

# Exploring the North East – the CV way

Story and Photography Suhrid Barua

It is not pretty. But, life goes on.  
But you wonder, for how long.

During the course of 7 days,  
across 5 North Eastern states, we  
encountered...poor roads and fuel,  
separatist extortion, route congestion  
and government apathy.





## AS I SAW IT

The North East seems like so much of a troublesome enigma. More so, its CV industry. You want to know more, but are scared to. We decided that we did not want to die wondering. And the fourth anniversary issue was as good a time to get this done as any.

We at CV got cracking, discussing, brain-storming over which route to proceed, something that can give a real pulse of the commercial industry in that neck of the woods.

We first stumbled upon the idea of starting the trip from Agartala (Tripura) to Aizawl (Mizoram) but after some threadbare discussion, we altered our travel plans and opted to kickstart our trip from Aizawl (Mizoram).

At a personal level, I was expecting the weather to be cold but was extremely surprised to see the blazing sun at its very best.

Conversing was a really challenge as I am not adept at speaking fluent Mizo as easy speaking in Hindi or English was never an ideal way to communicate. I spoke to a lot of people during my stay at Mizoram and always took help of someone to translate for me what's was being said in local language.

I had heard a lot stuff being said about Manipur that it's a troubled state and not safe to travel. That's precisely what I experienced during my day's stay in state capital Imphal. I also heard stories about miscreants stopping you at public places and

digging into your wallet wiping off whatever cash is available at that time. I kept most of my cash and credit cards inside my socks, and kept barely two hundred rupees in my purse going with the line of thinking that if anything untoward happens, it won't be a big dent on my pocket. By four in the afternoon, the buzz in the city slowly tapers off and by 6 all is shut.

Having worked in Nagaland (Dimapur

*"Almost 80 per cent of roads in the state are in a dreadful state"*

to be precise in 2002), I was feeling little assured about it though I was wary of trouble brewing after the economic blockade changed the equations leading to flurry of protests and agitations. Much of unease was still till I crossed Mao Gate – Manipur- Nagaland border and was beginning to feel I was in the comfort zone as I speak pretty good Nagamese. So conversing in Nagaland was a piece of cake for me.

My first stop at Mizoram was the Ch. Saprawnga Truck Terminal where a bevy of trucks were parked with drivers and handmen lazing around the premises. All trucks plying into Mizoram from other states park their vehicles at CSTT

Communication-wise, I had the best experience in Arunachal Pradesh. Local speak chaste Hindi and it made things easy for me. The bus break down incident on the way to Bomdila did widen the worrylines

on my brow as it was a forlorn place and also dusk had settled in. I heaved a massive sigh of relief when I got into a Tata Sumo and finally reached Bomdila.

On way to Guwahati, I could feel like homecoming when I saw the locals chewing tamul-paan (betel nut) when the bus stopped at various places on the Assam border passing through Balipara, Tezpur, Mangaldoi en route to Guwahati.

The North-east trip probably went as I anticipated save for a stay at Imphal where things are not at all rosy for common people as I could not explore the way I desired because of the looming fear factor of not becoming a 'casualty'.

### Day 1

Heading out from Pune, I had tucked in a couple of woolen wears inside my bag, not knowing what kind of weather to expect in the distant North East. It was to be in vain. I was greeted to a hot and sunny day at the Lengpui airport – a 32-km drive from Mizoram's capital Aizawl.

The airport road leading to Aizawl is often jocularly referred to as the only 'good' road in Mizoram. After all, VVIPS/VIPS need to take it to fly in and out of the state.

### CH. SAPRAWNGA TRUCK TERMINAL

My first stop at Mizoram was the Ch. Saprawnga Truck Terminal where a bevy of trucks are parked with drivers and handmen lazing around the premises. All trucks plying into Mizoram from other states park their vehicles at CSTT. A chat with the →

The Ch. Saprawnga Truck Terminal (CSTT) in Aizawl, Mizoram, can accommodate 150 trucks at a time. No washing of trucks is permitted inside CSTT premises.





Adulterated fuel/malpractices are a big issue for commercial vehicle owners in Mizoram. (Inset) The Singson Service Station surprised us with a black tape being stuck on the fuel price indicator.

truck drivers at the depot was all I needed to know that Assamese truck drivers have an overwhelming presence in Mizoram though trucks from other states such as West Bengal, J & K, Delhi, Rajasthan, Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya also ply into Mizoram.

