the Mughal period (though it was in use alternatively, during the time of Babur and 1<sup>st</sup> phase of Humayun's rule respectively) due to two major reasons: -

- (a) Firstly, due to the long stretch of 'marshy land' and the 'watery barrier' on the way and
- (b) Secondly, due to the frequent change in courses of the Himalayan rivers of North-eastern Bihar and North Bengal, which were responsible for abandonments of many towns (Lakhnauti - Gaur, Deokot, Pandua, Tanda among others), that led to the realignment of travel routes, north of the river 'Ganges – Padma'. <sup>(10)</sup>

- (i) Babar faced the Eastern Afghans in the **Battle of Ghaggra**; May 3 – 5, 1529 (Near Manjhi, Saran) and Bengal Army came by the **'Northern-Ganges-Route'** via Hajipur to face the Mughal army. <sup>(11)</sup>
- (ii) Similarly, Humayun also availed **'Northern – Ganges Route'**, further east, while returning from Gaur till the place, on the opposite bank of Munger, where he crossed Ganges and availed the **'Southern-Ganges-Route'** and faced Sher Khan at the Battle of Chausa in 1539 AD. <sup>(12)</sup>

## POPULARIZATION OF SOUTHERN GANGES ROUTE

From 1540s (the reign of Sher Shah and during the second phase of Mughal rule); the movement along the **'Southern-Ganges Route'** (along the southern bank of the River Ganges), got popularized. The **Southern Ganges Route** along the southern bank of Ganges, via Patna; is the **'Shah-Ara'** or the **'Sher Shahi Marg'**, which later emerged as the **Eastern Imperial Highway of Mughal India.** It has been the most important Communication route, connecting Bengal Delta with North India but other variant routes of South Bihar were also in use, though occasionally. <sup>(13)</sup>

## FURTHER EXTENSION IN THE EAST

During Akbar's reign, the Eastern Mughal Imperial highway got its permanence in the east, till Rajmahal-Tanda region; though there was loose linkage, further east.

During the rule of Jehangir, Islam Khan, the Governor of Bengal (1610), moved the imperial provincial capital from Rajmahal, to Dhaka (Dacca), deep in the Bengal hinterland. <sup>(14)</sup> From 1610 to 1715, the Dacca remained the capital of Bengal. As a result, the towns of Chittagong and Dacca (Sonargaon) were directly integrated through the Eastern Imperial Highway <sup>(15)</sup>

## MURSHIDABAD - TRIPLE JUNCTION

After the relocation of the Bengal Diwani (Revenue Collectorate) from the Mughal Court city of Dacca to the town of Makshudabad (later Murshidabad), on the east bank of Bhagirathi river, in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century (1715); it became hub of political and economic activity of Eastern India during 1715 to 1765.

Murshidabad provided easy access both upstream to Patna, and then to Delhi, and downstream to Hooghly and Calcutta in the south and Dacca and Chittagong in the southeast and became the most important **triple junction** (previously it was **Suti**) in the **Eastern Imperial Highway**, in the late Mughal period. <sup>(16)</sup>

From Rajmahal-Suti-Murshidabad region, the variant routes move through Rada-Vardhaman-Midnapore regions towards Odisha. In the late Mughal period, Murshidabad-Hooghly-Calcutta emerged as the major alignment in the direction.

### **ALTERNATIVE ROUTES: BETWEEN BENARAS AND PATNA**

If one moves from Benaras to Patna, he may follow two alternative routes: -

1. One keeping in line with the Ganges through Mughal Sarai (i.e. eastern bank of Ganges and opposite the city of Benaras), Jamania, Chausa, Buxar, Bhojpur, Arrah, Maner and Danapur. <sup>(17)</sup> This was part of the Eastern Imperial Highway.
2. The other route pass through Mughal Sarai, Khajura, Sawath, Mohania, Sasaram, Daudnagar, Arwal, Naubatpur and Phulwarisharif. <sup>(18)</sup>

Many historical personalities have availed either of the two alternative routes and they include the following: -

**The Jamania – Buxar alignment of the Eastern Imperial Highway:** - In 1529, **Babur** followed the Jamania, Buxar route to quell the revolt of Afghans by crossing Ganges.<sup>(19)</sup> **Humayun** followed the same route to Gaur in 1538 & while returning through the same route (after Munger) a year later;<sup>(20)</sup> his troops were routed by **Sher Khan** at the Battle of Chausa.<sup>(21)</sup> Though Mughal army came by the ‘Southern-Ganges-Route’ in 1574 to Patna; **Akbar** came later on a speeding flotilla by River Ganges to fight against Kararani Pathans, <sup>(22)</sup> under the leadership of **Daud** and after defeating them; Akbar pursued Daud up to Daryapur (south east of Barahiya) in the east, by the land route and returned by the river route.<sup>(23)</sup> After the revolt of **Prince Khurram (later**

