

The “Excluded Area” Policy in the Naga Hills: Colonial Administration and Its Impact on Naga Society

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Abstract

The “Excluded Area” policy introduced by the British colonial government in India played a major role in shaping the political, social, and cultural development of the Naga Hills. Implemented under the Government of India Act 1935, the policy separated certain tribal regions from direct provincial administration. The British justified this decision by claiming that tribal societies required protection from outside influence and exploitation. However, the policy also helped the colonial government maintain strategic control over frontier regions while limiting political participation by local communities. In the Naga Hills, the Excluded Area system preserved many traditional customs and institutions but also isolated the region from mainstream political developments in British India. This article examines the origins, objectives, implementation, and long-term impact of the Excluded Area policy in the Naga Hills and explains how it contributed to the rise of Naga political consciousness and identity.

Keywords: Excluded Area Policy, Naga Hills, British Colonial Rule, Tribal Administration, Northeast India, Colonial Frontier Policy, Naga Identity, Government of India Act 1935, British India, Naga Political Movement

Introduction

During British rule in India, the northeastern frontier posed unique administrative challenges because of its difficult terrain, ethnic diversity, and strong tribal traditions. Among these frontier regions, the Naga Hills occupied a particularly important position due to their strategic location between British India and Burma (now Myanmar). The British encountered resistance from several Naga tribes during the nineteenth century and gradually established administrative control over the area. As colonial rule expanded, British officials developed special administrative policies for tribal regions. One such measure was the Excluded Area policy, formally introduced under the Government of India Act of 1935. This policy had a lasting effect on the political and social development of the Naga Hills and influenced later movements for autonomy and self-determination among the Nagas.

Historical Background of British Rule in the Naga Hills

British involvement in the Naga Hills began in the early nineteenth century after the expansion of British influence in Assam following the Treaty of Yandabo. The British sought to secure trade routes and protect tea plantations in Assam from raids originating in the hill regions. The Nagas were not politically unified but consisted of many independent tribes and villages, each governed through customary laws and village councils. British expansion into the hills led to frequent conflicts, including military expeditions against villages that resisted colonial authority. One important episode was the resistance of the Angami Nagas at Khonoma Resistance during the late nineteenth century. By the 1880s, the British had established administrative control over much of the Naga Hills, though several areas remained only partially governed. The colonial administration soon realized that ordinary legal and political systems used in other parts of India were difficult to apply in tribal regions.

The Excluded Area Policy

Meaning of the Policy

The Excluded Area policy referred to a special administrative arrangement under which certain tribal regions were removed from the authority of provincial legislatures and placed directly under the control of the Governor. In these areas, ordinary laws passed by provincial governments did not automatically apply unless specifically approved by the Governor. Under the Government of India Act of 1935, the Naga Hills were classified as an “Excluded Area,”

which means: Limited participation in provincial politics, Direct administration by the Governor of Assam, Restricted entry of outsiders, Protection of tribal customs and land systems, Reduced interference from Indian political organizations. The British claimed that tribal communities were socially and culturally distinct and therefore required separate administration.

Objectives of the Excluded Area Policy

1. Strategic Frontier Control

The Naga Hills bordered Burma and formed part of a sensitive frontier region. The British wanted stable control over this area to protect imperial interests and prevent external threats.

2. Administrative Convenience

The difficult geography and decentralized tribal structure made direct administration challenging. Special governance allowed colonial officers greater flexibility.

3. Protection of Tribal Communities

British officials argued that tribal societies needed protection from exploitation by moneylenders, traders, and political groups from the plains.

4. Limiting Nationalist Influence

The policy also reduced the spread of the Indian nationalist movement into frontier regions. By isolating the Naga Hills politically, the British limited anti-colonial mobilization.

Impact on Naga Society

Preservation of Traditional Institutions

One important effect of the policy was the preservation of traditional village governance systems. Naga customary laws, village councils, and tribal practices continued with limited interference from colonial legal systems.

Growth of Christianity and Education

Although political access remained restricted, Christian missionaries were allowed to work in the region. Missionary schools contributed to literacy, education, and the spread of Christianity among many Naga communities. Over time, this created a new educated class that played a major role in political movements.

Political Isolation

The Excluded Area policy separated the Naga Hills from mainstream political developments occurring in British India. Many Nagas remained outside representative institutions and nationalist debates that shaped the rest of the country.

Emergence of Naga Political Identity

Ironically, the same policy that isolated the Nagas also encouraged the development of a distinct political identity. Organizations such as the Naga Club emerged during the colonial period. In 1929, the Naga Club submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission requesting that the Nagas be allowed to determine their own future rather than being merged with other Indian populations. This marked an important stage in the growth of modern Naga political consciousness.

Criticism of the Policy

Historians and scholars have offered different interpretations of the Excluded Area policy. Some argue that the policy protected tribal customs and prevented exploitation by outside groups. Others believe that it was mainly designed to strengthen colonial control and divide frontier communities from the wider anti-colonial movement. Critics also point out that the policy slowed economic and infrastructural development in the region because the British invested minimally in roads, industries, and political institutions.

Long-Term Legacy

The legacy of the Excluded Area policy continued even after Indian independence in 1947. Many political debates concerning autonomy, self-governance, and tribal rights in Northeast India can be traced back to colonial administrative arrangements. The policy contributed to: The growth of separate Naga political identity, Demands for autonomy and self-determination, Special constitutional protections for tribal areas, Continued emphasis on

customary law and local governance. Modern administrative systems in Nagaland still reflect some aspects of these historical arrangements, especially regarding land ownership, customary law, and tribal institutions.

Conclusion

The Excluded Area policy in the Naga Hills was one of the most significant colonial administrative measures in Northeast India. While the British presented it as a protective system for tribal societies, it also served strategic and political interests of the colonial state. The policy preserved traditional institutions and limited external interference, but it also isolated the region from broader political developments in India. Most importantly, the policy played a central role in shaping modern Naga political identity. The historical experiences of exclusion, separate administration, and frontier governance influenced later demands for autonomy and continue to affect political discussions in the region today. Therefore, the Excluded Area policy remains a crucial subject for understanding both colonial history and contemporary politics in Northeast India.

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