Interestingly, it is not mandatory for trucks to park their vehicles at CSTT which operates under Aizawl Municipal

Trucks are charged Rs 50 for up to 6 hours and Rs 100 up to 24 hours while trailers/earth movers are charged Rs 100 up to 6 hours and Rs 150 for up to 24 hours. CSTT can accommodate 150 trucks at a time but it is never packed to capacity at any time as trucks keep coming in and going out.

Corporation. 'We do not own up any responsibility for theft or damage to goods at CSTT. We also do not permit any washing of trucks inside CSTT premises. But, I guess the safety element is the key attraction for truckers to park at CSTT,' says Vawlalchhuanga Rangavamval, manager, CSTT.

Trucks are charged Rs 50 for up to 6 hours and Rs 100 up to 24 hours while trailers/earth movers are charged Rs 100 up to 6 hours and Rs 150 for up to 24 hours. CSTT can accommodate 150 trucks at a time but it is never packed to capacity at any time as trucks keep coming in and going out.

## FUEL STATIONS

Next, I took a brief jaunt to some fuel stations in Mizoram and was a tad surprised to see – Singson Service Station pasting a black tape on the metre showing the tab for fuel delivered to a vehicle. The lady manager at the Singson Service Station,

*"A trucker takes the whole day to cover a distance of 60 kms"*

who refused to identify herself, sported a broad smile before offering a lame excuse that the device had some technical bugs. It stands to reason that through the 'faulty' machine, the managers of the pump were only trying to extract 'differential pricing' from customers of varying profiles!

My next destination was the office premises of the Mizoram Road Transport Union (MRTU) – the apex body for all commercial vehicles in Mizoram. During the tete-a-tete with MRTU officials, my attention was drawn towards poor fuel quality in Mizoram. 'Fuel quality has gone down badly in Mizoram because of adulteration. We have apprised the government about this. Adulteration of diesel is the last thing truckers want in Mizoram as fuel consumption is already high because of the hilly terrain. Diesel

adulteration can lead to the fuel injector pump getting damaged easily. Even the engine's power output could also go down,' explains Mizoram Road Transport Union (MRTU) president R Lalhmumawia.

What came as a stunner to me was the revelation from MRTU that almost 80 per cent of roads in the state are in dreadful state. With help from MRTU, I took a truck ride on a Tata 1613 (this cab forward model is most consistently seen on Mizoram roads) on the Lunglei road which goes through eight of the eleven districts in Mizoram – Serchhip, Hnahthial, Lunglei, Lawngtlai, Saiha,

Saitual, Khawzawl and Champhaiaand. The road was in terrible state with landslides being a regular feature. Invariably, exca-



The Silchar-Aizawl journey of 140 kms was covered in around eight hours. We passed through Vairengte, on the Assam-Mizoram en route to Silchar.

vators are being pressed into service to make the roads barely motorable. An illegal stone quarry along the road only added to the chaos.

Its not just poor construction that is responsible for this sorry state of the roads.

I stumbled upon a handy piece of information that the nature of the local stone has a role to play in roads being in bad shape. 'The mother stone in Mizoram is very soft. This is the reason for frequent repairs being needed here. As per PWD guidelines, the mother stone has to be used. But that does not have to be the

MRTU president R Lalhmumawia feels poor fuel quality only compounds the woes of transporters in Mizoram as fuel consumption is already high in the hilly terrain.





The dreadful state of the Aizawl-Lunglei route which goes through eight of eleven districts in Mizoram.

case. Like bitumen is brought from IOC, Haldia, stone can also be brought from outside Mizoram. Once that happens, roads would hold firm for a longer period,' says Akhilesh Kumar Singh, Project Manager, ABCI, a firm responsible for construction of Kawnpui and Birichai stretch.

## Day 2

### HORRIBLE ROAD LEADING TO BAIRABI

If I thought this was a bad road to ply vehicles on, the one I was now proceeding would have to be the worst among the worst. The 120-km stretch between Aizawl and Bairabi, especially the stretch from Kalasib to Bairabi (distance of 60 km) can be a forgettable experience for a truck driver. 'The mud-riddled stretch from Kalasib to Bairabi is a truck driver's nightmare. Believe it or not, a trucker takes the whole day to cover a distance of 60 kms, something that can otherwise be covered in under 5 hours. We have drawn the attention of the state government on the need to repair these abysmal roads but so far, they have failed to act on our requests,' Lalmunmawia vents his frustration.

This route is crucial for the hilly state as it is an important conduit for the supply of food grains from the Bairabi railhead. It

It is a routine for truck drivers in Mizoram to take longer to cover distances. For instance, a trucker has to spend five days and five nights to cover a 300 km distance from Aizawl to Longlei

is here that trucks unload food grains from rail wagons and carry it to the Bairabi FCI godown from where it is distributed point-to-point.

