

SPECIAL ARTICLE

## The Inner Line Regulation: The Making of Frontiers and Hill Politics in Northeast India

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**Abstract:** *This paper delves into the historical evolution of the Inner Line Regulation. It explores methods and strategies implemented by the imperial powers in their interactions with the hill-dwelling tribes by revisiting the concept of frontier regulation in a broader historical framework. It will examine how these strategies culminated in the promulgation of the Inner Line Regulation by unveiling the original purpose and its subsequent transformation into a vital instrument for safeguarding Indigenous tribal traditions and culture after India's independence.*

**Keywords:** *Ahoms, British Policy, Frontier, Inner Line Regulations.*

### Introduction

Frontiers have historically functioned as paradoxical spaces; simultaneously zones of exclusion and inclusion, marginality and centrality, control and resistance. Within these regions, boundaries are not merely cartographic demarcations but dynamic interfaces where governance, culture, and security intersect. In the context of Northeast India, the Inner Line Regulation; first instituted under the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873 stands as one of the most enduring colonial mechanisms devised to manage these tensions. It reflects both ancient and modern strategies employed to navigate the complex balance between centralized state authority and regional autonomy.

The Inner Line Regulation continues to operate as both a physical and symbolic boundary, controlling the movement of non-tribal populations into designated tribal areas and serving as a legal safeguard for Indigenous cultural practices. However, to interpret it solely as a protective measure for tribal

communities is to overlook its deeper historical origins and strategic rationale. A comprehensive understanding of the regulation necessitates situating it within a wider historical continuum, alongside frontier governance structures such as the Roman limes and the Native American reservation system in the United States. These analogues exemplify how imperial powers have historically deployed spatial mechanisms to organize authority, regulate intercultural interaction, and reinforce hierarchical systems of governance.

This paper, therefore, explores the Inner Line Regulation as both a historical construct and a contemporary policy instrument. It traces the evolution of the regulation from its colonial inception to its present-day function as a protective legal framework. Furthermore, the study interrogates the interplay between the Regulation and contemporary statutory provisions, highlighting the broader tensions between national citizenship policies and the preservation of Indigenous rights in India's northeastern frontier.

### **Broader framework on frontier regulations**

Historical analysis reveals that the origins of the Inner Line Regulation were rooted in colonial anxieties concerning security, commercial interests, and the strategic management of territorial margins. Similar to the Roman Empire's deployment of the limes; militarized frontier zones demarcated Roman provinces from non-Roman peripheries. And the United States' implementation of the reservation system to spatially segregate Native populations from settler societies, the Inner Line Regulation functioned as an instrument of imperial statecraft. It delineated the boundaries of effective governance, legitimized indirect rule, and facilitated the economic exploitation of frontier regions, all while serving as a protective buffer for the administrative core against perceived disorder and resistance.

The Roman limes, particularly those constructed along the Rhine and Danube frontiers, represent some of the earliest codified imperial boundaries. These were not merely defensive fortifications, but complex socio-political systems that integrated military surveillance, taxation, trade regulation, and diplomatic engagement. The limes marked zones where Roman administrative authority operated, beyond which lay tribal societies classified as external to Roman civic life but vital to the empire's security and economy as trading partners, clients, or providers of auxiliary military forces. As Benjamin Isaac emphasizes, these boundaries were more than barriers; they were contact zones where exchange, diplomacy, and hybrid cultural formations emerged.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, the Native American reservations established under U.S. federal policy in the 19th century were not solely spaces of Indigenous cultural isolation. Rather, they served as mechanisms of dispossession and spatial governance designed to neutralize Indigenous resistance and facilitate settler colonial expansion. Though treaties often promised autonomy and protection, in practice, these reservations enabled heightened surveillance, the extraction of

resources, and the ideological assimilation of Native populations through missionary activity and state-sponsored education. As Frederick Hoxie has noted, reservations functioned as laboratories of federal control, deeply intertwined with broader projects of state-building and settler colonialism.<sup>2</sup>

