



Return of the Frontier: Understanding the Demands for Inner Line in Northeast India

Alternatives: Global, Local, Political
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Abstract

The colony in British India had at one time designed an inner line to distinguish two separate systems of administration for the frontier areas and the nonfrontier areas of colonial Northeast India. Constructing the frontiers as areas of strife and conflict and from which the nonfrontiers always needed to be secured, the British in creating the line made an instrument of policing the frontiers that has not only persisted but transgressed the colonial administrative structure into the post-colonial era. Although it was designed really for the protection of the nonfrontier areas of Assam from the raiding of the hill tribes of the frontier, in implementation the line prohibited non-natives of the frontiers from adopting interest in land or products of land located behind it. Contemporary movements demanding an inner line in three states of Northeast India have gone back to the idea of a line that divides the territory into two nonhomogenous areas, disallowing non-natives within the inner line from an extended involvement in the areas outside of the line, thus, refrontierizing themselves and giving them the peculiar characteristics of the frontier, wanting to lend themselves an exterior identity that is distinct from the identity of the regular nonfrontier territory in India.

Keywords

frontier, inner line, refrontierization, colonial, postcolonial, territory, belongingness

The inner line system has made a near-dramatic reentry in the politics of Northeast India by being asked for where it was never thought to be applicable in the colonial scheme of the line. The length and extent of the line being notified under the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation I of 1873 and Regulation V of 1873, the policy was made for “Peace and Government of certain districts on the Eastern Frontier of Bengal.”¹ Therefore, designed really for the establishment of peace and for the protection of outlying tea gardens along the edges of the hills of the Northeast, the colonial British Government of India made use of the line to make a distinction between the peoples on either side of it. The inhabitants in front, in the nonfrontier areas which were directly administered by the British

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were at the core of the policy, needing protection from the hill tribes that would make raids on the areas below while the inhabitants of the areas behind the line were the wild sort who needed an administration with a personal touch. To the anthropologist Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, for instance, only the *Pax Britannica* made possible “peace and friendship” among the Naga tribes who otherwise headhunted and burned houses of enemy villages.² In the postcolonial Independent Indian state, although these formerly frontier areas have undergone a process of defrontierization through a cartographic assembling of the frontier borders, the characterization of the colonial frontiers has traveled down to the areas that made the colonial nonfrontiers. Contemporary movements for the demand of the Inner line in these areas have depended on the characterizations that enable the delineation of a line to segregate the peoples along belongingness and nonbelongingness to the region.

This article attempts to bring the historical making of the Inner line into relevance in the present. It is because it has been argued here the demands for the line in the three states of Meghalaya, Manipur, and Assam are a process of refrontierization, making itself like that of the frontiers in the colony. The Inner Line Regulation was a product of the colonial frontierizing of the hills. The formidable British power in Bengal finding itself involved in putting down the rebellions in the Ahom kingdom toward the end of the eighteenth century was forced to seize the Assamese territories to save this neighboring country from depredation and the persecutions of the Burmese who were becoming a potent rival of the British on its frontiers. They found Assam to be in great suffering, a community of people called the Moāmariyās turning the eastern areas into a famine by burning villages, destroying crops and looting supplies.³ This was the characteristic of the frontier in the colonial time—that frontier areas were always in conflict, and this was the way it was constructed for making a need of further governmental interventions. Finding it incumbent upon itself to restore order, exploratory expeditions sent from the British administered areas found the hills to be inhabited by “very primitive peoples who respond hardly at all to the influences of civilization” that needed the frontier police to continuously tour the wild mountainous frontier and settle disputes among the tribes either by persuasion or by force.⁴

The turbulence in the frontier areas needing a frontier policing for the peaceful administration of the nonfrontier, the inner line served as the instrument of control. It controlled entries and exits of non-natives to the frontier areas through the issue of a permit by the deputy commissioner of that area. The temporariness of this permit indicated that the non-native could not involve oneself for long in the frontier district since otherwise it would be illegal for the person to prolong the visit and the visitor was liable to be prosecuted for it. The line and the permit were reminders in the form of the delimited boundary and the check post where it was verified that the visitor did not belong in the areas within the line. More importantly for the current movements demanding the establishment of an Inner line, the notifications of the line prohibited non-natives from acquiring land within the line. The two different sorts of administrations on opposite sides of the line were suited to the temperament of the peoples therein. The government preferring not to meddle unnecessarily with the raiding tribes of the frontiers found it more convenient to prohibit the subjects of their nonfrontier administration by sealing the outer boundaries of colonial projects such as the tea growing industry at the Inner line. The line is significant to the protestors of the movements due to this reason that it defines who belongs where.