**Shahjahan)** against his father, Emperor Jahangir; he followed the route from Deccan via Odisha – Bengal – Teliagarhi– Chausa.<sup>(24)</sup>

**Mohania – Sasaram alignment:** - **Peter Mundy** (1632) & **Tavernier** (1665) followed the Sasaram route to Bihar.<sup>(25)</sup> Sher Shah used to follow the route as he had his 'Family Estate' in this area and also because of the Forts of **Rohtasgarh**<sup>(26)</sup> and **Shergarh** (that lay south and south-west of Sasaram), respectively;<sup>(27)</sup> which were integral part of his defence strategy as he acted with steadfastness against any act of 'ATTACK OR DEFENCE' along with the fort of **Chunar** (in the Mirzapur district in UP), further west.<sup>(28)</sup> Ali Gauhar (Later Shah Alam II) availed this route in his three (failed) expeditions during 1759 – 1761 periods.<sup>(29)</sup>

Mir Qasim fled through this route and English Army under Major Adams followed up to the Karmanasha and afterwards the EIC forces were stationed at Durgawati.<sup>(30)</sup>

## **VARIANT ROUTES THROUGH MAGADH REGION**

In the Magadh region, the Eastern Imperial Highway passes along the southern bank of Ganges, via **Patna-Mokamah-Barhiya-Lakhisarai** towns. All the variant routes of Magadh region, south of the Mokama Taal; meets the Imperial highway at Lakhisarai.<sup>(31)</sup>

- (i) **Sasaram – Gaya – Biharsharif – Lakhisarai**
- (ii) **Sasaram – Daudnagar – Arwal – Jahanabad – Biharsharif – Lakhisarai**

Interestingly, both '**Patna**'<sup>(32)</sup> and '**Biharsharif**'<sup>(33)</sup> are key towns of two alternative routes connecting at **Kiul – Lakhisarai Junction**.<sup>(34)</sup>

## **LAKHISARAI-TELIAGARHI SECTOR**

When Mughal Imperial Highway moves further east and passes through the the Lakhisarai-Teliagarhi Sector (Anga region); earthworks, were erected at different times across the gaps, to block the passage of hostile armies and they include the following: -

1. Erection of the **Munger Fort** and strengthening of its defenses in successive periods. <sup>(35)</sup>
2. The narrowest pass was at **Teliagarhi**; where there was a fort, which completely dominated the road. This defile has often been called '**The Key to Bengal**'. The fortifications across the narrowest gaps may more appropriately be described as the "**Gates of Bengal**". <sup>(36)</sup>

It was at Teliagarhi that Sher Khan was held up by the Bengal army, when he first proceeded against the capital of Bengal (Gaur) in 1536 A.D; but Sher Shah himself made a bold detour through Jharkhand & suddenly appeared before Gaur. <sup>(37)</sup>

In 1538 A.D., Sher Shah was in the capital of Bengal (Gaur); and was defending Teliagarhi pass from Humayun by delaying his movement towards Gaur, while Sher Shah managed to reach Rohtasgarh through the jungle terrain of Jharkhand. <sup>(38)</sup>

#### **VARIANT ROUTES IN THE ANGA REGION:**

1. In the Turko-Afghan period, the 'jungle terrain' of Santhal Pargana was successfully exploited by Bakhtiyar Khalji, when he led his armed contingent from Odantapuri Vihar (Biharsharif) towards Nadia (the then Bengal Capital) in the early 13<sup>th</sup> Century. <sup>(39)</sup>
2. Sher Shah exploited the alternative routes of South Bihar, more aggressively, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.
3. In 1659, after the defeat at 'Khwaja' against Aurangzeb; Suja retreated eastward and entrenched himself at Munger. Mir Jumla circumvented **Munger**, through Jharkhand route and went ahead. <sup>(40)</sup>
4. Suja was forced to retreat to Rajmahal and encamped his soldiers at **Teliagarhi pass**. Again, Mir Jumla circumvented Teliagarhi through the jungle-terrain & after 12 days emerged at '**Siuri**' in Birbhum and proceeded north & laid siege to Suja's entry in Bengal. <sup>(41)</sup> Suja was forced to cross Ganges near Rajmahal and fled towards Arakan via North of Padma River.