In the United States, the reservation system took definitive shape during the period of westward expansion, emerging when military campaigns alone proved insufficient to quell Native resistance. In response, the state adopted a strategy of spatial segregation, reinforced by legal instruments and cultural assimilation initiatives, which together offered a more enduring framework for exerting control. Similarly, the Roman Empire's establishment of *limes* in regions such as Germania and Britannia represented a strategic response to the limitations of territorial conquest and the practical necessity of managing relations with hostile or partially assimilated groups. These frontier boundaries enabled limited trade and interaction while mitigating the risks of rebellion and mass migration into the Roman interior. Frequently, *civitas*-based client states or allied tribes were situated just beyond the *limes*, acting as buffer zones and intermediaries between Rome and more autonomous tribal territories.

In both contexts, a form of delegated governance persisted: in the United States, some Indigenous tribes maintained internal autonomy under the oversight of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, albeit with significant variation in the degree of self-governance permitted. Analogously, Roman authorities engaged with Germanic and Celtic groups whom they perceived as 'barbarians' requiring control and discipline.<sup>3</sup> American policymakers similarly regarded Native Americans as wards of the state deemed too 'uncivilized' for full citizenship, yet too threatening to be left unregulated.<sup>4</sup>

As in the Roman and American cases, frontier regulation functioned as a means to facilitate the exploitation of peripheral resources while simultaneously restricting the mobility and influence of Indigenous populations. In the context of Northeast India, British colonial administrators encountered comparable obstacles. The region's rugged, forested terrain populated by a wide array of tribal communities with diverse languages, customs, and political structures posed significant challenges to direct administrative integration. In all three contexts, the frontier emerged as a liminal space at once part of the state's sphere of influence and yet positioned beyond its full administrative control. It functioned simultaneously as a barrier to authority and an arena of strategic opportunity.

### **Ahom's Policy toward the Hill tribes**

For many centuries, Northeast India remained an enigmatic and sparsely documented area. The establishment of the Ahom kingdom in Assam during the 13th century marked a significant shift, initiating the first organized records of the region's various tribal groups. However, it wasn't until the East India Company arrived that these communities began to gain broader recognition.<sup>5</sup>

Established around 1228/1235, the Ahom kingdom is a key chapter in Assam's history. Led by Sukaphaa, a prince from what is now part of China and Myanmar, about 9,000 Ahoms crossed the Patkai mountains.<sup>6</sup> Their rule, which spanned several centuries, stood out for its staunch resistance against Mughal advances for over 500 years, ultimately ending when the British annexed Assam in 1826.

The Ahoms' relationships with nearby tribes were not limited to political matters but extended to social and economic exchanges. Managing these relationships posed distinct challenges; nonetheless, the Ahom rulers often preferred diplomacy and conciliation, resorting to military means only when required. This careful strategy allowed them to exert influence over surrounding tribes and establish a long period of relative stability in the region.

Several factors likely contributed to the Ahoms' conciliatory approach toward the hill tribes. For one, the tribes' unique customs, languages, and social frameworks created notable administrative obstacles. Integrating them into the Ahom system, which was heavily reliant on the 'Paik' system<sup>7</sup> or labour structure, would have been complex. Moreover, the mountainous terrain of the hill regions complicated communication and transport. While the tribes used simpler weapons, their mastery of guerilla warfare and ambush tactics made military campaigns costly and difficult.<sup>8</sup> These challenges were amplified by the Ahoms' ongoing battles in the Brahmaputra Valley, particularly with the Mughals during the 16th and 17th centuries, which highlighted the necessity of a stable and unified populace.

Recognizing their limitations in numbers, the Ahoms adopted a strategic policy of cultural assimilation.<sup>9</sup> This policy served dual purposes: it helped secure alliances with certain hill tribes for military support critical in their protracted resistance against the Mughals and encouraged social cohesion. The Ahoms promoted intermarriage with both hill and plains tribes and incorporated aspects of local customs, languages, and traditions. This inclusive approach nurtured a sense of equality between frontier communities and the Assamese heartland.