This article makes an attempt to understand the logic of the movements demanding for Inner lines in Northeast India in three sections. The first section visits the history of frontier-making in the region when the British entered it for furtherance of its colonial interests. The frontiers of Gāro Hills in the South of Goālpāra district had to be entered into for “the growth of order and civilization” in the district through a control over the “outrages and acts of violence” committed by these hill peoples.⁵ The frontier areas were always the areas of civil strife and lawlessness, and these disturbed situations created the right conditions for the British, with their self-delivered responsibility of

civilizing, to enter into and interfere. The British established a system of policing along and in the frontiers to settle its disturbances, secure the nonfrontier from the outrages coming from the hills, and regulate the interactions among the two separate administrative regions. The second section explains the role of the Inner line in governing the peoples of the region in the colonial era. The Inner line was a physical division of the region into two different administrative systems, excluded from each other through a policing system. The laws and regulations applicable in one zone were not applicable in the other. The frontier areas were allowed a degree of self-government that was disrupted only if the government needed to mediate between peoples of different communities or among European British subjects and the tribes.⁶ Through these separations, the line created an exterior identity to the visitors.

The third section then applies the understanding arrived in the first two sections to the postcolonial attempt to defrontierize the colony-constructed frontiers. Defrontierization has been a process of evacuation of the traditional boundaries of territorial space that were not physically demarcated. By replacing them, state-created physical boundaries have upset the equation that held up the interactions of territorial space and people of these areas.⁷ Although physically the frontier was undergoing this change to the postfrontier, in idea the frontier remained to be dismantled. The characteristics of the frontier of the colonial time have instead traveled across to postcolonial time and in Assam across space even to nonfrontier area of the past. The demands for the Inner line, in making the case for the line's necessity, refrontierize themselves by lending themselves the peculiar characteristics of the frontier. They have sought to project themselves different from the areas that would remain outside of their demanded Inner line; they are native to the region and have a right to its land and resources while the non-natives do not. The Inner line is needed for the policing of migrants to these areas, who are seen to be detaching the native peoples from traditional sources of livelihoods. Migration has been one of the central sources of conflict in Northeast India with armed secessionist groups of the region such as United Liberation Front of Assam and United National Liberation Front (UNLF) doing xenophobic violence on migrant workers.

The Frontier

Colonial frontier administration in Northeast India began with the interference of the British in the politics of Assam toward the end of the eighteenth century. Their system of administration was being consolidated in the British Indian provinces. The armies equipped with superior arms, the British had a higher political and military organization that they made full use of to dominate upon the rivalries of the Indian rulers.⁸ In the neighborhood of British-ruled Bengal, the Ahoms who were the rulers in Assam were upon its last legs. The king, Gaurināth Singh, was a tyrant, who killed other claimants to the throne, and was governing his subjects through fear. He helped stoke an insurrection by persecuting the Moāmariyā community who lived in the East of his kingdom and whom he hated. The rebellion spread countrywide in 1786, giving the opportunity to petty chiefs of his kingdom to claim independence and making the king run for assistance from his neighbors. However, the scope for neighborly assistance had been exhausted, the Kachāri and Jaintia kings remaining neutral while although the ruler of Manipur sent an army to Gaurināth's aid, the Moāmariyā defensive routed it.⁹ This situation of conflict in the British-ruled India's frontiers made the opportune moment for the British to intervene since all hope was lost for Gaurināth and until the war ended the kingdom would continue to be in rebellions against a system of order.

Even at the outset, the frontier for the British in India was the territory of civil strife. For a time, they did not directly interfere, and until the end of the Second Anglo-Burmese War in 1826, the *de facto* frontiers were the limits of the Ahom kingdom located at the foothills of the Gāro Hills on the northern side. From the Bengal plains that were directly administered, attention of the British administration directed toward the "outrages and acts of violence" committed by the Gāros in the

“Gāro frontier.”¹⁰ The Gāro Hills were part of Goālpāra administration that the British inherited from the Mughal rule in Bengal. Reported to be confirmed headhunters, the colonial administration found it no easy task to rule them; in the colonial frame, the frontier Gāros were made to be a terror to the people of the plains.¹¹ There was always serious trouble coming from them, so that military expeditions needed to be sent to control the trouble or to exact punishment from them. Understood in this way, the “frontier” was also the zone where it was not easy to govern. A land marked by the barbarity of headhunters and the like, at the frontier the people of the plains could be held in terror of the frontier tribes.

