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Between Protection and Integration: Rethinking the Inner Line Permit Regime in Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract

Arunachal Pradesh is currently undergoing unprecedented infrastructural development. Projects such as the Arunachal Frontier Highway, strategic trans-basin hydropower dams and the Sela tunnel have been initiated as part of the central government's national security measures against Chinese territorial claims along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). However, this rhetoric of development stands in sharp contrast to the demographic anxieties and demands for stricter protection against the surge of illegal immigration into the state. The ongoing frictions between the civil society groups and the government have renewed attention on one of the most controversial policies of the colonial state in the region – the Inner Line Permit (ILP). This Issue Brief argues that contemporary 'outsider' anxiety and immigration concerns are not recent phenomena but result from inherent contradictions within the very structure of the ILP system. This contradiction finds expression in recent instances of infrastructure-driven labour inflows, expired permits and unauthorized constructions, and the consequent protests, *bandhs* and *hartals* by various organizations of indigenous communities. As the state government pushes for connectivity and the gradual defrontiering of the region, the indigenous people's call for the protection of their identity and territory has intensified, not driven by connectivity per se but by apprehensions of demographic instabilities. This in turn has transformed the ILP from a state regulated mechanism into a contested site of political negotiation between the state government and indigenous civil society groups.

Keywords: Inner Line Permit; Arunachal Pradesh; borders; identity; frontiers; national security

The Paradox of Development and Protection

In June 2026, the Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh, Pema Khandu, announced the formation of four High-Powered Committees (HPCs) to re-evaluate infiltration issues, make the Inner Line Permit (ILP) system more stringent, and re-verify Scheduled Tribe (ST) certificates to preserve the rights of indigenous people. Khandu announced that each committee would be headed by a cabinet minister and involve representatives from the Scheduled Tribe Bachao Andolan (STBAC), All Arunachal Pradesh Students Union (AAPSU), and Arunachal Indigenous Tribes Forum (AITF), legal experts, women representatives and research scholars to ensure inclusivity (*India TodayNE*, 2026).

The committees have been tasked with the examination of the patterns of immigration, and recommending stricter rules for border control, biometric and digital verification systems and

penalties against forged identity documents and undocumented settlement networks. This legislative decision followed a series of 36-hour shutdowns (*bandhs*) by various civil society groups, under the leadership of the Arunachal Pradesh Indigenous Youth Organization (APIYO) in the Itanagar Capital Region (ICR). These *bandhs,* culminating with the formation of the HPC, go back to January 2026 when the APIYO raised concerns over the construction of unauthorized mosques and madrasas in Itanagar. The state responded by conducting a thorough survey and subsequently sealing 12 out 15 illegal mosque structures within the ICR. The remaining three remained unresolved, provoking another call for *bandh* by the APIYO in June. The APIYO further raised concerns over the influx of Bangladeshi and Rohingya immigrants in recent times. It also rejected the HPC formed to deal with these issues, calling for immediate state action. It demanded immediate enforcement of existing laws against illegal occupation of land and demolition of the unauthorized mosques as well as an extensive verification drive covering residents, labourers, business operators and ILP holders (*Arunachal Times*, 2026).

Tensions between the state and the civil society over the presence and regulation of outsiders in Arunachal Pradesh are not new. They have periodically resurfaced at various points since Arunachal Pradesh acquired statehood in 1987. For instance, in the 1980s and 1990s, the AAPSU launched intense agitations against the Chakma and Hajong refugees from Bangladesh who had settled in the 1960s (Chakma. 2025, pp.28-29). More recently, in 2018, the AAPSU started 'Operation Clean Drive' fearing the possibility of an influx from Assam of those whose names were excluded from the National Register of India (NRC) (Singh, 2025, p.10). However, while the past issues were related to exceptional cases of refugee crises, current problems are tied to the ongoing state government led development and connectivity processes. Thus, what distinguishes the current protests is the scale and speed of infrastructure driven inflows since 2020 and the state government's limited capacity to make an effective transition to the promised digital ILP regulation system (discussed below).

