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From NEFA to Arunachal Pradesh: The Path to Statehood (1947–1987)

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Introduction

The North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA), which later became the state of Arunachal Pradesh, holds a crucial place in India's geopolitical framework. Nestled in the eastern Himalayas, NEFA occupies a strategically sensitive position, sharing international borders with China, Bhutan, and Myanmar. Its rugged terrain, diverse tribal communities, and remote location have historically made it a unique frontier zone—distinct from the political and cultural mainstream of India. Understanding NEFA requires more than a regional analysis; it demands a deeper appreciation of its historical evolution, colonial legacy, post-independence reorganization, and current geopolitical relevance. For decades, this region has stood at the crossroads of regional diplomacy, ethnic diversity, and national security. The story of NEFA is not just about territorial administration but about India's ongoing efforts to integrate its frontiers, manage cross-border tensions, and ensure socio-political stability in an area marked by both opportunity and vulnerability.

The roots of NEFA's geopolitical importance can be traced back to the colonial period, when British administrators defined the outer boundaries of the empire through policies that excluded tribal areas from direct control. The McMahon Line, drawn in 1914 during the Simla Convention between British India and Tibet, marked the boundary between Tibet and NEFA, but this line was never recognized by China. After independence in 1947, the Government of India inherited this contested frontier, which became a focal point for India-China relations. The incorporation of Tibet by the People's Republic of China in 1950 heightened India's security concerns and placed NEFA at the center of diplomatic and military strategies. As a buffer zone and the easternmost extension of Indian territory, NEFA's significance grew with the increasing tensions between the two Asian powers, especially during the 1962 Sino-Indian War when China briefly occupied parts of the region.

Beyond its strategic location, NEFA is also important for its ethnic and cultural richness. Home to numerous tribes with distinct languages, customs, and governance systems, the region poses unique challenges in terms of integration and development. The Indian government has had to navigate these complexities with caution, aiming to modernize the region without disrupting its traditional fabric. Efforts were made to improve education, healthcare, infrastructure, and local governance, while also maintaining a delicate balance with tribal autonomy. This dual objective—preserving identity while promoting integration—has been central to India's policy in NEFA since its creation in 1951.

Today, as India strengthens its position in the Indo-Pacific region and faces renewed challenges from an assertive China, the geopolitical value of Arunachal Pradesh (formerly NEFA) has become even more pronounced. The region serves as a key frontier in India's defense strategy and as a potential gateway for regional cooperation with Southeast Asia under the Act East Policy. Thus, understanding NEFA is essential for comprehending the broader issues of border management, national security, and regional diplomacy. This paper seeks to explore NEFA's formation, colonial legacy, post-independence evolution, and contemporary significance to highlight why this frontier region remains a vital part of India's geopolitical vision.

Colonial Legacy and the Formation of North-East Frontier Tracts (1914–1947)

The North-East Frontier Tracts (NEFT) were created during the British colonial period in India as a way to manage and control the northeastern border areas of Assam. These regions were home to many tribal communities and were located in remote and difficult terrains, making them hard to govern using regular administrative systems. Between 1914 and 1947, the British made several changes to the way these regions were governed. These changes were not only about administration but were also connected to larger concerns of defense, diplomacy, and colonial expansion. The creation and control of the NEFT left behind a legacy that continued to shape the region even after India became independent in 1947. This essay explores the history, reasons, and impact of British rule in the region and how it led to the formation of the North-East Frontier Tracts.

The history of British interest in the northeast region of India began in the early 19th century. After the British East India Company took control of Assam in 1826 following the Treaty of Yandaboo, they began to explore the hilly and forested regions to the north and east of the Brahmaputra Valley. These areas were inhabited by various tribal groups such as the Abor (now called Adi), Mishmi, Dafla (now Nyishi), Aka, and many others. The British were initially hesitant to interfere in these regions due to the rough terrain, lack of resources, and fear of resistance from the local tribes. But over time, they realized the strategic importance of these areas. These hills formed a natural frontier with Tibet, China, and Burma (now Myanmar), and the British feared that rival powers might try to enter India through these areas.

In 1914, the British decided to reorganize the frontier regions of Assam by separating certain areas from the regular administrative system. This marked the official creation of the North-East Frontier Tracts. These tracts included the tribal areas that were previously under the control of the Dibrugarh and Lakhimpur districts. The tracts were divided into two parts: the Central and Eastern Sections. The Central Section included the areas of the Abors and Mishmis, while the Eastern Section included the territory of the Nagas and other hill tribes. Later in 1919, these sections were reorganized into three

distinct tracts: the Sadiya Frontier Tract, the Balipara Frontier Tract, and the Lakhimpur Frontier Tract. This division made it easier for the British to control and monitor the frontier zones.