For the reason of peaceful governance and establishment of law and civilization in the plains, the frontiers had to be entered into. The Gāro frontiers, for instance, were intruded into for “the growth of order and civilization” in the plains of Goālpāra district, putting the frontier areas under a special civil commissioner but not excluding them from the political rule of the British who had newly taken over the administration of Goālpāra.¹² The tribes had previously made skirmishes with the zamindars of Goālpāra upon disagreement over payment of rents. The British substituted the zamindars’ levies for a direct collection of rent by the special commissioner. As in other frontier areas later, a noninterference policy was followed for a time, but ultimately the unstopping disorder and raiding by the Gāros had caused it to fail. The British found the tribute paying Gāros to be irregular in payment inviting a punishment of this criminality. The local colonial administration interfered in the traditional Gāro markets, closing them and putting an economic blockade upon them.¹³ The complete subjugation of the Gāro Hills happened in 1872–1873 when a punitive expedition was sent to punish the Gāros raids in the nonfrontier areas, making the entrance of the colony into this frontier area complete.¹⁴ The frontier was different, possessing dissimilar characteristics from the regular areas under administration, but yet they were inseparable territorially for keeping of peace.

The territorial annexation of frontier areas to the regular nonfrontier areas already put under the colonial thumb followed this pattern in the extension of British administration to Assam as well and subsequently in the arrangements arrived with the hill regions that together comprise Northeast India of today. The declared policy of the British Government of India had been to not interfere in foreign territories but for removal of obstacles to the establishment of law and civilization, as it has been seen in the total subjugation of the Gāro Hills, the colonial state found itself compelled to interfere and thereafter establish political control upon it. In the case of Assam proper—the valley of the Brahmaputra after the Ahom kingdom had virtually lapsed, the Burmese were found committing aggression in the northern frontier of Bengal and in the borders of Chittagong and Sylhet.¹⁵ They had taken over control of Upper Assam and were almost reaching Dacca, Mymensing, Rangpur, and Rajshahi districts of the British where, if left alone, they could “re-act on water, in their war-boats, the part of Pindaries in South India.”¹⁶ Realizing the threat to the British territories from the aggression, the British associated with the chiefs of Western Assam to expel them.¹⁷ Therefore, once again a frontier province became nonfrontier because of the justness of the interference in it that was provided by the sufferance of the people of Assam.

The British took up the burden to civilize the frontier peoples for which they entered into their territories. The tribes here were an object of interest and inquiry, offering explanations for the science of man. A history of killing, war, and head-hunting that did not spare the Ahoms of the plains was found in the local chronicles.¹⁸ It was as if the frontier would be unmanageable without the colony’s control of it. The frontier administration regulated the interactions of the peoples, one of which forms grew into becoming the Inner Line System at a later time. There was a rift between the Gāro and Bengalis in Goālpāra, which was attributed to the traditional habit of the Gāros of coming armed to the markets at the foothills called *haats*, intimidating their “enemies,” the Bengalis.¹⁹ Left alone, the two communities were thought incapable of dissolving their differences. A native judicial establishment and a local police were found necessary toward this purpose of conflict management. Revenue was collected from the Gāros in the *haats* for the establishment of a local corps that would

police such interactions.²⁰ Frontier tribes needed to be controlled unless they made violence on the plains people, the peoples of the nonfrontier who had submitted sooner to British control and thereon were under protection of the British. The frontier was designed as having “a history of bloodshed, rapine, and political instability” that needed strict regulation at the boundaries of the frontier for the establishment of civilization.²¹ Colonial administration along the frontier would be vexed by the need for constant vigil of these areas.

Vigil was still necessary because certain characteristics made the frontier peculiar—it was a region of political turmoil, constituted by infighting, raiding, and the appearance of a constant fighting with the plains people. Such areas were also the Sadiya and Matak tracts identified by the British at the outset of taking over the control of Assam. These were small territories at the eastern borders of the Ahom kingdom that were ruled by tribal chiefs but occasionally held by the Ahoms.²² The colonial frontierizing of these areas were apt because the Khamtis who came to rule in the Sadiya tract were realized to be an “invading people,” gaining the chieftainship of the territory through making repetitive raids into the area during the rule of Ahoms and upon obtaining the chieftainship reducing the plains Assamese into dependence and slavery.²³ In the Matak tract, it was the Moāmariyās that had led to the chaos in the last days of the Ahom kingdom and had led the king Gaurināth Singh to ask help of the British in resuscitating his kingdom. The Moāmariyās had caused whole villages to be destroyed, their inhabitants fleeing the country after being robbed of all their possessions.²⁴ Both the Khamtis and the Moāmariyās fitting the characteristics of the frontier people, the Sadiya and the Matak tracts, respectively, for each of these communities were designated frontier tracts or areas excluded from the general British administration in Assam. The Matak tract was made semi-independent on the condition that Matak chief provided two-thirds of the total *pāiks*—foot soldiers raised by him.²⁵