'The Bairabi railhead has huge significance in transportation of food grains to Mizoram. God forbid, if this road is blocked or snapped, the whole of Mizoram would suffer as it is the only supply line of food grains for us,' Lalmunmawia tells us.

It is a routine thing for truck drivers in Mizoram to take longer to cover distances. For instance, a trucker has to spend five days and five nights to cover a 300 km distance from Aizawl to Longlei. Similarly,

**"Another contributing factor to bad roads is maintenance cost, which is relatively high in Mizoram"**

a trucker has to spend four days to cover the 290-km distance from Rentagon to Chamhai. 'On these routes, the possibility of landslides is high, so truckers only ply during the day,' observes MRTU Secretary Marka Lalsangliana.

Around 400 trucks ply in Mizoram. These trucks are mainly engaged ferrying food grains along with construction material like bricks, sand and cement.

Here, trucks operate under the carrier contractor system to ferry food grains from the FCI. The carrier contractor system works in such a way that trucks have to operate under their banner to ferry food grains from FCI godowns.

In fact, buying a truck is not considered a viable business option anymore in Mizoram primarily because truck owners do not get the desired return on their investments.

### HIGH MAINTENANCE COST

Another contributing factor to bad roads is maintenance cost which is comparatively very high in Mizoram compared to other North-eastern states. 'Look, under normal →





circumstances, a gear can easily last for a year but in Mizoram it lasts for barely 2-3 months. Again for differentials which has two configurations - 40 and 50 - the 40 configuration lasts for eight months nor-

Transporters are feeling the heat of paying a hefty 12.5 percent VAT on purchase of automotive spares, which is much higher compared to the other North-eastern states.



mally, but in Mizoram it barely lasts for a month. Even the 50 configuration, which normally keeps for life, also used to result in problems within a month because of the terrible road conditions,' MRTU secretary Lalsangliana disclosed. The purchase of automotive parts is also a big challenge because of hefty state taxes. 'The government levys a 12.5 percent VAT on purchase of automotive spares. This is virtually double the rates seen in other states,' a MRTU official bemoans.

Not just that, the poor conditions of roads ensure truck owners often have

to carry out body repairs much earlier than is required in normal circumstances. 'A truck owner would carry out body repairs for 4-5 years. But in Mizoram, every truck owner would tell you that their trucks needs body repair once a year,' the MRTU secretary informs.

Another interesting disclosure that came to light while interacting with the truck drivers is that almost 75 percent of truck drivers in Mizoram are owners as well. H Malsawma is one such truck owner-cum-driver who sums up the life of truckers in Mizoram. 'We carry food grains from FCI godowns, following government guidelines of carrying no more than 90 quintals per truck load. But, there are times, when trucks have to take on 120 quintals per load to meet the food needs of the state and in the process, expose ourselves to high risks of trucks overturning,' he puts things in perspective.

### BUS BUSINESS IN SHAMBLES TOO

Even the bus business is hard hit by bad

road conditions at Mizoram. 'It is no longer a profitable business for us. We run our buses keeping public interest factor in mind. Today, we had just eight passengers for my 42-seater Guwahati-Aizawl bus. But, we operated it on schedule in public interest,' says Mizoram Night Bus Owner Association president LT Thankhuma.

The biggest concern for Thankhuma, who owns Maraland Travels, is the sight of a bus breaking down on the way.

If a bus breaks down in a hilly terrain like Mizoram, passengers suffer a lot. Save

*"Today, we have just eight passengers on my 42-seater Guwahati-Aizawl bus. But, we still operate it on schedule in public interest"*



We went through trouble-torn NH-39 from Imphal to Dimapur via Mao Gate, on the Manipur-Nagaland border.

for the designated hotels at a few pockets, we do not have hotels or eateries at regular intervals as in the plains.

Like trucks and buses, light commercial vehicles bear the brunt of bad roads in Mizoram. Among the 80,000 commercial vehicles operating in the state, about 2,000 Maxi Cabs and 3,500 Taxi make up for the LCV segment. Maxi cabs play a key role →



The truck driver-cum-owner combo of H. H. Malsawma and H.C Thanglura.







Sadly, truck burning has become a common sight in Manipur. As many 14 trucks were burnt down since the economic blockade broke out in April.

in shipping of essentials items like food, fruits, vegetables, while taxis ferry passengers within and outside the city.

