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## How do Assam 's Foreigners Tribunals function?

(The Hindu, 19-07-24)

On July 5, the Assam government asked the Border wing of the State's police **not to forward cases of non-Muslims** who entered India illegally before 2014 to the Foreigners Tribunals (FTs).

- This was in keeping with the Citizenship (Amendment) Act of 2019 that provides a citizenship application window for non-Muslims — Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, Parsis, Jains, and Buddhists — who allegedly fled persecution in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan.

### How did the FTs come about?

- The FTs are **quasi-judicial bodies** formed through the **Foreigners (Tribunals) Order of 1964** under Section 3 of the Foreigners' Act of 1946, to let local authorities in a State refer a person suspected to be a foreigner to tribunals.
- The FTs are **currently exclusive to Assam** as cases of "illegal immigrants" are dealt with according to the Foreigners' Act in other States.
- Each FT is headed by a member drawn from judges, advocates, and civil servants with judicial experience.
- The Ministry of Home Affairs told Parliament in 2021 that there are 300 FTs in Assam but the website of the Assam's Home and Political Department says that only 100 FTs are currently functioning.

### What is the role of the Border police?

- The Assam Police Border Organisation was established as a part of the State police's Special Branch in 1962 under the Prevention of Infiltration of Pakistani (PIP) scheme.
- The organisation was made an independent wing in 1974 and is now headed by the Special Director General of Police (Border).
- After the liberation war of Bangladesh, the PIP scheme was renamed Prevention of Infiltration of Foreigners or PIF scheme.
- The Centre has sanctioned the posts of 3,153 out of the 4,037 personnel of this wing under the PIF scheme while 884 are sanctioned by the Assam government.
- The members of this wing are tasked with
  - detecting and deporting illegal foreigners
  - patrolling the India-Bangladesh border with the Border Security Force
  - maintaining a second line of defence to check the entry of illegal foreigners
  - monitoring people "settled in riverine and char (sandbar) areas"
- **The Border Police also refers people of suspicious citizenship** to the FTs to decide whether they are Indian or not based on documents.
  - Cases of 'D' or doubtful voters can also be referred to an FT by the Election Commission of India and people excluded from the complete draft of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) released in August 2019 can appeal to the FT concerned to prove their citizenship.
  - Some 19.06 lakh out of 3.3 crore applicants were excluded from the NRC, whose process has been on hold.

### How does an FT function?

- According to the 1964 order, an FT has the **powers of a civil court** in certain matters such as summoning and enforcing the attendance of any person and examining him or her on oath and requiring the production of any document.
- A tribunal is required to serve a notice in English or the official language of the State to a person alleged to be a foreigner within 10 days of receiving the reference from the authority concerned.
- Such a person has 10 days to reply to the notice and another 10 days to produce evidence in support of his or her case.
- An FT has to dispose of a case within 60 days of reference. If the person fails to provide any proof of citizenship, the FT can send him or her to a detention centre, now called transit camp, for deportation later.

### Why are some FT orders under fire?

- On July 11, the Supreme Court set aside an FT order declaring Rahim Ali, a deceased farmer, a foreigner 12 years ago.
- The apex court called the order a “grave miscarriage of justice” while pointing out that the Foreigners’ Act does not empower the authorities to pick people at random and demand that they prove their citizenship.
- In September 2018, an FT member in central Assam’s Morigaon observed that foreigners’ cases have assumed the form of an industry where everyone involved is “trying to mint money by any means”.
- The member also noted that notices are “hung up on some trees or electric pole” without the suspected non-citizens unaware of such a case against them.

## The issue with tree planting schemes

(The Hindu, 19-07-24)

World has lost about 10 million square kilometres of forests since the start of the 20th century

- UN declared 2021-2030 as the Decade of Ecosystem Restoration with the aim to restore 350 million hectares of degraded land so as to sequester an additional 13 gigatons-26 gigatons of greenhouse gases from the atmosphere.
- Tree planting seen as a popular approach to address climate-related crises

### What are the benefits of tree planting initiatives in addressing climate-related crises?

- **Carbon sequestration:** Trees absorb and store carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. Act as natural carbon sinks, helping to mitigate greenhouse gas effects
- **Disaster risk reduction:** Reduce landslide risks in hilly areas. Act as windbreaks in coastal regions
- **Biodiversity conservation:** Provide habitats for various plant and animal species. Help maintain ecological balance and ecosystem services
- **Soil conservation:** Prevent soil erosion through root systems. Improve soil quality and structure
- **Water cycle regulation:** Enhance water retention in soil. Reduce runoff and flood risks
- **Temperature regulation:** Create cooling effects through shade and evapotranspiration. Help mitigate urban heat island effects
- **Air quality improvement:** Filter air pollutants and particulate matter. Produce oxygen, improving overall air quality

- **Economic benefits:** Provide sustainable resources (timber, fruits, etc.). Create job opportunities in forestry and related sectors
- **Social and cultural value:** Improve human well-being and mental health. Preserve cultural and spiritual connections to forests

#### **What are some of the major tree planting initiatives globally and in India?**

- **Van Mahotsava programme** in India, launched in 1950: Annual tree-planting festival in the first week of July to create awareness about forest conservation
- **"One Trillion Project"** of the World Economic Forum: Global initiative to grow, restore, and conserve 1 trillion trees around the world
- **"Great Green Wall of China"**: Massive afforestation project to combat desertification in northern China by planting a 4,500-kilometer belt of trees
- **"10 Billion Tree Tsunami"** of Pakistan: National initiative to plant 10 billion trees across Pakistan to combat climate change and deforestation
- **"Bonn Challenge"** to restore 150 million hectares by 2020 and 350 million hectares by 2030

#### **What are the criticisms and limitations of mass tree planting drives?**

- Limited community participation
- Lack of adequate post-planting measures
- Promotion of monoculture
- Potential damage to existing ecosystems like grasslands
- Not always cost-effective compared to other restoration approaches
- Neglect of ecology and locality specifics

#### **What challenges does India face in its forest restoration efforts?**

- Nearly 10 million hectares of forests under encroachment
- 27.5 crore people dependent on forests for subsistence
- 5.7 million hectares of forest land lost for non-forestry purposes since Independence
- Need for adequate finances, active community participation, and technical considerations
- Balancing restoration goals with the needs of forest-dependent communities

*Can you answer the following question?*

*While tree planting initiatives are popular for addressing climate change and environmental degradation, they face criticism for their ecological impact and implementation challenges. Discuss.*