To the colonial mind, the peculiarity of the frontier areas necessitated a strong frontier policing. The upkeep of law and civilization in the plains was not possible without a vigilance of the frontiers since it was from here that the raids into the plains were made. The creation of frontier posts made it possible to watch the activities in these hill areas, although the creation of such posts was just one step short of political subjugation of the frontier territory near to these posts. Samaguting (Chumukedima), for instance, was a frontier post created in 1866–1867 for securing Nowgong from raids coming from Western Angami villages and for the control of head-hunting and massacres that could not be tolerated under the very noses of the local British officers.²⁶ Thereafter, the post was the base for punitive expeditions made into the Angami territory, the administration at Samaguting being directed by superior British authorities to be a center of control of the neighboring frontier areas through “a moderate display of physical force.”²⁷ Another frontier post had been created soon after the Second Burmese War at Sadiya that was manned by local troops but put under the supervision of a native officer of the Assam Light Infantry appointed by the British Government. Two to four companies of the Light Infantry were stationed to guard the area from the “restless tribes” inhabiting the hills.²⁸ Colonial frontier policing in this way was directed toward the control of the frontier.

Inner Line

The territorial extent of British rule having extended east after the Second Burmese War in 1826 was imperative for the British to settle the administration along the established administrative lines in their other Indian territories. The nonfrontier areas in the plains were amenable to the laying of administrative foundations for “law and civilization,” while the hill people were being interfered with as little as possible. In the base nonfrontier areas, first the laws that were functioning in the neighboring British territory of Bengal were put into effect in Assam with some provincial individuality. For regularization of judicial administration, a Code for Assam was developed and made to function for the civil and criminal cases.²⁹ However, for a permanent control of the newly acquired

areas, decisions were made to reform the existing administration, so that the peace and settled government could lead to improvement in conditions of the cultivating classes. The emancipation of slaves of the former Ahom aristocrats was one such intervention at the outset. Already having taken steps to abolish slavery in other parts of British India and finding slavery to be widely prevalent, the British extended their avowed policies upon slavery to Assam by liberating the slaves here.³⁰ The local officers were directed to conform to the Bengal Regulations for revenue administration. Under the Act II of 1835, in the four districts in Assam—Darrang, Goālpāra, Kāmrup, and Nowgong—criminal and civil cases were put under the jurisdiction of the Sadar Court and revenue matters under the Bengal Board of Revenue.³¹ The process in effect started to regularize these former frontier areas to become more like areas not considered a part of the frontier.

With the eastward extension of the colony, frontier administration too moved eastward. Briefly returning Upper Assam to an Ahom prince, Purandar Singh, its government had been resumed by the British in 1838 when the king failed to pay the promised tribute of Rs. 50,000.³² On February 6, 1874, the collection of territories in Assam including those newly acquired from Purandar Singh was formed into a new province of British India by lopping off six districts from the Government of Bengal and reconstituting them into the chief commissionership of Assam. Whereas so far the eastern frontiers were being governed from Bengal, now its administration became an immediate responsibility of the chief commissioner who was better positioned to understand the local conditions. The regularization of the nonfrontier areas of Assam hit upon a block at the hills where previously the unwillingness of the Gāros to submit had lent experience to the British in frontier administering. The way out was found in a differential rule that, while transforming the prereformed existing traditional system of administration in Assam into administrative contiguity with that in Bengal, would at the same time leave the frontier areas barely touched. All of the frontier tracts were administered on a separate principle from that of the nonfrontiers, mainly through the upkeep of law and order. The eastward extension meant that the frontier was to be administered now locally, from the base of the hills upward to the outposts of colonial authority while maintaining a distinction between the two areas.

The eastward extension exposed the nonhomogeneity in conduct of colonial interventions among the nonfrontier and the frontier areas. Interventions into the first were guided by “dictates of justice and humanity,” and when settling the trouble in neighboring independent kingdoms, they were guided by diplomacy that investigated the possibilities of securing the future defense of the British territories.³³ In the frontier, diplomacy in the normal sense did not work, and areas were annexed through administrative extension, exercised locally by increasing the political influence over individual villages and inducing them to submit to British rule. It was not dictates of justice or humanity that led the British into these lands but a need for domination. There was an endeavor to put down raids to protect people of the nonfrontier, to protect “friends, and to punish those who injure[d] them.”³⁴ What was awaited next was a demarcation in policy of the distinction between the friendly plains people and the criminal, unyielding frontier tribes. A distinction was made in administrative action upon where law and civilization were possible and where not. This intervention was possible in the nonfrontier while in the frontier Naga Hills, the government’s course of action was put in vague directions to the local official to keep a distance from interfering lest the tribes take retaliatory action on regular British subjects or make violent protests through raiding or murder.³⁵

