



British Policy In The Northern Frontier Of Assam

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Abstract

The Northern Frontier of Assam occupied a unique position in British colonial policy due to its strategic location, difficult terrain, and diverse tribal population. Unlike the revenue-oriented administration of the plains, British engagement with the northern frontier was shaped primarily by concerns of security, frontier stability, and imperial geopolitics. This paper examines the nature, objectives, and impact of British policy in the Northern Frontier of Assam. It analyzes the principles of non-interference, the introduction of the Inner Line Regulation, punitive expeditions, and administrative arrangements such as Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas. The study argues that British frontier policy, while ensuring political control and protection of imperial interests, resulted in the long-term isolation and underdevelopment of the region. The legacy of this policy continues to influence contemporary governance and ethnic relations in Northeast India.

Keywords: Northern Frontier of Assam, British Frontier Policy, Inner Line Regulation, Tribal Administration & Colonial Assam

Introduction

The Northern Frontier of Assam, comprising the Himalayan foothills and adjoining hill tracts, formed a sensitive borderland of British India. This region lay between the Assam plains and territories such as Bhutan, Tibet, and the tribal highlands of the eastern Himalayas. Inhabited predominantly by tribal communities with distinct socio-political institutions, the frontier posed serious administrative and strategic challenges to the British colonial state. India's north-east frontier region lacked a distinct geographic connotation until the 20th century. Throughout the colonial period, the north-eastern area of India had little or no communication with the rest of British India. It is a factual matter that the multiple tribes in the vicinity have maintained their separateness or autonomy not only from outside influences, but also from one another. Since time immemorial, the people of India's North East region have had a stronger bond with the people of Southeast Asia, and the region has been considered more a part of Southeast Asia than the Indian subcontinent because its culture and racial structure are more similar to those of Southeast Asia. The Treaty of Yandaboo was signed on February 24, 1826, under which the Burmese king consented to surrender power over Assam and other portions of North East India, effectively ending the struggle over the Ahom kingdom, and the British East India Company occupied the Ahom region. The agreement provided an opportunity for the British East India Company to establish its economic and political dominance in India's frontier region. It is an important moment in history because the British acquisition of the entire Ahom kingdom and its neighboring princely and tribal territories solidified this land to India's mainland as soon as Assam was placed under unified administrative control of the British India State. The British colonizers

were obviously intrigued with Northeast India for the sake of administration. Furthermore, its enormous natural riches and great cultural diversity piqued their curiosity. Most of the hill tribes on India's North-East frontier live within or on the borders of the state of Assam, and it would not be unfair to suggest that while tracing the history of these tribes during British administration, one should keep a close eye on political trajectory of Assam (Chakravorty, 1964, p.11). The previously independent kingdoms and political entities, such as the Ahom

Following the annexation of Assam in 1826 after the Treaty of Yandabo, the British gradually extended their influence over the Brahmaputra valley. However, their approach towards the northern frontier differed significantly from that adopted in the plains. The region was not considered suitable for regular administration due to its rugged terrain, sparse population, and absence of a monetized economy. Instead, it was viewed as a buffer zone essential for safeguarding British commercial and political interests in Assam, especially the rapidly expanding tea plantations of Upper Assam.

British policy in the northern frontier thus evolved as a distinctive frontier policy characterized by limited intervention, indirect control, and military expeditions when necessary. This paper seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of this policy and its implications for the region and its people.

Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of this paper are:

1. To examine the strategic and political factors shaping British policy in the Northern Frontier of Assam.
2. To analyze the administrative measures adopted by the British to control the frontier region.

Methodology

The study is based on historical and analytical methods. Both primary and secondary sources have been consulted for the purpose of analysis. Primary sources include colonial administrative reports, government regulations, and official correspondence available in published records. Secondary sources consist of books, journal articles, and research papers by historians and scholars on colonial Assam and frontier administration. The data has been analyzed qualitatively to understand policy objectives, administrative practices, and their socio-political consequences.

Concept of the Northern Frontier of Assam

The term "Northern Frontier of Assam" refers to the hill tracts lying north of the Brahmaputra valley, inhabited by various tribal groups such as the Abors (Adi), Mishmis, Daflas, and others. These communities maintained their own political systems based on customary laws and kinship ties. The frontier was characterized by fluid boundaries, seasonal migration, and limited interaction with the plains except through trade and occasional raids.

For the British, the frontier was not merely a geographical entity but a political space requiring special treatment. Its management was influenced by imperial concerns rather than local developmental needs.

Strategic Importance of the Northern Frontier

The strategic significance of the northern frontier was a major factor behind British policy. The region bordered foreign territories like Bhutan and Tibet, raising concerns about external influence and possible threats to British supremacy in India. Additionally, tribal raids into the Assam plains posed risks to settled populations and economic activities.

The British also feared that instability in the frontier could disrupt the tea industry, which had become central to Assam's colonial economy. Consequently, the frontier was developed as a defensive buffer zone rather than an integrated administrative unit.

