

## **An aspect of North East Frontier Policy of the Raj : an overview**

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The architect of British Colonial empire in North-East, David Scott initially was against permanent occupation of Assam.<sup>1</sup> But the North East Policy completely changed with the discovery of Assam tea plant. The realisation that Assam plant was genuine tea, a commercially marketable item of immense potential and later discovery of open seams of coal and presence of mineral oil and other minerals made Assam attractive to British capital investment.<sup>2</sup> With final annexation of Assam in 1838, the Colonial Government assumed as successor government, the paramountcy over the North-Eastern Hills between the administered Assam valley and Tibet border. The new Supreme Government pursued under compulsion of logistics, geopolitics and the demands of holding together north-east frontier of Bengal, a philosophy of leaving the north-east India alone, as far as possible, except for utilising its resources as it suited them for trade and business, Assam under went rapid transformation. The tea industry prospered, British investment increased in Railways, transport, steamer, tea plantation, Jute crops, coal mining and in oil refinery. Exploitation of waste land and forest resources made rapid progress. This policy was tempered by conciliation and display of force in the form of punitive expedition into the hills. There had been three regular expeditions against the Adis in 1858, 1859 and 1862. By the grant of Posa and agreements, the formed British Sovereignty was extended over the hills upto the international border during the period of 1826 and 1874.

The degree of authority exercised by the British had varied in different areas.<sup>3</sup> The British policy was not to bring the hill territory between Assam Valley and Tibet under direct Colonial rule. It was a policy of conciliation and penetration giving the north-east India a new political and territorial unity for colonial purpose.<sup>4</sup>

The Ahom tribal policy was directed to contain the tribes within their hills. This required a line of demarcation between non-administered tribal areas from the Plain areas administered by the

Ahoms. There was no question of occupying the Hills.<sup>5</sup> The British assimilated and brought it into line with their own political philosophy of individualism and non-intervention pursued in India and at home at that time.

The newly developed tea industry wanted to open the country for reaching the markets of Tibet and Central Asia and to use the hills for tea plantation. This required settlement and occupation of the traditional tribal areas. Naturally the extension of tea gardens and the cutting down of Simul trees for tea chests were resisted by the tribes. Apatanis used to bring Indian rubber from the hills for sale in the plains and competition for it created problems. The spread of tea gardens outside British fiscal limit involved the government. In Lakhimpur there was an interference with the revenue from Indian Rubber plantation beyond the lines of settled mahals. Thus there was a necessity of bringing under control the commercial relations of the Europeans with the hill tribes living on the boundary of the settled districts of Assam Valley. The Inner Line Regulation of 1873 gave the executive government of Assam the power to prescribe a line for frontier districts beyond which no British subject or foreign resident could pass without a license. The rule was laid down regarding trade and possession of land beyond the line.

The first Chief Commissioner of Assam, Col. Keatinge in 1875 took up the case of laying down the Inner Line for the district of Lakhimpur. The immediate object was to enclose within the Inner Line a tract of fertile land south of Jaipur which had not upto that time been subject to the authority of the Deputy Commissioner. The object was to bring the tea gardens of Namsang, Taurack and Hukumjari with the Inner Line.<sup>6</sup> From the Paragraph 13 of Capt. G. W. Beresford's Notes on the North-East Frontier of Assam, it appears that the tract between the Inner Line and the Hills was practically uninhabited. There were few Miri villages beyond the Inner Line. Inner Line covered them for ostensible protection. The economic and commercial objectives of the Inner Line were three folds : (i) to regulate the trade in Indian Rubber between the hills and the British traders, (ii) to control the extension of the tea plantation into the hill areas, and (iii) to regulate the transfer of land in these areas. It was a policy to avoid direct confrontation with the tribes by the British planters. It was an externalisation of the policy of non-interference by the Colonial rulers in areas outside the settled and administered districts of Assam. The tribes were no match to the advanced people

like the British. The regulation clearly states that the Inner Line was defined merely for the purpose of ordinary civil jurisdiction of the district authorities.

The Inner Line was not a static line for all time and purpose. It was found to be so elastic as to be capable of being stretched so as to include any area when it suited British Colonial purpose.<sup>7</sup> Although the government followed by and large a policy of non-interference in matters beyond the Inner Line, they made their influence felt amongst the hill people without taking any active part in inter-tribal disputes.<sup>8</sup> Sir Banphylde Fuller, the Lt. Governor of East Bengal and Assam while laying down that the whole strip of land from Brahmaputra to the Hills was British territory and that the tribesmen should not be permitted to ignore this reality, held that until effective possession was taken of the tract by moving the police posts to the foot-hills, it was useless to interfere in matters of details. He said there was no reason why managers of British saw mills should not pay the tribals some royalty on Simul timber extracted from this area if they found it convenient.<sup>9</sup> But the real character of the Inner Line policy came out with the assertion of Lt. Governor Sir Lancelot Hare in November 1906. He was strongly impressed with the necessity for a firm assertion to the British government of its supervision and control upto the further frontier both for the protection of existing transborder trade and for the purpose of preserving the valuable stock of simul timber in forests, north of Brahmaputra for making tea boxes. The Government of India advised the Assistant Political Officer should undertake a tour in the tract between Inner Line and Outer Line in order to ascertain the actual position of affairs then existing there and to test the feeling of the people in regard to the proposed taxation on settlers within the Outer Line.<sup>10</sup>

The Inner Line Regulation was never enforced to curb the movement of the hill men across the Line.<sup>11</sup> They were encouraged to bring simul timber and India rubber. As a part of British frontier policy, annual fairs were held at the border villages of the administered areas. The hill men were encouraged to visit fairs held at Darranga and Udalguri. Sadiya became a travel centre for all the tribal people in the frontier areas.<sup>12</sup> Inner Line was purely an administrative measure and not a frontier policy against a foreign people.<sup>13</sup> The British policy was directed towards pacification and conciliation of the tribal people with the object to reach the international frontier with Tibet and China. Between 1854 and 1934, six exploration parties journeyed through the Mi-

shmi country from Sadiya to Rine. Apparently, they had no intention to extend administration beyond the Inner Line. Initially they confined themselves to the plains cultivating at the same time, political relations with the tribal people by bringing the Chiefs into stipendary police relations to them. The extension of tea gardens and destruction of simul trees for making tea chests were resisted by the tribes. The politics of tea outside the British fiscal limit involved the colonial government directly. There was competition for Indian Rubber brought by the Apatanis for sale. They all created many difficult problems. This needed modification of frontier policy of the colonial government.

Step by step administration extended to the hills. At the beginning, the Deputy Commissioner regulated tribal relations north of Dibrugarh. In 1882, a post of Assistant Political Officer was created at Sadiya. Slowly, Balipara and Sadiya Frontier Tracts were created. To meet the growing needs of expanding administration, these two tracts were further divided by 1945 and they stood from east to west as Se La sub-Agency, Subansiri Area, Sadiya Frontier Tract and Tirap Frontier Tract. Slowly the Frontier Tracts were brought under close control. The effect has been the slow transformation of tribal economy into a money economy. The colonial control of north-east India became complete.

### References

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Assam Secretariat.**

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