The distinction in application of policies to the two separate administrative areas became apparent in the making of laws for the local administration. There was exclusivity to the frontier areas and laws specific to Assam made it clearer that even though administratively the frontier areas and the nonfrontiers of Assam were under the same legal jurisdiction, the application was different to the two regions. In general, laws made for Assam were selectively applied. The frontiers were zones of exclusivity inside the local jurisdiction of the province that distinguished these areas as such. In 1860 although the codes of civil and criminal procedure and in 1862 the Indian Penal Code were extended

to the Brahmaputra valley, superseding the Assam code, the two codes did not have a clause explaining their territorial extent. In 1874, the passing of two acts made it clear that enacted laws did not have universal territorial extents in Assam. The Laws Local Extent Act XV of 1874 differentiated among the territorial extents of the laws made generally. Specified laws under this act did not extend to backward tracts called “scheduled districts” or more or less, the frontier areas. The other act, The Scheduled Districts Act XIV of 1874, enabled the government to declare which laws were in force in these districts. Enactments that were in force elsewhere could be extended to the scheduled districts.³⁶

The inner line was to come. It was being realized by the time of the enactment of the Scheduled Districts Act that inhabitants of the frontiers who the British found to be rude and of a simple state of society were not suited to be put under the refined administrative system of Bengal.³⁷ The Frontier Tracts Regulation II of 1880 accordingly provided that unsuitable laws may be barred in all hill districts, in North Cachar subdivision, the Mikir hills tract in Nowgong and the Dibrugarh frontier tract in Lakhimpur. Identified as a rude and simple people, the tribes of the tracts were instead governed through military expeditions that continued to be sent up in these areas until early in 1914 to the territories of the Aka and Daphla tribes located east of the headwaters of the Bharali.³⁸ At the base of these areas, a new battalion of the frontier police was raised as the fifth Assam Rifles near Tezpur in 1920 to prevent the Akas and Daphlas from making raids in Kamrup and Darrang.³⁹ The policing of the tribes had also become essential since Assam tea had been discovered in 1823–1824, which had raised the commercial importance of the Assam plains. Tea gardens that were begun for production were sometimes attacked by hill people from the frontier. To protect the tea gardens from attacks, such as one made on a tea garden in North Cachar by some Angamis in 1880, the area was brought under complete British dominance.⁴⁰

Especially since the beginning of tea growing industry in Assam, the government was concerned with the danger of coming into conflict with the frontier tribes. Clearly, the hill people did not like the changes introduced by the colonial government especially along the foothills and the intrusions made into their traditional way of life. In Lakhimpur, speculators in India rubber had threatened disturbances with the hill tribes in the frontier tract located beyond while also interfering in the revenue earned by the government from the trade in rubber.⁴¹ Colonial commerce in these frontier areas such as in tea, forests, or rubber disturbed the traditional way of living of the tribes inhabiting along these areas. The Executive government of India had acquired a power of summary legislation for the backward tracts that enabled it to bypass discussion in legislature. Using this power, for the control of disturbances in the frontier areas, the government promulgated the Inner Line Regulation in 1873, prescribing the northern, eastern, and southeastern limits where ordinary laws would have direct effect and beyond, where they would not. It was also the limits up to which tea gardens would be permitted to be grown. Beyond, no land could be acquired by planters either from the government or from the chiefs of the tribes directly. On the other hand, an indirect rule was made, so that politically and territorially the frontier areas remained under British sovereignty.⁴²

The maintenance of peace and civilization in the nonfrontier underlay the making of rules of inner line. Therefore, it was not for the protection of the frontier areas or its people as the inner line has been seen to be protecting in the postcolonial time, being actually for the protection and securing of the colonial projects including tea plantations at the base of the frontier hills in Assam from the criminality and raiding by the tribes. Although British power was sovereign and questioning it was punished through military offensives, loose political power was exercised over the frontiers, meaning that the traditional forms of government were allowed to remain. Unless the traditional ruling authority differed with the policies of the government, he was left to himself although if the traditional chief treated the government’s superior authority with contempt, action was made to realign the local politics of the area with that of the colonial government. Internal management of the frontier areas was left to the chiefs of the areas, the British officer mediating only if different tribes

were parties to a dispute. Among the Khamtis of the Sadiya tract, when this situation was tilted to their disfavor toward 1839—their slaves had been released, they were not under a profitable position of control over the Assamese of the Lakhimpur plains, and proposals for bringing them under regular assessment were being mooted—they revolted and had to be suppressed through three successive military expeditions.⁴³ Whereas, in the plains, internal management was turned over to the local authority who dispensed justice and collected land revenue through the *Mouzadars* or contractors; the main source of revenue in Assam proper or the nonfrontier was land revenue, while in the hills, it was generally house tax.⁴⁴