The Ahoms' management of neighbouring groups is evident in their careful policies toward different tribes. In the northern frontier, which includes present-day Arunachal Pradesh and Bhutan, they implemented the humane 'Posa' system.<sup>10</sup><sup>11</sup> For the Nagas near Lakhimpur and Sibsagar districts, they introduced the 'Naga-Khats' system.<sup>12</sup><sup>13</sup> To reinforce connections with these communities, the Ahoms set up an organized administrative system. Key border areas were overseen by appointed wardens and governors, who were supported by 'Duarias' guards stationed at crucial mountain passes.

The Ahoms' varied policies toward the hill tribes proved to be highly effective. Through a balanced approach involving diplomacy, economic incentives, and selective assimilation, they managed to foster alliances with some tribes while strategically integrating others. This pragmatic governance secured nearly six

uninterrupted centuries of Ahom rule, with only minor interruptions from isolated conflicts or breaches in agreements.

### **The British policies towards the hill tribes**

When referring to the northeastern frontier of Bengal, the British encompassed a vast region. This included the entirety of the hill ranges surrounding the Assam Valley - to the north, east, and south. It also stretched westward to the slopes of the mountain system separating Bengal from Burma, along with its outlying spurs and ridges.<sup>14</sup>

British intervention in Assam initially stemmed from an appeal for assistance by a local ruler amid internal conflicts. Assam was facing significant unrest from factions such as the Moamariahs and other dissident leaders, prompting the Raja to seek British aid. In response, Lord Cornwallis directed Captain Welsh to lead a contingent of sepoys into Assam in 1792-1793.<sup>15</sup>

However, John Shore, who succeeded Cornwallis, held a different strategic perspective and subsequently recalled the troops to Bengal, depriving Assam of British military support. This withdrawal led to further instability, which intensified during the reign of Raja Chunder Kant Singh (1809-1818), as several ministers rebelled. Lacking support from the British, the Raja turned to Burma for assistance, resulting in the Burmese occupation of Assam.

This Burmese expansion posed a threat to British interests, particularly as they had vested strategic interests in Cachar, which lay directly in the path of a potential Burmese incursion into Eastern Bengal. The Burmese forces continued to expand, occupying the Manipur Valley and advancing toward Cachar and Jaintia, the latter being a tributary state of Bengal. In this context, the British saw the reoccupation of Assam as essential for maintaining regional stability and protecting their economic and strategic interests.<sup>16</sup>

Within a year, British forces succeeded in expelling the Burmese from Assam. Subsequently, the Burmese king formally relinquished all claims to Assam, Cachar, and Jaintia, and committed to non-interference in these territories. David Scott was then appointed as the Governor-General's Agent on the northeastern frontier, marking the beginning of a structured British presence in the region. This gradual territorial expansion by the East India Company, facilitated by its appointed agents, steadily extended British rule across Northeast India.<sup>17</sup>

During this period, the British also began engaging with various hill tribes through strategic manoeuvres such as Cooch Behar, Brahmaputra Valley, Jaintia, Cachar, Arakan, Khasi Hills, and Garo Hills. A celebrated Historian and scholar H.L. Gupta aptly underscores that the British expansion in India was often incremental. The annexation of one territory frequently necessitated the annexation of others, driven by imperial ambitions, strategic considerations, or commercial interests this pattern held for Assam and its surrounding hill regions. Once the organized states of the region fell under British control, the

subjugation of the more turbulent hill people became a seemingly inevitable next step.<sup>18</sup>

In 1869, at the request of Sir William Grey (Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, 1867-1870), Alexander Mackenzie authored a communication exploring the relationship between the British government and the tribes inhabiting the northeastern frontier region. This document asserted the existence of a well-defined policy towards these tribes.<sup>19</sup> According to Mackenzie, the core principle of this policy was conciliation.

'This memorandum has set forth historically and it is believed correct, the leading facts regarding the relationship of the frontier tribes of the North-East with that of the government. That there has been a decided policy towards those must be evident. This policy may have varied as times and Governments have changed, but in its broad aspect, it has never been aught else than a policy of conciliation (Barpujari (Ed.), .x).'