Driven by the intense geopolitical competition along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with China, especially after the 2020 Galwan stand-off, the Indian central government has launched an unprecedented infrastructure campaign across Arunachal Pradesh. This campaign includes the Rs. 27,000 crore, 1,748-kilometre National Highway (NH) 913 and the Vibrant Village Programme (VVP) to counter China's territorial claims and expansionist policies in the border. The state made a significant breakthrough with the inauguration of the Sela Tunnel in 2024 to ensure an all-weather connectivity to Tawang. Similarly, the state has initiated the 'Decade of Hydropower' investing Rs.1.9 lakh crore in mega hydropower projects, such as the 11,000 MW Siang Upper Multipurpose Project (SUMP). These are responses to China's upstream projects on the Yarlung Tsangpo river. In May 2026, the Indian government allocated another Rs.4,900 crores to the state under the 'Pride of Hills' initiative to target 'critical infrastructure and development gaps' (*Economic Times*, 2026). The centre's involvement since then has transformed the way Arunachal Pradesh was once perceived and accessed. The colonial construction of this Himalayan frontier as a peripheral and remote space and the paternalistic ethos of the post-independent Nehruvian-Elwin framework are being increasingly challenged by the contemporary narrative of strategic connectivity.

However, these new transformations have also deepened the indigenous communities' concerns over their land rights, tribal identity and cultural heritage. With the frontier opening up, inflows of people, in the form of tourists, or labourers have increased substantially since 2020, alongside the pace of infrastructure development discussed above. Labourers, especially from outside the state, have assumed utmost importance in the realization of the multiple mega projects currently underway.

Due to these factors, the pre-existing manual ILP system became inadequate as it could only regulate the entry of people into the state. The AP government announced complete digitization of the Inner Line system in 2022 by replacing traditional paper permits and integrating Aadhaar authentication and QR codes at all entry points to prevent the use of duplicate permits. Additionally, employers bringing labourers from outside the state are required to formally sponsor their employees to obtain a work permit. These policies are intended to strengthen regulatory control amid the growing inflow of outsiders, particularly in the context of large-scale infrastructure and construction projects.

However, this transition has exposed significant operational and structural challenges. The state currently lacks the digital infrastructure required to manage the system efficiently, resulting in frequent delays and technical disruptions. A majority of permits are still acquired manually at various border checkpoints like Bhalukpong, Ruksin, Balemu and so on. Thus, the issue of regulating the exit status of non-local populations remains unresolved. For instance, several cases have been reported in which labourers brought in for some work would simply switch districts once their permit expired to avoid being sent back. The tension between the need for greater connectivity of the frontier while preserving its cultural and ethnic distinctiveness further complicates the implementation of the ILP.

To understand the current issues related to the ILP and to find an effective way forward, there is a need to move beyond contemporary administrative rhetoric and trace the deep-seated historical and geographical contradictions that have governed this frontier for over a century and a half.

This Issue Brief argues that such differences, although more pronounced in recent times, actually result from the very structure of the ILP system designed by the British Raj. Understanding the colonial design is crucial because the ILP's core logic of separating the settled population from the unsettled was marked by contradictions that remained unresolved when the system was incorporated into the post-Independence framework. Thus, while the purpose of the ILP changed, the structure remained largely similar to its colonial origins. These structural problems became apparent when the frontier assumed an important place in the discourse of development and the central government's policy of 'nationalizing space' in Arunachal Pradesh (Baruah, 2007). This policy was further tied to the broader concerns of national security.

Colonial Origins and Contradictions

In the colonial imagination, the North-East frontier was both a zone of opportunity due to its strategic and resource potential, and a landscape marked by volatility, danger and unruliness. Prior to the colonial intervention in Assam, the relationship between the hills and plains was marked by "overlapping territoriality and sovereignty" (Misra, 2011, p. 56). The colonial state, through a series of policies, sought to create a distinct separation between the settled plains, i.e., their limits of jurisdiction, and the wild, unsettled hills which lay outside their sovereign authority but which were nonetheless important for strategic and commercial motives. As the empire's 'resource frontier' (Tsing, 2003, p.5100) consolidated, the porosity and liminality of the unadministered areas posed serious challenges. Frequent confrontations of tea planters and rubber speculators with the frontier tribes meant that the state was "dramatically present and frequently ineffective" (Simpson, 2021, p.5) in the marginal spaces. This was precisely the backdrop of the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation Act of 1873. The regulation was originally meant to protect the interests of the rubber and elephant dealers in Cachar and Sylhet districts of Assam (then a part of Bengal province) through the system of an ILP.