The central and most important effect, however, of making the Inner Line Regulation that is relevant to understanding the present politics over the line was the control of movement of people to and from the frontier areas. The inner line gave power to the local authorities to prohibit the British subjects generally or specified classes of people from going beyond the limits prescribed through the rules without a pass given by the deputy commissioner which might be given with accompanying conditions that might appear necessary for issuance of the pass.⁴⁵ It necessarily accompanied the first characteristic of the areas outside of the inner line, that is, these areas produced an exterior identity. They were controlled by the colony, but they were not colonized territory in its strict meaning. The effect of the discovery of Assam tea had been that since taking over the administration of Upper Assam, tea tracts were founded by government and nearly 70,000 British acres of such tracts were transferred to the “Assam Company” for manufacturing tea. These transfers of land were located along the inhabiting areas of the frontier tribes, and also other transfers to individual tea cultivators were made free of any rent to the government for ten years.⁴⁶ Apart from these lands, colonists were also induced to take up land at the head of the Assam valley outside of the areas reserved for tea.⁴⁷

For the peoples of the frontier themselves, there were advantages of a kind in being outside of the Inner line, that is, in being a frontier area, in terms of retaining the precolonial political identity of the area. It has been seen how, right from taking over the Gāro hills, tiring from the restlessness of the raiding Gāros onto the Goālpāra plains, the British had attempted to place a noninterference policy in the hills. The frontier areas that were added to British Northeast India at a later time had this same position. They remained outside of the operation of criminal procedure and civil procedure code, of stamps, court fees, registration, and transfer of property. Rules made under the Scheduled Districts Act created a simpler system of administering justice in civil and criminal matters. The high court had no jurisdiction except in criminal cases against European British subjects. This power was with the village headman who presided over tribunals to decide petty civil and criminal cases.⁴⁸ The same system was in Khasi Hills where the *Syiems* or chiefs decided petty cases as was traditionally done. In the Jaintia Hills, the *Dolois* and *Sardars* continued to be appointed by popular choice, although their appointment had to be confirmed by the government. They were responsible for the maintenance of law and order and collection of revenue in their areas. The special administrative scheme was intended to civilize the tribes to see them developed, and for better knowledge of the frontier societies, the village headmen were consulted.⁴⁹

Postcolonial Inner Line Politics: Frontier, Postfrontier, and Refrontierization

Having been a regulating system for the interactions between peoples of the nonfrontier and the frontier areas, the policy toward the tribes of the northeast hills did not change at the transition to the independence era. The skeleton of the former remained in the change to the new form. Although political changes were made that were directed from the central government toward the states, legally and administratively, more or less the same laws had been functioning in the British rule stagnated in Northeast India.⁵⁰ The inner line was one such administrative overhang from the

colonial time that was neither removed nor modified to adapt to the changed political conditions. The colonial demarcation of the line had been changed periodically in the past to suit the interests of the colonialists in the plains since beyond the line no interest could be had in acquiring land or products from land.⁵¹ During that period, where it had existed at the boundaries of these districts, since independence, the line has remained in effect in the states of Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, and Mizoram in Northeast India, the borders of which these districts came to constitute. The absence of any change is symptomatic of an inability to transform the administration of these states from frontier areas to “postfrontier” areas, and because the Inner line was developed as an instrument to regulate the interactions across the nonfrontier and frontier, it is symptomatic of an inability to exit the colonial administrative structure that had been in place in the region.

The boundaries of Assam state underwent a change, but the idea of the frontier remained to be dismantled.⁵² The colonial projection of the frontier hills of the region as remote, backward, and lacking in civilization passed over onto postcolonial time; these were the same characteristics that appeared as fundamental. The peculiar features of the colonial time were replaced by new identifications in the postcolonial era. Raiding by the hill tribes in the former period was not altogether substituted by peaceful relations, whereas informative material upon the clashes between the hill people and the people of the plains at the borders of Assam state was dependent on characterizing the troublemaking habits of the hill tribes and bringing them into contemporary relevance.⁵³ For example, when reports were received in March 1979, that Adi people set fire to government houses in Pasighat, the problem was identified as arising from the objections of local Arunachali people to surveying work of the survey of India at the Arunachal Pradesh border, in similar sense to that of difficulties arising in the administration in the plains during the colonial time due to the unruliness of the frontier tribes. The logic of governing the nonfrontier and the frontier differently meanwhile led to carving out of new administrative divisions in the territorial extent of Assam state that was politically responsible for these areas for a time, forming new states of Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Arunachal Pradesh.