### Day 3 SHADOW OF FEAR

Now, my trip was getting into the business-end - strife-torn Imphal. But, before that, I had to skirt the Mizoram-Assam border. My 85-km truck ride from Kalasib, Mizoram to Silchar, Assam in a Tata 407 EX was an enriching one. The road on this route was much better, but the passage leading into Silchar was miserable, loaded as it was with pot-holes. 'Unlike other north-eastern states Mizoram is largely militant-free. I ply daily on this route to ferry rice from Silchar,' says truck driver VL Mhar even as we crossed Vairengte - on the Assam- Mizoram border.

Imphal loomed large now. A city, which has an abundance of greenery all round, but little life after dusk. Underground organisations mushroom in large numbers in the state and the NH-39 connecting Manipur-Nagaland is a crucial link for both states. Given this scenario, the life of the trucker could hardly be easy.

### TRUCK BURNING CULTURE

In other parts of the country burning of trucks may elicit a 'what?' feeling, but in Manipur truckers are sadly beginning to get accustomed to the 'truck burning culture'. In fact, ever since the economic

blockade broke out in April.

Lives of truckers operating on NH-39 have become close to hell. As many as 14 trucks were burnt down in the last three months.

'Seven trucks were burnt down at one

*"Ransom for a truck driver ranges from Rs 2-6 lakh"*

go in Khuzama in Nagaland last May. It was a routine day when some truck drivers were cooking fish along the road, when gun-totting miscreants thrashed the drivers because of which a few of the truck drivers sustained eye, head and hand injuries. The truck drivers recovered a 9 mm magazine which had 12 rounds and handed it over to the ASP of Kohima,' reveals All Manipur Truck Owners' Welfare Association secretary Y Lokeshore Singh.

Very recently, the Nagaland State Transport has installed vehicle tracking systems on its 25-odd super buses. The vehicle tracking system is controlled from the NST head office in Dimapur

Meeting extortion demands is a challenge truckers have to cope with day in day out. Interestingly, underground organizations make it a point to issue challans to truckers at all times whenever they collect 'taxes'. The annual road tax for a truck is Rs. 8,000, Rs 15,000-16,000 for ten-wheel-

ers, Rs 8,000 for a tanker, Rs 10,000 for bus and Rs. 8,000 for gas bullet. Road tax apart, there are separate goods taxes fixed by underground outfits to ferry goods per truck per trip.

The only relief for truck owners is that goods tax does not need to be borne by truck owners but by goods owners. A goods owner has to pay goods tax of Rs. 8,000-9,000 to carry potato and onion while for medicines, a truck has to pay in the range of Rs. 25,000-30,000. For iron and steel, a goods owner has to fork out Rs. 11,000-12,000 per trip. If you thought this is exorbitant, think again as a hefty go-down tax of Rs. 50,000 to 5,00,00 also has to be paid annually by goods owners.

An interaction with some truck drivers at the truck depot at Mantripukhari in Imphal gave us a deeper insight into a truck



All Manipur Truck Owner Welfare Association secretary Y. Lokeshore Singh says meeting extortion demands is a challenge every truck owner has to cope with, day in day out.

drivers' mood. 'Drivers often get thrashed by underground outfits irrespective of whether we meet their demands or not. If we complain to police you know what would happen the next time we meet these UGs,' says truck driver Ibomcha Singh (name changed) who plies on the dangerous NH-39.


My next place of visit is the All Manipur Truck Owners' Welfare Association office where I was aghast to learn that truck driver abduction is emerging as a productive kind of extortion for underground outfits.

### TRUCK DRIVER ABDUCTION

The All-Manipur Truck Owner Welfare Association secretary Y Lokeshore Singh, who owns over 25 trucks was a personal →







Underground organizations make it a point to issue 'challans' for every tax collected.

Goods tax per truck per trip	
Onions	Rs. 8,000-9,000
Potatoes	Rs. 8,000-9,000
Medicines	Rs. 25000-30000
Iron and steel	Rs. 11000-12000
Tourist bus with goods	Rs. 2,000-2,500
Godown tax per year	Rs. 50,000-500,000

Road tax truckers pay per year for vehicle	
Truck	Rs. 8,000
Truck (ten wheelers)	Rs. 15,000-16,000
Tanker	Rs. 8,000
Bus	Rs. 10,000
Gas bullet	Rs. 8,000

victim of truck driver abduction last year. 'Ransom for the truck driver ranges from Rs 2-6 lakh. They demanded Rs.10 lakh after abducting my truck driver, but I settled with them for Rs. 6 lakh,' he adds.