Policy of Non-Interference

Initially, the British adopted a policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of the frontier tribes. This policy was based on the belief that direct administration would be costly and ineffective. Tribal chiefs were allowed to exercise authority within their communities, and customary laws were respected. In its formative years, the British Company was reluctant to assume administrative responsibilities on the frontier areas, and in fact, shied away from too close interaction with the hostile tribes (Barpujari, 2007, p.130). The weather-related issues and rugged terrain of the frontier region made it difficult for the British East India Company to carry out their military expeditions on the tribal areas. As a result, the British East India took an exhaustion policy towards the frontier tribes. This meant suspending military actions. The company's principal goal was to prevent any such Burmese attacks India and Tibet shared a 2,000-mile-long common border, part of which runs along the North-Eastern Frontier. It is a factual matter that the ruler of Tibet adopted an isolationist stance to protect his political and cultural traditions. After gaining the majority of the land of the North East Frontier, the British Government of India tried a variety of approaches to learn more about Tibet. They attempted to win over Tibet's ruling class by sending them gifts and westernized weapons. In the meantime, rumours swirled that the Russians were manufacturing weapons at Lhasa to supply the Tibetan army. In August 1904, a team of British Government headed by Younghusband, a British military officer, signed the Anglo-Tibetan Treaty, in which the Tibetans agreed to establish Gyantse, Gartok, and Yatung trading centers where Britishers could trade (Majumdar et al., 2009, p. 896). Thus, Viceroy Lord Curzon was successful in opening Tibet after a century, but the Younghusband mission displayed impracticality by engaging China. China vowed to keep foreign forces out of internal Tibetan matters and from harming territorial integrity. In March 1911, Lancelot Hare, the Lt. Governor of East Bengal, directed N. Williamson, the Assistant Political Officer at Sadiya, to explore the hills up to the Tibetan border inhabited by the Abor hill people. The tribe slaughtered Williamson and his 42 soldiers because they were threatened by their incursion. This incident altered the British strategy for protecting the mainland by establishing a buffer zone to allow for a correct boundary line to be drawn through a thorough survey. In the meantime, the British installed military outposts close to the border to halt Chinese aggression. Similarly, semi-independent hill villages of modern-day Arunachal Pradesh came under direct British authority when the boundary line in the north was drawn. The boundary dispute between India and the People's Republic of China still involves the McMahon Line. 5

However, non-interference was conditional. Whenever tribal activities threatened British interests in the plains, the colonial state intervened through diplomatic pressure or military action. Thus, non-interference functioned more as a pragmatic strategy than a principled commitment to tribal autonomy.

Inner Line Regulation, 1873

One of the most significant instruments of British frontier policy was the Inner Line Regulation of 1873. The regulation established an imaginary boundary separating the plains from the hill areas. British subjects and outsiders were prohibited from entering tribal territories without official permission.

The Inner Line system served multiple purposes:

- It protected tribal communities from exploitation by traders and settlers.
- It minimized administrative responsibilities in difficult terrains.
- It safeguarded British economic interests in the plains.

This regulation institutionalized the isolation of the frontier and reinforced the colonial perception of tribal areas as distinct and separate.

Punitive Expeditions and Military Measures

Despite the policy of limited interference, the British frequently organized punitive expeditions against frontier tribes in response to raids or resistance. These expeditions aimed to assert colonial authority and deter future attacks rather than establish permanent control.

Military outposts and roads were constructed primarily for strategic purposes. The use of force became an integral component of frontier management, revealing the coercive nature of colonial rule despite its rhetoric of protection and non-intervention.

Administrative Arrangements: Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas

Under the Government of India Act, 1935, the northern frontier regions were designated as Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas. These areas were placed outside the jurisdiction of provincial legislatures and administered directly by the Governor.

This arrangement reinforced indirect rule and limited political participation by the local population. While it preserved certain traditional institutions, it also prevented the emergence of modern political consciousness and administrative integration.

Economic Policy and Developmental Neglect

The British deliberately avoided introducing land revenue systems or commercial agriculture in **the frontier region. Economic development was restricted to the construction of communication** routes for military and administrative purposes.

As a result, the northern frontier remained economically underdeveloped compared to the Assam plains. This neglect had long-term implications for regional inequality and socio-economic backwardness.

Impact on Tribal Society

British frontier policy had a profound impact on tribal societies. On the one hand, limited interference allowed the continuation of traditional customs and social institutions. On the other hand, political isolation and lack of education hindered social mobility and modernization.

Colonial representations often portrayed frontier tribes as primitive and violent, justifying exclusionary policies and reinforcing stereotypes that persisted into the post-colonial period.

Conclusion

British policy in the Northern Frontier of Assam was primarily guided by strategic and political considerations rather than economic development or social integration. Through instruments such as non-interference, the Inner Line Regulation, and indirect administration, the British transformed the region into a controlled buffer zone.

While this policy ensured frontier stability and protected imperial interests, it also led to long-term isolation and underdevelopment of the region. The legacy of British frontier policy continues to shape governance structures, ethnic relations, and debates on autonomy in Northeast India. Thus, it can be said that the North East frontier of Assam was unknown topography during the British occupation. There was no confrontation with the tribes dwelling in the Frontier Hills after the East India Company controlled Assam. The British government intended to use the Frontier Hills as a buffer zone in the Northeast border of India and never took part in disputes within hill villages. As a result, the British East India Company power initially avoided serious wars with the hill tribes. Later, in Assam, tea cultivation received more immediate attention from the British from a commercial point of view. Therefore, they clashed with the hill tribes to expand the tea plantations to the hills and took them under their control. They also revealed that the Company's administrators placed troops at Sadiya as it was a navigation stream and stored a big armament in order to protect the newly seized Brahmaputra Valley. Subversive tactics were another efficient tackle adopted by the British government to accomplish its economic and political goals. Similarly, in order to maintain their authority, the British authorities used extermination measures against the hill tribes, particularly the Naga Hills. Indeed, the wars against the hill tribes showed the British Army's methods of warfare in the Northeast Frontier highlands. Thus, the British colonial state of India expanded throughout the entire part of the North-eastern region. The British were also responsible for incorporating this large hill area into India and taking it away from its historical connection to South East Asia.

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