A process was begun to defrontierize the frontiers through a cartographic assembling of the frontier’s borders, transforming the frontier into a borderland, crystallizing nonexistent differences in people inhabiting these areas by dividing them artificially across boundaries defined by the state.⁵⁴ The several conflicts in Northeast India since have been diagnosed to be caused by such transformations of nonstate spaces to state-controlled spaces. Entrapped in the new imageries of the territorial state, the inhabitants felt marginalized. Some of them made their resistance felt through self-determination movements, wanting to return to their precolonial existence.⁵⁵ Because of these movements that took to secessionism to mark their protest, the postfrontier refused to characterize itself as different from its former past. The obduracy of the movements vexed the government, requiring it to militarize the northeast region. In the colonial time, it can be recalled the lawlessness of the frontier had required the state to send for the frontier police in these areas. There is hardly any departure from the syndrome of governing the frontier through the demands of law and order.

The Inner line has cut across in the transformation to the uncharacterized postfrontier. It persists in the form of a minor intervention at the plains hill geographical borders in the three states. In Nagaland, the check post for the Inner line Permit (ILP) is located at Chumukedima, near Dimapur, just where the Naga Hills begin. As vehicles halt or slow down at the barricades on the National Highway 39, police officials in barracks located along the side scrutiny the passengers and ask for the permit, if they think it is needed. Although the ILP is essential for any nontribal to enter beyond Dimapur into Nagaland, it can be bypassed. It is not known what orders remain with the police for administering the ILP, but certain vehicles are let go while some are checked. But once bypassed anyhow, at least in the state of Nagaland the permit is not verified frequently for validity. It can also be claimed that one’s journey is to Manipur (where the Inner line does not apply) without halt in Nagaland and for which one has to take the same road.⁵⁶ However, it is still considered safe to carry

the ILP on a visit to any area in the Naga Hills for which facilitation offices are located at Guwahati, Kolkata, Shillong, and New Delhi. In Nagaland, the ILP only has a ritual significance—the visitor is reminded through the application process for the permit and at the check post that there are special rules that prohibit the person from acquiring land.

In use, the change in the postcolonial time has been that ideologically the Inner line has come to be associated with the Indian state's policies for the three postfrontier states. Along with its continuing practical use in regulating the interactions of the people behind and across the line, it is indicative of its supposed utility since at its inception, it was meant to prohibit the people from within the line from taking interest in any land located behind it. Actually designed for peace and justice of the nonfrontier areas of the colony, the idea has been used in reverse now. It is seen to be an administrative measure for protection of the tribes of these postfrontier areas from the migrations of non-natives to these places for work. Migrations here have been part of the dynamics of conflict of the northeast region, making detachments from the traditional sources of livelihoods for the natives while also transferring the possessions of land to migrants "in reality, if not in theory."⁵⁷ The mechanism in these three states of disallowing nontribal from owning land in the state is actually exercised not exclusively through the ILP system but by specific laws and other constitutional provisions. The sixteen-point agreement, for example, that led to the creation of Nagaland state set apart "the ownership and transfer of land and its resources" from the jurisdiction of the Union Parliament for the Nagaland Legislative Assembly.⁵⁸ From a distance, the three states of Nagaland, Mizoram, and Arunachal Pradesh are seen to be having the administrative capacity to police the migrants in their states. Therefore, what the ILP system does is lend a confidence that the tribes of the state are protected from interferences from without.

As state-controlled space in postcolonial India and its legal system encouraged encroachment of immigrants on common land of tribes in the region, the symptomatic relevance of the ILP system came to be seen in movements for demand of the Inner line in states where previously it has not existed.⁵⁹ In Manipur, an agitation headed by an umbrella organization of thirty smaller student and other organizations called the Joint Committee on the Inner Line Permit System (JCIPLS) has led a movement demanding the inner line since 2012. The agitators have complained that the population of the indigenous people has remained small while that of the outsiders in the state has been increasing. There is a fear of the "Tripura phenomenon," that natives of the state should be culturally and demographically replaced in their own land.⁶⁰ The same demand was being made in Meghalaya since much earlier, although in December 2013 the central government ruled out the possibility of creating the line in the state.⁶¹ The xenophobia surrounding the demands in these states has resulted in violence against migrant workers in Manipur and Meghalaya. It has been reported by the state intelligence that the JCIPLS's demand has been secretly driven by the armed secessionist group in Manipur called the UNLF.⁶²