Over the year, the modus operandi of truck driver abduction has undergone a change thanks to mobile technology. 'They underground outfits call up from one place, kept the abductee in another place and release him at a third location. In my case, the driver was abducted from Dimapur, kept in Assam (Golaghat) but the ransom call came from Manipur,' AMTOWA secretary adds further.

Supply of essential commodities is crippled as most trucks operating under AMTOWA have taken a firm stand not to ply on NH-39 unless the government takes adequate measures to compensate for burnt trucks and ensure that trucks no longer face extortion demands on NH-39. With most MTOWA trucks not plying on NH-39, the government is forcibly requisitioning trucks and providing security to ferry goods on NH-39. As a result, only 60-70 Manipur trucks are plying on NH-39 in contrast to the 400-odd trucks that were plying before the economic blockade first broke out in April. Only trucks coming from other states are plying into Manipur and those too, in small numbers.

The talk of providing security cover takes an astonishing turn when a truck driver pleading anonymity disclosed that security personnel are of no use when they are escorting trucks on NH-39. 'CRPF person-

nel who accompany trucks on NH-39 as escorts do precious little to mitigate the woes of truckers. Recently, in Senapati, CRPF personnel took refuge inside a truck when militants stopped trucks on the Guwahati-Imphal route to extort money. CRPF personnel apparently said they have not been given orders by government to fire. So, what is the point of taking CRPF personnel with trucks as security cover?', said the driver who was privy to that incident.

#### FREIGHT RATES ZOOM

Business-wise, truckers plying on NH-39

Any one who wants to buy a mini bus and ply them on these routes has little chance of succeeding. Paying off monthly installments on the loans and incurring maintenance expenditure is a tough ask.

have a lot to gain notwithstanding the economic blockade. Freight rates have hit the roof since June.

'See, when the economic blockade was not there – an Imphal-Dimapur trip would fetch Rs 20,000-22,000 and that has now doubled to Rs. 45,000 per trip. Similarly, a Guwahati-Imphal trip which used to fetch a truck owner Rs. 45,000 is now above Rs. 60,000,' says a truck owner who operates on NH-39.

If truck owners are making the most of the economic blockade, truck drivers

***"Truck drivers of Manipur are homesick by nature"***

also have a lot going for them. In fact, this route is an attractive option for outstation drivers. 'Truck driver can add a few extra tonnes as there is no weigh bridge in Manipur. At check gates, only the weight is checked through documents available with the trucker and even if at all anything fishy is found, truckers can grease palms and get way with it,' remarked a truck driver.

Truck drivers of Manipur are homesick by nature. This is the main reason why they do not travel outside Manipur, mostly confining themselves on Dimapur and Guwahati routes. So, the new national permit fee would be of little benefit to Manipur trucks. 'The National Permit Fee is good news for truckers in Manipur but how many of them would go out of North-East is difficult to say. They are happy to ply in and around Manipur,' added Y Lokeshore Singh. →



Recently, the Nagaland State Transport resumed its bus services on the trouble-torn Imphal-Dimapur route after three months because of the economic blockade on NH-39.







Nagaland State Transport (NST) bus driver Imkong runs his vehicle with its recently installed vehicle tracking system. The VTS is controlled and monitored from the NST head office in Dimapur.

#### Day 4

#### NST GOES HI-TECH

After a day's halt at Imphal, I undertook a journey from Imphal to Dimapur on a Nagaland State Transport (NST) bus. The general feeling over here is that travelling on government buses is a safer bet as miscreants are unlikely to create trouble. Passengers travelling in private buses often report issues with looting, stone pelting and assault.

'Because of the economic blockade, NST bus services from Nagaland to Manipur were suspended for three months. We only resumed this service three days ago, you are lucky to be travelling in this bus as private buses are not safe at all,' says NST bus conductor Henry Nring.

The 35-seater bus started with around 15 passengers from Imphal but the occupancy soon picked up as passengers started pouring in at Kangpokpi, Senapati and Maram stoppage points. Soon we reached Mao Gate – Manipur- Nagaland border where the bus halted for the lunch break.

Seeing a vacant seat in the cabin, I started conversing with the bus driver and conductor in a random mix of Nagamese and Hindi. Even as I was engrossed in a conversation with the bus driver, my eyes were drawn towards a square box near the middle of the dashboard. Bus driver Im-

kong told me that it is the vehicle tracking system (VTS) that has been implemented in NST buses, about a month and a half ago. 'This VTS is controlled from the NST headoffice in Dimapur. VTS will not make much difference to my way of operating because even when the VTS was not there, I was carrying out my duties sincerely,' says Imkong.