Contrary to the claims of the colonial state, the ILP was neither implemented to protect the frontier tribes from exploitation nor was it designed to isolate the plains from the hills (Hussain, 2023, p.268). Although, one of the purposes was indeed to prevent the friction between the European planters and the hill tribes.

The regulation, framed under Act 33 Vic Chap 3, consisted of 11 sections of which Section 2 stated that the local government could 'prescribe and alter from time to time' a line to be called the "Inner Line" that prohibited all British subjects or any persons residing or passing through districts or to bypass the line without a pass (Mackenzie, 1884, pp.89-90). Section 7 similarly made it illegal for non-residents from acquiring the rights and products of the land beyond the said Inner Line. Since the beginning, the "Inner Line" remained an ambiguous demarcation marked by frequent revisions and shifts, to suit the dynamic process of colonial territorial and commercial integration. This system was justified by the narrative of tribal protection, which was reproduced, albeit with a few periodic variations in the post-independent period.

The ILP has been central to the administrative and constitutional safeguards of several North Eastern states, including Arunachal Pradesh. The entire region of North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) was recognized as a tribal area after independence and the Inner Line Regulation was seen as a protective tool for indigenous rights and culture. Until NEFA became a Union Territory in 1972, the ILP regime was controlled by the Governor of Assam. Thereafter, it was under the jurisdiction of a centrally appointed Lieutenant Governor and finally, when Arunachal Pradesh acquired statehood in 1987, the ILP control was passed over to the Chief Minister and his bureaucrats. Despite these changes, the structure of the ILP remained more or less the same since the colonial period.

However, the constitutional validity of the ILP in NEFA attracted many debates throughout the 1950s and 1960s. For instance, Lok Sabha proceedings often had polarizing views about the

relevance of the ILP. Ram Manohar Lohia, socialist and a member of the Lok Sabha, who visited Jairampur in NEFA in 1958, strongly opposed the ILP system viewing it as a violation to freedom of movement and national integration (Guha, 2010, p.386). While Nehru staunchly rejected the idea of preserving the NEFA as a 'museum piece', he also emphasized the need to restrict the entry of outsiders arguing that their presence could disrupt local ways of life (Nehru, 1963, pp.359-360). Thus, the Nehruvian state sought to promote connectivity without initiating mass development schemes that could trigger a large-scale demographic influx. Thus, the state leaned more towards protectionism and adopted a model of slow-paced development. This debate was carried out even in the early 2000s, with policy analysts arguing that 'rigid barriers' resist the process of integrating the local economies to the dynamic world economies (Sachdeva, 2000). While such a model suited the specific economic and geopolitical conditions of the time, the present period requires a different set of policy responses.

In this era of rapid infrastructure development and greater mobility, to what extent can the state sustain a policy of regulated entry without escalating the tensions between economic integration and indigenous demands of protection?

Rethinking Implementation: Limits and Possibilities

Since its inception, the ILP functioned as a mechanism of topographical and civilizational separation, distinguishing the settled plains people from the unsettled 'frontiers'. Implicit in this framework was the expectation for the population beyond the line to remain isolated. However, the forces of development and national security have only complicated the unresolved contradictions of the ILP. As discussed in the previous sections, the tensions between developmentalism and protectionism have only intensified the relevance of the ILP as a regulatory mechanism and a means of sustaining public confidence in Arunachal Pradesh.

As Sanjib Baruah argues in *Durable Disorder* (2007), despite the staunch attempts of Arunachali political elites to defend the protective discrimination regime, they may prove to be insufficient against the logic of demographic change that developmentalism entails. In the 'high politics of nationalizing space' (Baruah, 2007), the rights and the interests of the indigenous population, environmental considerations and alternative models of development may assume a secondary position to the state's security driven priorities. Arunachal Pradesh's ongoing challenges in effectively implementing the renewed ILP regime reflect the continued relevance of this argument.