The principle of non-intervention had long guided British policy towards the northeastern hill tribes. However, by the mid-19th century, the exponential growth of the tea industry necessitated the use of vast tracts of land for plantations in the Assam foothills. This expansion inevitably brought the British into conflict with the hill tribes residing in these areas. Furthermore, the potential for exploiting valuable resources like minerals and hill products from these regions further fuels the desire for a shift away from non-intervention.

Several British officials campaigned a 'forward policy' advocating for annexation. However, the central government in Calcutta and the Bengal government remained hesitant, viewing such a bold move as financially and politically imprudent (Barpujari (Ed.) 2003, .x). As a compromise, local officials were instructed to explore alternative methods of control. These methods included: blocking mountain passes, paying tribute to hill chiefs, establishing buffer zones, recruiting hill men into the local militia, and Stationing British officials within the hills.<sup>20</sup>

However, the rapid expansion of the tea industry, coupled with the growing interest of other European powers in Assam, emboldened advocates of the 'forward policy.' Before this shift, despite a lengthy presence in Bengal and Assam, the British government's understanding of the region's borders remained limited to the Assamese foothills. But it is worth noting that in 1760, even before assuming direct administrative control of Assam, the East India Company had secured the Hill Tract of Chittagong from the Nawab of Bengal, Mir Kasim, through a treaty.

The piecemeal annexation of Northeast India began with the British occupation of the Cachar plains in 1830. This expansionist drive extended into the Cachar hills by 1854, marked by a series of subsequent annexations. Lakhimpur and the Jaintia Hills were swiftly incorporated in 1835, followed by the Sylhet region in 1858. The British further pushed into the Naga Hills and Garo Hills in 1866 and 1869, respectively. Finally, by 1890, the Lushai Hills also fell under British

control. This gradual expansion brought the majority of Northeast India under British colonial rule. However, two regions managed to retain their independence until the end of the 19th century Manipur and the Khasi Hills. These highlight the varying pace and strategies employed by the British in their overall expansion across the region.

The British annexation of Northeast India was far from straightforward. It unfolded through a complex interplay of subtle pressures, negotiations, and occasional violent eruptions. A key source of tension was the expansion of commercial activities into the foothills, disrupting the traditional way of life of the native tribes. These hill people practised Jhum cultivation, which required shifting to new plots every seven to eight years to allow the land to recover. More importantly, the expansion of tea plantations in the Assam foothills encroached on their vital hunting grounds and restricted the tribes' traditional hunting practices. The key point of contention arose when the Kheda Department was established in Cachar in 1875. Aimed at monopolizing the capture and use of elephants, which the British consider a vital resource. For the tribes dwelling in the foothills, hunting elephants was an integral part of their culture and livelihood. Due to this struggle for control over natural resources both sides were locked in a constant cycle of conflict. Frustrated by the restrictions placed on their traditional practices, the tribes would launch raids on British subjects and tea plantation workers. In some instances, they even captured people and enslaved them. These activities forced the British to constantly be on guard and engage in frequent military expeditions to subdue the tribes and punish them for their disruptive activities. Despite occasional agreements signed with tribal chiefs, lasting peace proved elusive.

### **The enactment of the inner line regulation**

On August 27, 1873, the British colonial administration introduced the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, marking a pivotal development in their approach to governing the frontier regions of Northeast India.<sup>21</sup> Central to this regulation was Section 2, which established the 'Inner Line' a boundary beyond which the British refrained from exerting full authority, thereby granting Indigenous groups a degree of autonomy in managing their internal affairs. The regulation's jurisdiction was progressively expanded to encompass several districts, including Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Sibsagar, Lakhimpur, Garo Hills, Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Naga Hills, Cachar, and the Chittagong Hills.<sup>22</sup>

The implementation of the 'Inner Line' proceeded in stages across various districts. Lakhimpur in Assam became the first on 30th September 1875,<sup>23</sup> This was followed by notifications in Darrang district on 8th March 1876;<sup>24</sup> Sibsagar district with an initial notification on 21st June 1876 and a modification on 24th February 1882;<sup>25</sup> Cachar district with an initial notification on 20th August 1875 and a modification on 9th June 1878;<sup>26</sup> and finally, the Chittagong Hill Tracts on 30th June 1879.<sup>27</sup>

Under this regulation, British citizens were required to obtain an official pass from a Superintendent or Deputy Commissioner to enter the territories beyond the Inner Line. Failure to comply with this rule could lead to a sentence of up to six months of imprisonment.<sup>28</sup> Indigenous community members, likewise, needed a pass often with an associated fee to cross the line, likely to facilitate regulated trade. This permit system fulfilled dual objectives; it enabled the British to exert indirect control over frontier areas while monitoring interactions between British subjects and tribal populations.