The main aim behind the formation of these frontier tracts was to create a protective barrier between British India and neighboring foreign territories. The British did not want to fully control these areas like the rest of India. Instead, they followed a policy of indirect rule. This meant they allowed the tribal communities to continue with their traditional ways of life, but at the same time, they posted British officers, known as Political Officers or Assistant Political Officers, who would supervise the area and report to the higher colonial authorities. These officers had special powers to handle disputes, maintain law and order, and ensure that the tribal people did not come into conflict with the people of the plains.

The British also wanted to avoid direct confrontation with the tribes. In many cases, the tribes resisted British entry into their territories. There were incidents such as the Abor Expedition of 1911-12, which showed the dangers of trying to control the hills through military force. So, the British preferred a softer approach by offering gifts, trade, and friendly relations. This was often called the “policy of minimum interference.” However, in practice, the British still maintained strong control through the Political Officers, who acted as both administrators and military commanders when needed.

Another major reason for forming the NEFT was the British concern about foreign powers. During this time, China was trying to assert its influence over Tibet, and there were fears that the Chinese or other powers might use the frontier areas to invade India. The British were especially concerned about the region near the McMahon Line, which was drawn in 1914 during the Simla Convention between British India and Tibet. This line was meant to mark the boundary between Tibet and the tribal areas under British control, but China never accepted this line. The British, therefore, felt the need to strengthen their presence in the frontier region to prevent any future threats. The creation of NEFT helped them keep a close watch on the borders without fully integrating the region into the regular administration.

The colonial administration also passed several laws to control the frontier regions. The Government of India Act, 1919, placed these tracts under the control of the Governor of Assam, and the Government of India Act, 1935, later classified them as “Excluded Areas.” This meant that these areas were not part of any elected legislature and were directly governed by the Governor. The people of these regions did not have representation in the government and had little say in how they were ruled. This legal separation showed how the British viewed the tribal areas as different from the rest of India and tried to keep them isolated from mainstream politics and development.

The policy of isolation had both positive and negative effects. On the one hand, the British did not force the tribal people to follow new laws or change their customs. This helped preserve many traditional cultures, languages, and ways of life. On the other hand, it also meant that these regions were neglected in terms of development. There were very few schools, hospitals, or roads, and the people remained economically and socially backward. This neglect created a gap between the hill tribes and the people of the plains, which became a major issue after independence.

In the 1940s, as India’s struggle for independence grew stronger, there was also increasing attention on the frontier areas. British officials and Indian nationalists began to discuss what would happen to the NEFT after independence. Some tribal leaders feared that they would lose their autonomy if they became part of India, while others welcomed the idea of joining the Indian Union. To prepare for this, British administrators like Sir Robert Reid and later Sir Andrew Clow made efforts to understand the tribal societies better and to build trust among them. They introduced some educational and welfare programs, though on a very small scale.

When India gained independence in 1947, the NEFT did not immediately become part of any state. Instead, it continued to be administered as a separate entity under the Ministry of External Affairs. It was only later, in 1954, that the NEFT was renamed as the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA), and eventually, it became the Union Territory of Arunachal Pradesh in 1972, and a full-fledged state in 1987.

The colonial legacy of the NEFT is still visible today. The special administrative structure, the lack of early development, and the sense of being different from the rest of India are all results of the policies that the British introduced between 1914 and 1947. The focus on indirect rule and border security over integration and development created deep-rooted challenges for the region. Even after independence, the Indian government had to work hard to build roads, schools, and healthcare systems in the area. It also had to find ways to include the tribal communities in the democratic process while respecting their unique identities.

At the same time, the strategic importance of the region, which the British recognized over a century ago, remains very relevant today. The long border with China continues to be a source of tension, especially since China still claims parts of Arunachal Pradesh as its own territory. India’s efforts to build infrastructure, promote connectivity, and secure its borders are all part of a larger strategy that has its roots in the colonial period. The creation of NEFT laid the foundation for India’s modern frontier policy, and understanding this history is important to understand current issues in the region.

India’s Independence and the Future of Frontier Regions (1947)

When India gained independence in 1947, the country faced many challenges. One of the most important challenges was deciding the future of the frontier regions, especially in the northeast. These areas, like the North-East Frontier Tracts (NEFT), were not fully integrated into British India’s regular administration. They were ruled separately and treated as “Excluded Areas” under the Government of India Act, 1935. Because of this, the people living in these regions had little contact with the mainstream political, social, and economic developments that were taking place in other parts of India.