## **DECISIVE BATTLES FOUGHT ALONG THE 'SOUTHERN-GANGES-ROUTE'**

Some of the decisive battles were fought between the rival armies at various places of the '**Southern-Ganges-Route**' during different historical times before the Battle of Plassey, and they include: -

- i. **Battle of Surajgarha (May 1534 AD)** was fought between Sher Khan and the Munger contingent of the Bengal Army of Nasrat Shah. Sher Khan won the battle. <sup>(42)</sup>
- ii. **Battle of Chausa (June 26, 1539 AD)** was between Sher Khan and Humayun. Sher Khan won the battle. <sup>(43)</sup>
- iii. **Battle of Surajgarha (April 1557 AD)** was fought between Muhammad Shah Adil and Bengal Sultan Bahadur Shah. Bahadur Shah won it and Shah Adil was executed. <sup>(44)</sup>
- iv. **Battle of Patna (August 1574 AD)** was fought between the Mughal army and Pathans under the leadership of Daud Kararani. Mughal army won it and they captured Patna. Emperor Akbar personally came to monitor the battle during its decisive stages when Hajipur Fort was captured followed by the fall and subsequent capture of Patna. <sup>(45)</sup>
- v. **Battle of Tukaroi (March 3, 1575)** was fought between the armies of Daud Kararani and Mughals in Southern Midnapore (near Jaleshwar) in which, Mughal Generals Todar Mal and Munim Khan, achieved a stunning victory over Sultan Daud Kararani. Tukaroi lay in extension of the southern wing of the Southern Ganges Route (Suti-Nadia-Hooghly-Midnapore-Jaleshwar-Jajnagar-Bhuvneshwar) moving towards Coastal Odisha. <sup>(46)</sup>
- vi. **Battle of Rajmahal (July, 1576)** was fought between the Mughal army and Afghan rebels under the leadership of Daud Kararani. Mughals won the battle and Daud was executed. <sup>(47)</sup>
- vii. **Mughals vs Isa Khan of Eastern Bengal Delta** – Naval war of September, 1584 and August 1597. In both battles, the mighty

Mughal forces were defeated. It lay in the Rajmahal-Suti-Dacca-Chittagong alignment. <sup>(48)</sup>

## **VENTURING THE JHARKHAND ROUTE**

The geographical terrain of Jharkhand was under deep forest cover during Mughal period and there was no major highway, passing through the region till 1780s. The historical records revealed that some selected historical personalities, religious preachers, raiding army personnel, adventurers, raiders had availed the jungle terrain of Jharkhand, during different historical periods and few of them were: - I-tsing, Hindu and Jain Pilgrims,<sup>(49)</sup> Bakhtiyar Khilji (Santhal Pargana route),<sup>(50)</sup> Firuz Shah Tughlaq, Sher Shah,<sup>(51)</sup> Mughal Army under Man Singh, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Mir Jumla,<sup>(52)</sup> Shah Alam II,<sup>(53)</sup> Maratha raiders,<sup>(54)</sup> Major Caillaud,<sup>(55)</sup> the contingent under Major Carnac (against Mir Qasim)<sup>(56)</sup> among others who passed through various Jharkhand routes.

## **OPENING UP OF THE JHARKHAND**

From Mughal period, the Jungle terrain of Jharkhand slowly opened up with the sustained state intervention from the top; along with the ongoing process of de-forestation, opening up of new settlements of agricultural societies and conversion of jungles into paddy fields, building of new network of roads and integration of tribal population within the fold of agricultural society. Some of the Mughal campaigns were as follows: -

- (a) The expedition of Shahbaz Khan (Akbar's General) against Raja of 'Chutia Nagpur (Damodar Valley)'. <sup>(57)</sup>
- (b) The expedition of Shaista Khan (Shahjahan), against the turbulent chiefs of Palamau. <sup>(58)</sup>
- (c) Daud Khan, Governor of Bihar under Aurangzeb, were more aggressive as he invaded the country and stormed local forts, vanquished the chief and annexed the district to the Mughal dominions. <sup>(59)</sup>
- (d) The Subedar of Bengal Alivardi Khan was in great trouble with Maratha raids during 1740s & 1750s for about 11 years. As the balance of

