

SOVEREIGN INDIA'S INNER LINE REGIMES

By

Chandan S Nugyal

The Inner Line concept was evolved by the East India Company after it defeated the Burmese and took over the entire present North East India and deposed off the Ahom ruler of the Ahom Empire of Assam in the early 19th Century. The Company administration found that the Eastern Himalayan belt & the Patkai Range were occupied by numerous fierce tribes still living in the wild, who were isolated in their harsh demanding environment and had only their respective tribal identity and law. This of course did not apply to Manipur, which was a well-established independent kingdom but gave tribute to the Burmese King in Mandley at the time. The Company neither had the economic interest nor the wherewithal to intrude into this tribal belt and bring it under its administration. It found the tribes aggressive in nature who would often raid neighbours for heads and slaves.

So the Company established an inner line beyond which they told the tribes to do as they pleased provided they didn't carry out any raids into the Company territory. They could of course come into the Company territory in peace for whatever barter trade that they wished to do for their basic frugal necessities. Any Company area traders who went into the tribal areas for jungle produce did so at their own risk. Of course, the company charged them a "toll" and consequently gave them a permit to go across. This was just a convenient trade tax. It in no way gave any administrative or security cover to the few traders who ventured into the tribal areas.

To humor the tribal chiefs and thereby ensure peace with them, they were given a regular "tribute". The tribal chiefs also were required to reciprocate with suitable gifts for the Company Bahadur. So an honorable sovereign "equality" status was maintained. The tribe which violated the code of Company territory "off limits" by showing the sabers and dahos of their braves got punished by punitive columns which went across and burnt a number of their villages to bring them to heel.

This concept and mode was subsequently applied astride the Hindukush west of the Indus with the Pashtun & Baloch tribes when the Company assimilated North India to lean onto Afghanistan in their "Great Game" to checkmate the perceived threat of the Russians seeking the warm waters of the Arabian Sea.

In the Eastern Himalayas in today's Arunachal Pradesh there was an ongoing downward migration of people over many millennia from Tibet, thriving basic trade regularly monitored by the Tibetan administration and direct effective Tibetan administration in the Districts (Dzongs) of Tawang and Bomdila in the west till 1954 when the Indian administration established itself in these two districts. It is interesting that when the East India Company first went into Assam a Chinese force moved into Rima in Eastern Tibet opposite Walong poised to counter the Company should it venture north.

On independence, India continued the regime of Inner Line in the North East while focusing on progressively establishing administration in the tribal belt, developing defense related communications and developing a bonding Hindi based Hinduised education system particularly in Arunachal where Christian missionaries were not

allowed. The regime of Inner Line was partly protective for the tribals and dominantly for perceived security reasons. Sic! It continues so in today's space era even after 60 years of independence. Whether it has protected the tribals or not is debatable. It surely has helped a few in the region to exploit the restrictive environment for personal benefits. It certainly has glaringly prevented assimilation of the region in the national mainstream and has continued reinforcing its disputed status in the case of Arunachal and break away insurgencies elsewhere. Consequently, the Chinese surely have a strong claim on Arunachal well reinforced by Indian slippages.

The Nehruvian object of "protecting" the tribal culture and assets of their homeland exclusively for them is also very questionable. Walk into Arunachal today and you would see the tragic encroachment on the culture of these nature worshipers by Hindu and Christian faiths and institutions. Few of the younger generation still behold the "Sun & Moon" Gods or take pride in their tribal language and values. The visual media and Bollywood have brought the simple folks to the jean & suggestive provocative clothing and behavior culture. Progress... with the attendant change of values and ethos is inevitable. A road opens...it must...but it changes the society astride it. Dams are coming up...they are also required as a resource... they will dislocate people and cause them to loose their root values even though they would have lots of money to throw and blow. Most of the forest cover of the land is already gone with local front man assisting the outside businessman to make his buck with the necessary grease money flowing into the right pockets.

Surely, keeping up the barrier of the Inner Line has not stopped change. It has just obstructed assimilation of a land and its people in the national mainstream. They look at people from rest of the country as "Indians"....implying that they are not only different but have an exclusive "non Indian" identity of their own, despite the largesse that has flowed to them ...educational and job reservations...funds. Imagine how does an "Indian" feel getting an Inner Line Pass which is a greater hurdle then traveling any where abroad. And how does a foreigner feel and infer when he is required to obtain a special restricted area or protected area permit after getting an Indian visa to get into Arunachal.

Arunachal wants to be the world class tourist destination....an impossible dream with its Inner Line regime. It is time the leadership of Arunachal and the mandarins of Delhi wake up to today's realities and shed irrelevant legacies and shackles of the Raj period.