The Indian government knew that the integration of the frontier regions had to be handled very carefully. The people of these areas had their own traditions, languages, and cultures. Many of them lived in remote villages in the hills and forests. They did not feel connected to the rest of the country. Some tribes even feared that after independence, they might lose their autonomy or be forced to follow unfamiliar laws and customs. To reduce these fears, the Indian government followed a cautious and sensitive approach.

After independence, the North-East Frontier Tracts were placed under the direct control of the Ministry of External Affairs instead of being made part of Assam or any other state. This was done because the central government believed that these regions were not ready for full political integration. At the same time, the government wanted to maintain peace and friendship with the tribal people and avoid any conflict. The responsibility for governing these areas was given to Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officers known as Political Officers. These officers worked to understand the local customs and establish trust with the tribal communities.

One of the most important people involved in shaping the policy for these frontier regions was Verrier Elwin. He was a British-born anthropologist who became an Indian citizen and advised Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru on tribal affairs. Elwin believed that the tribal people should be allowed to develop in their own way and at their own pace. He was against forcing modern ideas or development on them too quickly. He promoted the idea of creating “protected areas” where tribal life could continue without outside interference. Nehru agreed with this idea and supported policies that respected tribal identity while slowly introducing education, healthcare, and other services.

The frontier regions also gained importance because of their location. After independence, India had to protect its borders with China, Burma (now Myanmar), and Bhutan. The northeastern frontier was long and difficult to guard. In 1949, the Chinese government took control of Tibet, which increased India’s concern about security. There were fears that China might try to cross into Indian territory through the frontier regions. This led the Indian government to focus more attention on developing and securing these areas.

In 1951, the North-East Frontier Tracts were reorganized and brought under the administrative control of the Governor of Assam. However, they were still treated as a separate area. In 1954, the name of the region was changed from NEFT to North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA). The Government did not merge it with Assam because it wanted to keep full control and manage it carefully due to its strategic location. The area was kept under the Ministry of External Affairs, which showed how important it was from a security point of view.

Even though the government wanted to protect the tribal culture, it also understood the need for development. So, during the 1950s and 1960s, the government started building roads, schools, and health centers. It trained local people to take up government jobs and encouraged them to participate in the administration. Slowly, efforts were made to bring the tribal communities into the mainstream without hurting their traditions.

The situation changed in 1962 when India and China fought a war over border disputes. The Chinese army invaded parts of NEFA and advanced into Indian territory. Although they later withdrew, the war exposed India’s weak infrastructure and poor communication in the border areas. After the war, the Indian government increased its efforts to build roads, improve transport, and strengthen military presence in the region. This event made it clear that frontier areas were not just about tribal welfare, but also about national security.

In the years after the war, India worked harder to bring the frontier regions closer to the rest of the country. In 1972, NEFA became a Union Territory and was renamed Arunachal Pradesh. This change allowed for more direct administration and gave people a chance to participate in the political process. Finally, in 1987, Arunachal Pradesh became a full-fledged state of India. This marked the completion of its long journey from an isolated frontier region to an important and recognized part of the Indian Union.

Creation of NEFA: Administrative Reorganization (1951)

After India gained independence in 1947, one of the major challenges faced by the Indian government was the proper administration of its border areas. The northeastern frontier, which had earlier been administered under colonial structures as the North-East Frontier Tracts (NEFT), needed to be reorganized and brought under a more formal and planned system of governance. These areas were remote, underdeveloped, and home to various indigenous tribes. Due to their geographical location near Tibet (now under Chinese control), Burma (now Myanmar), and Bhutan, they held immense strategic importance. In 1951, the Government of India officially reorganized this frontier region and created a new administrative unit known as the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA). This step was a turning point in the governance of the region and played a major role in India’s frontier policy in the decades that followed.

Before 1951, the region now known as Arunachal Pradesh was administered as a collection of frontier tracts. During British rule, the area had been divided into the Sadiya Frontier Tract, the Balipara Frontier Tract, the Abor Hills District, the Mishmi Hills District, and the Tirap Frontier Tract. These areas were governed separately from the rest of Assam and classified as “Excluded Areas” under the Government of India Act, 1935. The British followed a policy of non-interference, leaving tribal communities largely untouched except in matters of security or trade. This system allowed the British to maintain control while avoiding direct involvement in the internal affairs of the hill tribes.