The regulatory landscape evolved further with the Government of India Act of 1919, which granted the Governor-General authority to classify specific regions as 'backward tracts.' As a result, many hill regions in Northeast India were designated as 'backward areas' on 3rd January 1921. Following the Simon Commission's recommendations in 1927, the Government of India Act of 1935 introduced more specific classifications, dividing these regions into 'Excluded Areas' and 'Partially Excluded Areas.' 'Excluded Areas' referred to regions considered particularly remote and culturally distinct, exempted from regular British administrative structures. In contrast, 'Partially Excluded Areas' were territories seen as more integrated, thus subject to relatively less restrictive oversight.

Reid's work<sup>29</sup> provides a detailed account of these classifications. The Excluded Areas included the northern frontier zones of Balipara and Sadiya, the eastern regions of Tirap, the Naga Hills district, and the Lushai Hills. To the west, the boundary included the North Cachar subdivision, extending from Manipur to the Naga Hills district. Conversely, the Partially Excluded Areas consisted of the hill regions inhabited by the Garo, Jaintia, and Khasi tribes, along with a smaller section between the Jaintia and Khasi territories.

The Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, alongside the later Excluded and Partially Excluded Area designations, illustrates the British colonial strategy of balancing governance with minimal intervention in the Northeast. This evolving regulatory approach reveals how the British sought to manage diverse tribal populations in these frontier regions through controlled administrative engagement while maintaining flexibility in their strategies.

### **Implications of Frontier Regulations**

At its core, the Inner Line Regulation represented the strategic construction of buffer zones. These were not uninhabited or unclaimed territories, but rather contested and negotiated spaces in which sovereignty was partial and governance experimental. The regulation zones functioned as laboratories of indirect rule, where colonial authorities co-opted local elites into administrative roles, selectively recognized customary legal systems, and facilitated trade through a tightly regulated system of passes and permits. The 'line' itself; both a cartographic and legal construct served as a fulcrum for colonial governance.

This model of frontier regulation was deeply embedded in racialized and

civilizational ideologies. British colonial discourse frequently portrayed the hill tribes as 'primitive' or 'wild,' thereby justifying the implementation of the regulation as a protective measure intended to shield these communities from the purportedly corrupting influence of the 'civilized' inhabitants of the plains. Such narratives legitimized spatial segregation and reinforced hierarchies of knowledge, culture, and administrative authority.

Beyond its ideological dimensions, the Inner Line Regulation also served clear economic purposes. By regulating access through a permit and licensing system, colonial authorities were able to channel and control commercial activities for imperial benefit, particularly in the extraction and trade of valuable frontier commodities such as tea, timber, and elephants. The regulation of the movement of people, goods, and information was central to the operation of these frontier regimes.

Moreover, the symbolic function of the Inner Line required critical attention. These borders were performative expressions of state sovereignty lines drawn on maps that signalled state presence, even in areas where effective control was weak. Through this act of spatial demarcation, the colonial state sought not only to assert dominion over territory but also to shape the political imagination, delineating who belonged, who was considered an outsider, and under what terms these groups could interact.

### **Contemporary relevance**

In post-independence India, the Inner Line Regulation was equally instructive, it was reinterpreted through the lens of indigenous rights and constitutional protections. The work of the Bordoloi Committee and the subsequent adoption of the Sixth Schedule evolved into a mechanism of autonomy and cultural preservation, aligned with democratic federalism. Currently the Inner Line Regulation is applicable in the four northeastern states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram, and Manipur. Manipur, recently granted the provision of the Inner Line Regulation on 1st January 2020; thus, it became the latest state to be added and the fourth among the northeastern states to be incorporated under the regulation. Meanwhile, Meghalaya also demands that the Inner Line Regulation be imposed within the state as well. In its present form, the regulation allows other citizens of India and foreigners to visit these four stated northeastern states and also stay there for a stipulated period.