VTS is installed in and around 25-odd Super buses while it is still to put in place in semi-category among the 200 buses that operate daily with the longest route being Tuensang which stands at a distance of 274 kms from Kohima.

People prefer Sumos over APSTS buses because of the 'extra service' the latter provide. Sumos offer pick up and drop facilities for passengers. To take the bus, passengers may often have to make a long and hard trudge to the bus stops.

Imkong feels VTS would ring in discipline among those drivers who spend long durations at stoppages. 'VTS is meant to ensure that all buses reach their destinations on time. Earlier, such vehicle tracking was done through mobile phones but not anymore. Every bus can be monitored at our Dimapur office as destination, location and timing,' he explains.

Earlier, NST buses would ply within Nagaland save for this Imphal route. On a daily basis, two buses proceed from Ma-



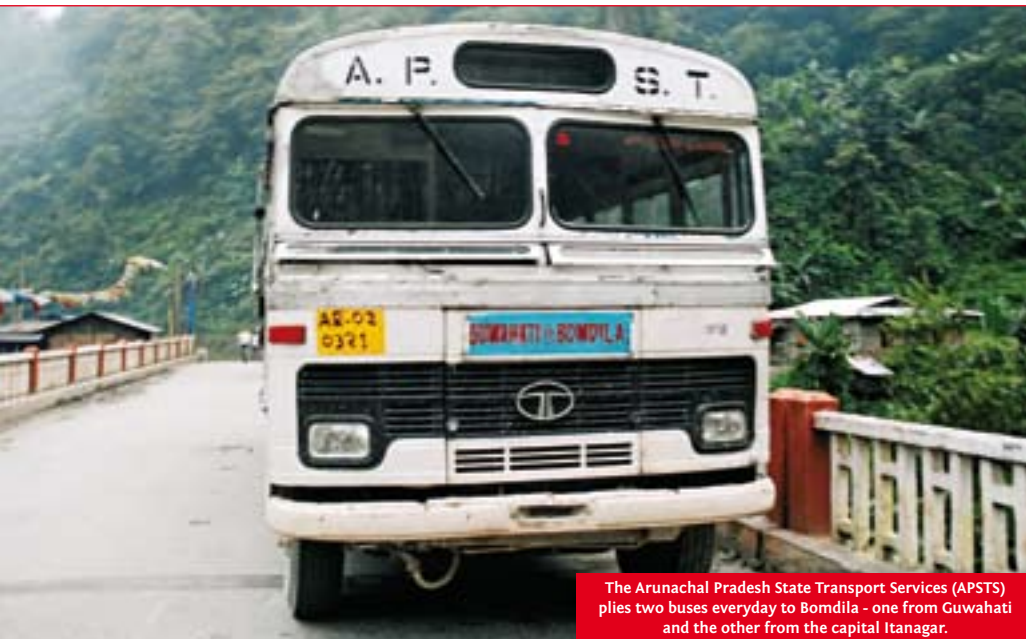
We set off for Tezpur from Dimapur and passed through the Assam-Nagaland border.

nipur to Nagaland – Imphal- Kohima and Imphal Dimapur. Earlier, NST used to operate buses to neighbouring states such as Assam and Meghalaya but lower passenger load forced authorities to discontinue such services.

Our bus was stranded for more than three hours owing to landslides as we came close to Nagaland capital Kohima. Waiting trucks on one side of the road only made things complicated. We reached Kohima around 4.30 pm and took off for Dimapur. Braving rains and heavy traffic, we arrived in Dimapur around 9 pm. ➔







I stayed put in Dimapur for the night and set off for Tezpur on a mini-bus, the next morning. The mini-bus conductor, who was an Assamese, kept yelling at stoppages that there are seats for passengers to get in when the reality was that the all seats were filled up. The only option was to go standing which I did along with my belongings.

#### Day 5

##### MINI-BUSES CRIPPLED IN ASSAM

Actually the bus was packed to capacity but the bus conductor kept hollering his favourite tone - 'seats available, come in'. The 'mini bus business in Assam or in any north-eastern state is fast turning non-profitable. There are so many vehicles plying on one route that profit margins are hit deeply,' said bus conductor Ratul Das.