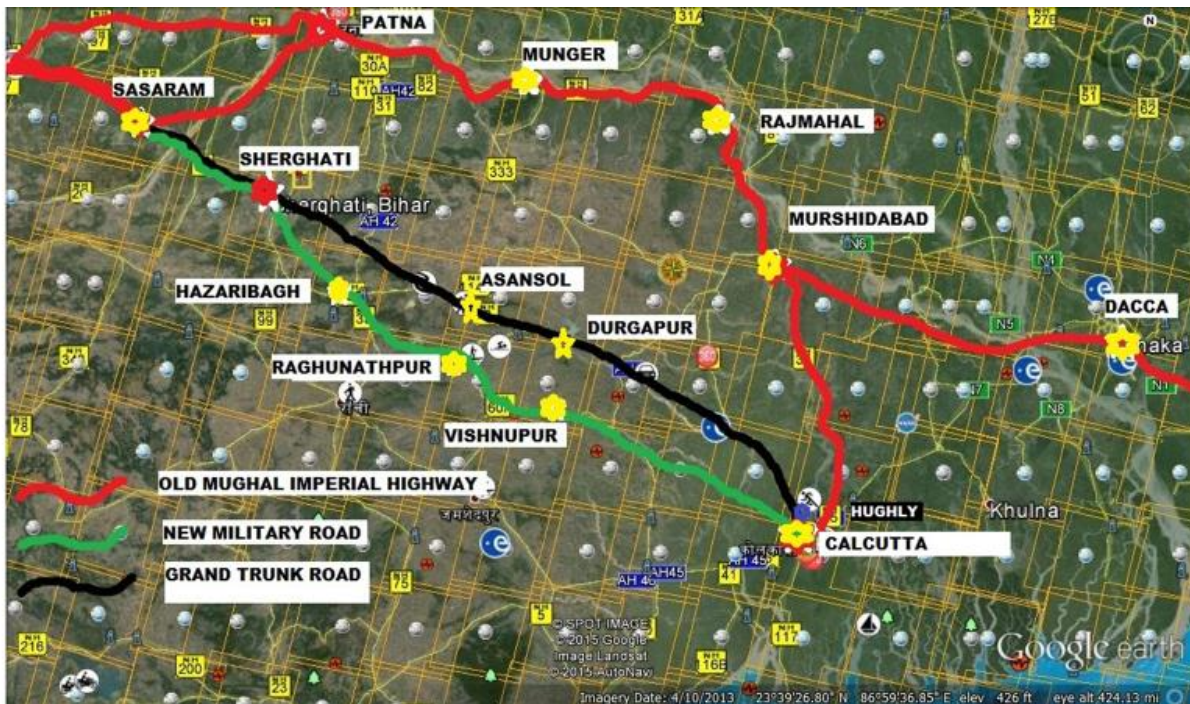
power shifted from Delhi to Pune-Satara region with ascendancy of Marathas; hordes of Maratha horsemen poured from Central India and took the route of either Orissa or Jharkhand and used to enter Bengal Province through Midnapur, or Chutia-Nagpur or Deoghar-Santhal Pargana-Birbhum route and also through the jungles of Kharagpur hills. The threat continued even after the Battle of Plassey during 1757 – 1765 phases also. <sup>(60)</sup>

## INFERENCE

Even in the early Colonial period, during 1757 – 85 phases (and afterwards), the armed forces of East India Company generally utilized the existing pattern of **Mughal Imperial Communication route**.

The English got the first exposure to **Jharkhand Jungle terrain** in 1763 and later two roads came up one after the other, through Jharkhand, connecting Calcutta with North India: - (i) first, the **New Military Road** (1785-1830) <sup>(61)</sup> and (ii) Second, **Grand Trunk Road** <sup>(62)</sup> by 1832.....But this is a later story!

**(Fig.4)**



[Fig. 4 Mughal & Colonial Highways of Eastern India]