After independence, this arrangement continued for a short period under the Ministry of External Affairs. However, the Government of India soon realized the need for a more coordinated and unified administration in the region. The border with China had become a serious concern, especially after the People’s Republic of China took control of Tibet in 1950. India was unsure of China’s future intentions, and the security of the northeastern frontier became an urgent matter. Therefore, administrative reorganization was necessary not only for development but also for defense.

In 1951, the Indian government reorganized these various tracts into a single entity called the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA). This move was carried out through an official notification under the authority of the Governor of Assam, who continued to act as an agent of the President of India in matters related to NEFA. The new structure merged the five frontier tracts into six administrative divisions: Kameng Frontier Division, Subansiri Frontier Division, Siang Frontier Division, Lohit Frontier Division, Tirap Frontier Division, and Tuensang Frontier Division. Later, the Tuensang division was separated and became part of Nagaland, while the remaining five divisions formed the core of what would later become Arunachal Pradesh.

This reorganization brought several changes to the way the region was governed. First, the position of Political Officers was replaced with Deputy Commissioners, who were given greater administrative powers and responsibilities. These officers were from the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) and worked under the guidance of the Ministry of External Affairs. Their job was to ensure peace and stability in the region, manage relations with tribal communities, and carry out development work. At the same time, the Indian Army and paramilitary forces played an important role in maintaining security and establishing India’s presence in this sensitive border area.

Another important figure during this time was Dr. Verrier Elwin, an anthropologist and advisor to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru on tribal affairs. Elwin’s ideas influenced the government’s policy towards the tribal people of NEFA. He believed that the tribes should not be forced to change their way of life quickly. Instead, he supported the idea of “tribal self-development,” where change would happen gradually and peacefully. Nehru accepted this philosophy and emphasized the need to protect tribal culture, avoid exploitation, and focus on welfare measures like education, healthcare, and communication without destroying the traditional lifestyles of the people.

The NEFA administration was given special status. Unlike other parts of the country, NEFA was directly controlled by the central government through the Ministry of External Affairs. The region did not have elected representatives, and laws passed by the Indian Parliament did not automatically apply

there. The administration was guided more by executive orders and local customs than by national legislation. This unique structure was meant to give flexibility in governance and respect local traditions while allowing the central government to maintain strategic control over the area.

In terms of development, the early years after the creation of NEFA focused mainly on improving communication and connectivity. The terrain of the region was very challenging, with high mountains, dense forests, and poor roads. Building roads, airstrips, and communication lines became a priority. These were not only important for the movement of officials and supplies but also for national defense. The Border Roads Organisation (BRO), established in 1960, played a major role in constructing roads in NEFA. At the same time, small efforts were made to open schools, health centers, and training institutions for local youth.

However, the peaceful development of NEFA faced a serious challenge in 1962 when India and China fought a war over the border issue. Chinese forces crossed the McMahon Line and entered deep into NEFA territory, capturing areas like Tawang and other key locations. The Indian forces were not well-prepared, and the lack of infrastructure made it difficult to defend the region effectively. Although China later withdrew from the captured areas, the war was a wake-up call for the Indian government. It exposed the weaknesses in both defense and administration in the frontier region.

After the 1962 war, there was a major shift in India's policy towards NEFA. The government started investing more in infrastructure, defense, and governance. The Ministry of External Affairs continued to administer the area until 1965. After that, the responsibility was transferred to the Ministry of Home Affairs, and NEFA was brought closer to mainstream Indian administration. Greater efforts were made to involve local people in governance and development. Training centers were set up to prepare tribal youth for administrative roles, and community development programs were expanded.

In 1972, NEFA became a Union Territory and was renamed Arunachal Pradesh. This marked the next phase of political development. The Union Territory got its own legislature, and gradually, local leaders started participating in governance. The region began to receive more attention in national policies and budgets. Finally, in 1987, Arunachal Pradesh was granted full statehood, becoming the 24th state of the Indian Union.

Looking back, the creation of NEFA in 1951 was an important step in India's strategy to manage and secure its northeastern frontier. It was not just an administrative reform but also a political and strategic decision. The area, which had once been isolated and treated as an excluded zone, was slowly brought into the fold of the Indian nation. The process was slow and cautious, shaped by respect for tribal culture, the need for national security, and the desire for peaceful integration.

The administrative reorganization of 1951 laid the foundation for this journey. It gave the government a structure to manage the frontier, build relationships with tribal communities, and respond to threats from across the border. It also provided a model for how to govern remote and sensitive regions in a way that balances development, cultural respect, and national interest. Today, Arunachal Pradesh continues to play a vital role in India's defense and diplomacy, and its path to statehood began with the important step taken in 1951—the creation of NEFA.