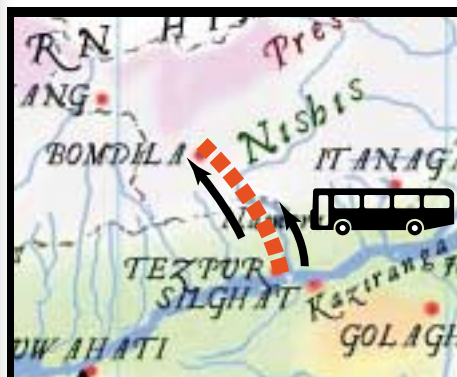
He added, how the advent of the Tata Magic has crippled the mini-bus business.

*"There are so many vehicles plying on a route that profit margins are hit deeply"*

'We are forced to compete with vehicles like the Tata Magic. Not only does the latter charge slightly lower fares, but they also reach destinations on time,' he added.

Das struck a realistic tone when he emphasised that only old players can sustain the present times. 'Any person who wants to buy a mini bus and ply them on these routes has no hope of succeeding. If he has bought a bus on loan, paying off monthly

installments and maintaining other operating costs would be a tough ask. Only bus owners, who are done with paying off



We took a bus ride on a Arunachal State Transport bus from Tezpur to Bomdila. We crossed the Bhalukpong-Assam-Arunachal Pradesh border along the way.

their loans and have 3-4 buses plying at the same time would get some returns. If

one or two buses are undergoing repairs, the other buses would keep the cash flow going,' he illustrates.

I kept yapping with the bus conductor amidst the pushing and showing of nearby passengers in the crowded bus and did not even realise when I reached Tezpur. I downed shutters for the day here.

#### Day 6

##### BUMPY RIDE TO BOMDILA

The next morning, I took a Arunachal Pradesh State Transport Services (APSTS) bus for Bomdilla from Tezpur. It was pretty overcast and cloudy. I enjoyed travelling through the smooth city roads of Tezpur, but once we crossed Balipara it was the start of a bumpy ride. 'It will now be 'disco-disco', said our bus driver. He was referring to the bumps because of which we would be dancing in our seats even if it was to be without choice. Soon we reached Bhalukpong on the Assam - Arunachal Pradesh border. The bus halted and I walked upto the check gate and furnished my Inner Line Permit to the cops. One of the cops wished me a happy journey and I was back in the bus.

Soon after we crossed Bhalukpong, we endured a horrible road. Heavy earth cutting work by the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) is going on in full swing as part of the plans to make this stretch a new highway. Soon the bus came to a screeching halt and we were stuck at a particular point for close to three hours as tragedy befell upon the road. Heavy boulders came crashing down on a military truck →









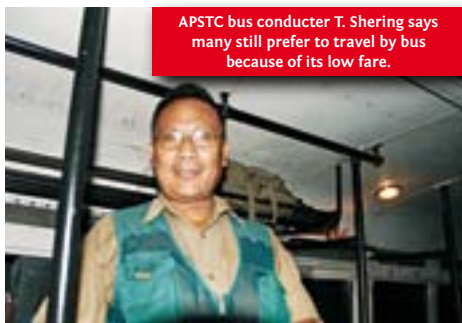
The Tata Sumos have been steadily eaten into the profits of the APSTC.

*"Sumos draw passengers easily because they pick up and drop passengers from their houses"*

and three jawans died on the spot while one succumbed to his injuries on the way to the hospital.

'Earth cutting work is on but because of rains, the whole road gets muddy and excavators are always on the ready to keep the road motorable,' a BRO official said on condition of anonymity.

Suddenly the bus developed starting problems 30 kms away from the Tenga



APSTC bus conductor T. Shering says many still prefer to travel by bus because of its low fare.

Valley. As dusk set in, I frantically waved at the Bomdila-bound Tata Sumos and finally got into in one of them. I reached Bomdila around 9 pm and capped off an eventful day.

I took another bus trip from Bomdila to Guwahati the next morning. There are two buses plying daily to Bomdila – one from Guwahati and other from capital Itanagar. The bus conductor B Tshering, a portly fig-

ure called 'motu' by the bus driver T Tshering kept us entertained with his smiles and jovial talk.

#### SUMOS PLAY SPOILER

He revealed how APSTS buses have taken a big knock on account of the Tata Sumos. According to B Tshering, the profitability was much higher four years back when Sumos were not present on this route.

'One Bomdila-Guwahati round trip would fetch us Rs. 9,000-10,000 when Sumos were not on this route but after Sumos arrived in this route, our earnings on a Bomdila-Guwahati round trip has dipped to something like Rs. 6,000-7,000 now,' added Tshering who has been serving as a bus conductor for the last 25 years.