An Inner Line Permit is the most important document that a person travelling or working in would need. It would specify the length of stay and areas permitted to be visited by outsiders. Based on the purpose of the visit, different kinds of permits are issued.<sup>30</sup> Thus, the present Inner Line Regulation system seems to engage effectively as a tool for guarding and preserving tribal cultures and traditions.

In this context, it may also be relevant to consider the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, which was enacted following the Presidential assent to the Citizenship

(Amendment) Bill on 19th December 2019. Henceforth, it is referred to as the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). The Act makes amendments to the Citizenship Act of 1955 by adding a new provision. According to this provision, certain illegal immigrants belonging to religious minorities, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, and Christian, who are coming from Pakistan, Afghanistan, or Bangladesh, who entered India before 31st December 2014, are now eligible to apply for Indian citizenship.<sup>31</sup>

Incidentally, the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) provoked widespread protests across India, especially in Assam and the northeast region. The intense opposition appears to have arisen due to two primary issues. First, it was believed that the act was discriminatory since it provided a pathway to citizenship for illegal immigrants belonging to specific religious minorities (Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, and Christian) from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh while excluding Muslims on the grounds of being the majority group in those countries. Secondly, it appears that dwellers of Assam and the northeast apprehended huge illegal immigration from Bangladesh, principally changing the demographic makeup of the region.

The amendment act with section 6B brought some respite to the hill regions of the northeast but offered scant solace to the plains of Assam. The provision in question exempts the Act from being applicable in the Sixth Schedule territories mentioned in the Constitution. The territories fall within tribal areas of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Tripura, and also regions governed by the Inner Line Regulation, which comes under the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873.

It is worth noting that the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic incidentally kept the Inner Line Pass system relevant in the northeastern states. Confronted by the menace of the dreaded viral transmission, most northeastern states suspended the permit system under ILP, effectively restricting movement into those protected areas. It is quite interesting that a law passed by the British over 150 years ago, which, in essence, drew a line dividing the northeast from mainland India, turned out to be an important mechanism and a handy tool for managing the pandemic.

The Inner Line Regulation or the Inner Line Pass (ILP) undoubtedly serves as a crucial tool for protecting the traditions, cultures, and interests of the Northeast today. However, a persistent misconception holds that the regulation was introduced solely to safeguard tribal communities, protect their cultural heritage, and provide political autonomy. A closer historical analysis, however, reveals a more nuanced reality. Multiple factors and circumstances compelled the British to adopt administrative methods and policies in the region that differed significantly from those applied in mainland India.

### **Conclusion**

The Inner Line Regulation was not merely an isolated administrative policy but emerged in response to broader institutional pressures facing the British

colonial administration in the northeastern frontier of India. Unlike the Ahom polity, which allowed unrestricted movement of hill tribes and fostered peace through diplomatic engagements and strategic alliances, the British perceived unregulated tribal mobility as an obstruction to colonial objectives. The expansion of colonial governance into tribal territories eventually culminated in the promulgation of the regulation as a mechanism to assert control.

The regulation served several important functions for the British administration in Assam. Commercially, it facilitated the regulation of trade between plains-based merchants and frontier tribal groups, enabling the colonial state to centralize and exploit key commodities such as timber, rubber, and elephants.<sup>32</sup> The policy also safeguarded British economic interests, particularly the tea plantations located within or near tribal lands, by restricting cross-border interactions and thereby minimizing the perceived risk of tribal hostilities.<sup>33</sup> Strategically, the regulation was embedded in broader security imperatives. Tribal areas functioned as buffer zones, insulating British India from external threats, notably from Burma. Thus, the regulation reflected the imperial state's attempt to secure its economic and geopolitical interests through spatial demarcation and controlled access.