The latest demand has been made in Assam state. In December 2016, a few organizations led by a group called the *Asom Jatiyabadi Yuba Chattra Parixod* made protests in New Delhi, asking for an inner line for Assam for the protection of Assamese natives from illegal immigrants into the state. It has been said that much of the violence in the Northeast region has been due to the inability to resolve the immigrations here. In Assam, the inconclusiveness of movements against immigrants since 1979 made the state a battleground of insurgency and counterinsurgency.⁶³ In this state, although there were in effect different categories of protections for the several communities of the state—a Bodoland Territorial Council for the Bodos, or the application of sixth schedule for certain tribes, an inner line had never been thought of for protection of the natives of Assam in general from the push of immigrants.⁶⁴ It is also to be kept in mind that in policy the inner line was never claimed to be an instrument for the purpose for which it is being usurped now in the demands made for it. Its use as an administrative tool for regulating peace in the frontier areas has changed into a measure of protection for even the nonfrontier. The inner line does not now regulate the frontier. It refrontierizes

the nonfrontier. The colonial nonfrontier space of Assam proper—the region of the Brahmaputra valley has been transformed into the situation of the frontier area, for the purpose of the demands made for the inner line in the state, requiring border policing for the maintenance of peace.

There is still an impermissibility of interaction of the nonfrontier and the frontier. The space of the postfrontier characterized by absence of any mark of change from having been a frontier in the past has not been dissolved. Instead, it has moved downhill to the plains, to the nonfrontier, to characterize even these areas in the form of a postcolonial frontier. The demands for inner line want to bring back that colonial distinction between two differently administered areas of the same government—the frontier and the nonfrontier by tracing such an arrangement over the natives and non-natives of the region. People of either side of the line would belong to two different categories that administratively do not mix well and therefore establish the administrative necessity of creating an artificial boundary between the inhabiting areas of the two. If the non-natives were to mix with the natives, as it was designed not to at the colonial demarcation of the inner line at the borders of nonfrontier areas of the Northeast in British-ruled India, it would lead to destabilization of peace from the perspective of the natives. The lawlessness of the hills frontier was at one time disallowed from traveling to the nonfrontier to disturb the law and order in existence in the area, through policing entries and exits, keeping a control on activities behind the line. That circumstance has been reinvented now in the reversed direction.

Conclusion

The frontier has come to be stagnant in Northeast India. It does not remove itself but reinvents itself for postcolonial communities that have felt marginalized in changing political circumstances. Although it was dismantled physically, the idea of the frontier as excluded space from the normal administration of the country has made a reappearance now. Wanting to be protected from the push of migrants, an inner line is expected to police their entries, exits, and involvement in areas behind the line just as it did in the colonial time. The demands made for it are symbolic of this frustrated inability of all to eject the colonial structure. The line itself is a colonial hangover, an administrative sediment that refuses to wash away and has not been dismantled by the postcolonial state. The peoples making demands for the line, alongside, have seen the use of the same colonial administrative tool as a fit instrument for the fixing of the regional problem of immigration. The British had at one time made the administration of peoples inhabiting on either side of the inner line a matter of differential rule, one needing the usual laws and rules that applied universally throughout the British administration of India and the other—a rule through personal touch of the government's local officers and which left considerable autonomy to the people for self-government.⁶⁵ The differential requirements in administration of the frontier and the nonfrontier areas have persisted to the extent that these differences are sought to be institutionalized in new forms through the symbolism of the inner line. It is merely one among other state policies such as the constitutional guarantee for Nagaland state or the general protections available under sixth schedule of the Indian Constitution that seek to protect the lands and rights of the natives of the states in Northeast India having these guarantees.

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29. *Ibid.*, 299.
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31. Gait, *A History of Assam*, 298–99.
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51. Bhubaneswar Bhattacharyya, *The Troubled Border* (Guwahati, India: Lawyer’s Book Stall, 1995), 12–15.
52. Assam as it existed at the time of Independence of India was constituted by the areas that have subsequently formed the states of Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Arunachal Pradesh, whereas the geographical term “Northeast” constituted these areas and the princely state of Manipur. Since independence the use of the term has included the states of Tripura and since lately, Sikkim in addition to the other six states.
53. For example, see Bhattacharyya, *The Troubled Border*, 1995.
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55. Baruah, *Post-frontier Blues*, 6–13.
56. I visited Kohima on two occasions between October 2014 and October 2015. The Inner Line Permit was not checked on both visits. It was the same when I traveled to Imphal (Manipur) by road in a shared taxi from Dimapur without carrying the ILP in June 2012 and in a bus journey in July 2017.
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63. Baruah, *Post-frontier Blues*, 42–47.
64. The Bodoland Territorial Council is a self-governing body of the Bodos within the state of Assam that has given the community the widest area of legislative jurisdiction so far given to any community in the state. The sixth schedule areas under the constitution of India are notified areas provided with special provisions for the administration of tribes.
65. Reid, “The Excluded Areas of Assam,” 21–24.

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