## NOTES

1. Parihar, New Delhi, 2008; Page 37-45 (Agra to Surat) –
2. Ibid; Page 37, 49 to 58 (3. Agra to Kabul) –
3. Ibid; Page 37, 45 to 49 (2. Agra to Patna and Dacca) –
4. (i) ‘Sarwani, Abbas Khan; [Pages 761-62]’ (ii) Parihar, [Page 83],”
5. Parihar, Page 83
6. Parihar, Page 45 to 49 (Agra to Patna and Dacca).
7. (i) Tripathy; First Volume, Page 15. (ii) Parihar, Page 45. (iii) Yang, Anand A.: Page 27.
8. (i) Askari, Volume II Part I (a) Page 146-148 (Strategic importance of Tirhut as Gateway to Bengal in early Medieval Period). (b) Page 149-151 (Ghiyathuddin Tughluq’s invasion and conquest of Tirhut after Lakhnauti and Sonargaon); (c) Firuz Shah Tughluq’s first Bengal expedition in 1353-54 was along Awadh-Tirhut-Darbhanga-Purnia-Nepal Terai region (Page 188-190); (ii) Diwakar, Page 391.
9. (i) Askari, Volume II Part I, Patna (Firuz Shah Tughluq’s return journey in second Bengal expedition in 1358 was along Northern Ganges Route i.e. via Hajipur and Jaunpur; Page 192). (ii) Diwakar, Page 392
10. Ray, Chapters 6 (Bangla), 6.2 (Lakhanavati), 6.3 (Pandua), 6.4 (Gaur); Pages 133-152
11. (i) Askari, Volume II Part II Pages 12 and 13. (ii) Tripathy First Volume, Page 20
12. Askari, Volume II Part II, Page 32 & 33
13. Biswas; - Pages 33 & 34
14. Eaton; -Pages 150

15. Eaton; -Pages 151
16. (i) Das, Page 18 (ii) Oldham, Part I, Page 27. (iii) Parihar, Page  
49
17. Oldham, Part I, Page 27
18. Ibid, Page 27
19. Ibid, Page 27.
20. Ibid; Page 27
21. Ibid; Page 27
22. Ambashthya, Page 13 -- 19
23. Ibid; Pages 20 & 21
24. Askari, Volume II Part II; Pages 138-140; -
25. Oldham, Part I; Page 27
26. Ibid; Page 27
27. Patil, Page 533 to 536
28. Askari, Volume II Part II; Page 16 - 55;
29. Datta, Volume III Part I; Pages 94 – 104
30. (i) Ibid; Page 114. (ii) James PATNA ;” Page 200.
31. Biswas; Page 36



32. (i). Ambashthya, Pages 471(ii) Yang, Page 58 – Patna vis-a-vis Biharsharif
33. Yang, Anand A.; Berkeley, 1999; Page 57 – Biharsharif
34. (i) Askari, Volume II Part I; Page 445 – The town of Lakhisarai.  
(ii) Ambashthya, Page 226.(iii) Patil, Pages 228 – 229 (Lakhisarai); Pages 427 – 430 (Rajaona); Pages 209 – 210 (Kiul).
35. (i) Patil, 'Monghyr – The Fort', Page 281 - 289. (ii) Ambashthya, "Munger Fort" - Pages 179 – 180
36. (i) Patil, 'Teliagadhi' – The Fort and buildings, Pages 556 – 557.  
(ii) Ambashthya, Page 476
37. Ambashthya, B. P.; Patna, 1990; Page 476
38. Ibid; Page 477
39. Ray, Nadia, Pages 129-133
40. (i) Jha, Surendra; Page 82. (ii) James, Page 37 – 38
41. (i) Ibid; Pages 82 – 83
42. Askari, Volume II Part II; Pages 22 – 23 (Battle of Surajgarha, May 1534 AD)
43. Ibid; Pages 33 – 34 (Battle of Chausa, June 26, 1539 AD)
44. Ibid; Pages 62 – 63 (Battle of Surajgarha, April 1557 AD)
45. Ibid; Pages 65 – 67 (Battle of Patna, August 1574 AD)
46. Eaton; Page 142

47. Askari, Volume II Part II; Page 67 (Battle of Rajmahal, 1576 AD)
48. Eaton; Pages 147 & 148
49. Oldham, Part I, Page 26
50. Jha, Pages 28 – 29
51. Oldham, Part I, Pages 21 – 25
52. Ibid; Page 25.- 26
53. Ibid; Page 26
54. Jha,; Pages 98 – 102
55. Oldham, Part I, Pages 25.- 29
56. Ibid; Page 30
57. Oldham, Part I Page 25 (Shahbaz Khan)
58. (i) Oldham, Part I, Page 25 (Shaista Khan). (ii) Ambashthya, Pages 479 & 480
59. (i) Oldham, Part II Page 25 (Daud Khan). (ii) Ambashthya, Pages 479 - 480 (iii) Tripathy; 'Dakshin Bihar Ki Nadiyan: Dhar aur Kachar; Page 219
60. Ambashthya, Page 474
61. (i) Oldham, Part II; Pages 17 – 26. (ii) Gopal and Jha (Ed.); Pages 24 – 29 (The team of Uncle and Nephew, Thomas and William Daniell in 1786 had passed through the 'New Military Road' in 1786 and immortalized it through its paintings)
62. Oldham, Part II – Pages 26 – 34 (Grand Trunk Road)

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