In the post-colonial era, its relevance was reaffirmed through constitutional processes. Following Indian independence in 1950, the Constituent Assembly established the Bordoloi Committee, which proposed an administrative framework tailored to the tribal populations of Assam's northeastern frontier, including formerly Excluded Areas. The committee's recommendations led to the creation of Autonomous District Councils, each granted specific jurisdictional authority. These developments were institutionalized in the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, which aimed to extend constitutional safeguards to tribal areas.<sup>34</sup> The adaptation of the Inner Line Regulation to a sovereign India was marked by terminological shifts replacing 'British subject' with 'citizen of India', signalling a re-articulation of the regulation within the framework of Indian democracy.<sup>35</sup>

Today, it remains a significant legal instrument for the protection of tribal interests in Northeast India. It authorizes state authorities to regulate the entry of 'outsiders', including individuals from other Indian states and neighbouring countries, thus contributing to regional security and socio-cultural preservation. The issuance of Inner Line Permits (ILPs) remains central to this regulatory framework, permitting temporary entry for visitors while prohibiting permanent settlement and property acquisition by non-residents. In doing so, the regulation safeguards tribal land rights and cultural heritage.

Recent demographic changes, particularly those linked to unauthorized immigration, have intensified calls for the extension of the provisions across other northeastern states to preserve their distinct ethnic and cultural identities. Advocates argue that without such protections, increased migration may exacerbate competition over employment, resource sharing, and political

representation, thereby threatening indigenous customs and institutions. The regulation is also instrumental in curbing illicit trade along the border. However, the regulation poses a complex challenge; while it offers protection, it may also hinder economic integration and reinforce political isolation. This may also have the potential to impede development, fuel separatist sentiments, and restrict cultural exchange, thereby perpetuating misunderstanding and social fragmentation.

Therefore, the Inner Line Regulation has evolved from a colonial apparatus of control into a contemporary policy mechanism for the preservation of indigenous identities and cultural autonomy in Northeast India. Yet, its implications for national integration, regional development, and inter-ethnic relations remain contested. It may best be understood as a part of a broader long-term historical process of frontier-making in Northeast India, in other words, a *longue durée* tradition of imperial frontier governance, exemplifying an imperial logic of managing diversity through spatial segregation, legal differentiation, and selective autonomy. These systems underscore that frontiers are not merely geographic peripheries, but critical political spaces where questions of identity, sovereignty, and citizenship are continuously negotiated.

Its persistence into postcolonial India, reconfigured as a mechanism to preserve tribal autonomy and cultural identity, demonstrates the enduring legacy, yet complexities of such frontier policies and their multifarious role in structuring centre-periphery relations. When viewed through a comparative and historical lens and placed within this larger historical continuum, the Inner Line Regulation thus presents the complicated interrelationships between governance, identity and space, which illuminate not only its historical roots but also their importance both within the structures of postcolonial governance and within the context of the 21st century.

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- They functioned on a rotational basis, with each 'got' sending one member at a time to perform public works projects. While a paik was away fulfilling his duty, the other members would take care of his family and ensure his land continued to be cultivated. In times of war, the paiks transformed into the kingdom's army.
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  11. It functioned as a strategic appeasement policy, aimed at curbing raids by neighbouring hill tribes on the kingdom's frontier plains. The system operated as a form of tribute, where designated villages provided commodities (posa) to the tribes. In return, these villages enjoyed exemption from raids, essentially buying peace and security. In return, the villages enjoyed a tax exemption from the kingdom.
  12. *Ibid.*
  13. It was an arrangement made during the Ahom kingdom. A marketplace known as 'Naga Khats' or 'Katakis,' were created which served as neutral zones for trade and diplomacy between the Ahoms and the Naga tribes. Under this system the Nagas was exempt from paying land revenue and were allowed to fish freely in designated streams.
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  23. Here the 'inner line' was implemented against the hill tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, including the Daflas (Nyishis), Miris, Abors (Adis), Mishmis, Khamtis, Singphos, and Nagas.
  24. Here the 'inner line' was implemented for the following hill tribes: Bhutias, Akas, and Daflas (also known as Nyishis).
  25. Here the 'inner line' was directed towards the Nagas
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