It would thus be overly reductive to suggest any straightforward policy recommendations given the complexity and historical depth of the issue. Moreover, the state has, in recent times, actively updated the ILP regulations to deal with the challenges through fresh guidelines, digitization and more recently, the formation of the HPCs. The problem therefore lies in enforcement or implementation.

As per the *Guidelines for the Enforcement of the Inner Line Regulation in Arunachal Pradesh,* 2026, the rules for the work ILP clearly holds the sponsors accountable for the workers they bring into the state (*Government of Arunachal Pradesh*, 2026). Similarly, the responsibility of ensuring that the workers do not remain beyond the validity of the ILP also falls on the respective sponsors. Provisions such as periodic and 'surprise' inspections by police teams are already outlined in the Official Guidelines. However, the frequency of these visits and their reach remain inconsistent in practice.

In this context, greater involvement of local administrative units, village councils and community institutions becomes crucial. Periodic inspections at worksites, settlements and commercial establishments employing local labour could be carried out by other institutions at the grassroot level. Community-based reporting mechanisms could further be implemented to help align regulatory practices with public expectations of accountability. Such mechanisms, however, carry a serious risk as without formal guidelines and restrictions, community level monitoring can turn into informal discrimination and vigilantism against non-local workers. Misuse of the ILP mechanism for personal gain through extortion, harassing or exploiting non-residents has already been reported in other states like Nagaland (*NTN*, 2026).

Thus, a formal structure highlighting the rights, responsibilities and limits of the reporting committees is equally necessary for effective and just implementation of the ILP rules against outsiders. Further, adopting stricter and enforceable penalties such as financial sanctions, and blacklisting of contractors could also instill a stronger sense of accountability and responsibility on the part of the sponsors to ensure that the ILP of the workers are legal and verifiable. Such measures would need to be coordinated between the state government and the district authorities, and in the case of centrally-funded projects, formal agreements could be set up in advance with the central government as a condition for project execution.

However, the challenge of illegal or undocumented entry still presents a different set of constraints since it falls outside the ILP regulatory framework. Present-day borders present unique social spaces where illegal flows often intersect with the licit (Abraham & Schendel, 2005, p.29). Although digitization seems like an effective solution in the long run, without the necessary infrastructure capacity and coordination across agencies, the risks of infiltration run even higher. The state might have to increase vigilance during manual checks and paper permits which continue to be the primary form of verification.

Within this contested landscape, the role of civil society organisations becomes more crucial than ever. Groups like APIYO and STBAC have acted as vigilant monitors of demographic shifts brought by an unprecedented scale of developmental schemes. During the colonial period, matters of everyday governance were largely left to tribal authorities but the state reserved the right to intervene on issues of peace and security. Although such a clear separation is not possible in the current democratised framework, non-state actors could be meaningfully incorporated into enforcement processes, provided this is done through formal and accountable channels. The HPCs are a promising step in this direction, but perceptions of groups like the APIYO reflect a loss of faith in top-down bureaucratic processes that are not effectively

enforced. The state needs to move beyond legislative committees to joint, localized field-based task forces comprising district administrative officials, police, representatives from groups like APIYO and STBAC and ensure time-bound enforcement to rebuild the trust of civil society and the broader public.

Conclusion

Arunachal Pradesh today stands at a critical historical crossroads where imperatives of national security and rapid infrastructure integration stand against century-old mechanisms of isolation. The ILP system, at its core, was not equipped to address the simultaneous demands of developmentalist integration and protectionism. Contemporary pressures of rapid infrastructure development have made these contradictions more visible. In this context, the future of ILP does not lie in the search for a definitive policy solution, but in the state's ability to manage and negotiate tensions at the ground level. This can be ensured through decentralized enforcement of ILP regulations, rapid technological advancements and more significantly, through greater collaboration with civil society. The relevance of the ILP system ultimately lies not in its rigidity, but in its ability to remain flexible and responsive to changing policies towards frontier governance.

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