Average occupancy of the 47-seater APSTS buses are around 60 percent. Earlier it used to be close to being packed to capacity until the Sumos came on to the scene, around four years ago. But now, average occupancy is in the range of 25-30 passengers. While 18-20 are Tezpur-bound passengers, 7-10 are Guwahati-bound passengers.

Also, another factor as to why people prefer Sumos over APSTS buses is because of 'extra service' they provide. "Sumos draw passengers easily because they pick

up and drop passengers from their houses while those travelling in buses have to walk to the bus point,' he intimates.

But there are many who still prefer APSTS because of its low fare and safety aspect coming from a government service bus. A ticket on the Bomdila-Guwahati bus would cost Rs 200 while that on the Sumo from Bomdila to Tezpur would cost Rs. 260. Interestingly, the APSTS buses would always ply daily unless there is a breakdown. Irrespective of counter bookings, the buses would ply only if it is fit to ply. 'Today, I got only three bookings but we still proceeded. I got the rest on the way. Buses would ply unless of course roads are blocked or the bus has broken down,' the bus conductor states.

#### Day 7 DRIVER'S CHALLENGE

The narrow road from Bomdila and right upto Tezpur is a challenge for any driver, let alone a bus driver. 'Roads are small and then you have sharp curves. Whenever a big truck or heavy vehicle comes from the other side, and it happens to be a sharp curve, I have to stop and turn my head out of the window and look and push the vehicle back. Sometimes, it can be difficult when it is raining as the visibility is →





APSTS bus driver T. Tshering says its buses frequently need to change propeller crosses because of bumpy roads.



also low and you cannot see properly, as to whether any other vehicle is behind you or not,' bus driver T Tshering, gives a real feel of the driving conditions.

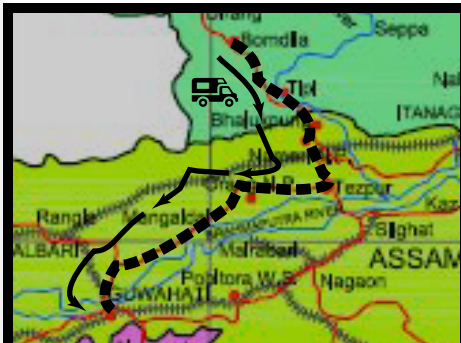
Earth-cutting work along with the bumpy road also means buses have to undergo frequent maintenance. 'We have to change the propeller cross very frequently, sometimes it does not even last for a month as the cap gets loose and results in the propeller cross getting damaged,' he adds.

I finally reached Guwahati at 10 pm and was greeted to a notorious traffic jam at Jalukbari junction and was stuck up there for an hour or so. I finally disembarked from the bus at Lakhra and stayed put in Guwahati.

BRO trucks are a common sight on the Tezpur-Bomdila route, as earth moving work is on in full swing along this stretch..

### SUSTAINING IS THE KEY

I caught up with the All Assam Motor Transport Association officials who dwelt upon the problems faced by commercial vehicle owners in Assam. 'The hike in diesel prices is hitting us badly, while the fare structure has remained the same in the last four years. Not just diesel, prices of tyre, grease and other spares have become cost-



We undertook the final bus ride from Bomdila to Guwahati (distance of 350 kms). We started from Bomdila at 6 in the morning and reached Guwahati at 10 pm.

lier. It is a massive challenge for existing CV owners to sustain themselves,' says All Assam Motor Transport Association president Pulak Goswami.

Another All Motor Transport Association official pleading anonymity, says police harassment is a big headache for transporters in Assam. 'Go to any north-eastern state, be it Manipur, Nagaland or any other

Drivers of mini-buses need to deal with not just narrow roads but also sharp curves. Whenever a heavy vehicle comes from the other side, the driver has to reverse the vehicle. This task can be doubly difficult when it is raining. In poor visibility its hard to check for other vehicles behind on the same route

state, you would not see palm greasing on the scale you see in Assam. Plus, they would requisition vehicles according to our convenience,' fumed the official with a splash of frustration.

My north-east trip was a highly eventful and also an extremely insightful one. Clearly, one thing is for sure: the commercial vehicle industry in this neck of the woods is overloaded with odds from which many are trying to tide over or capitulating to it. Bad road conditions, threat from the ultras, too many vehicles on small routes, and lack of passenger load are challenges being faced by commercial vehicle owners. Unless things change drastically, the future of the CV industry looks bleak. ■

*"A Bomdila-Guwahati round trip would fetch APSTS Rs. 9,000-10,000 four years back but now our earnings has dipped to Rs. 6,000-7,000 now"*

