Movements against Illegal Migrants

What is the issue?

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- Two principal movements currently dominate the socio-political landscape in Assam viz the demand for autonomy and statehood by tribal groups headed by the Bodos and the push against illegal migrants from Bangladesh by native Assamese.
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- In the post-independence era, there has been perceptible economic and infrastructure development in the state but it has **hardly been able to fulfil aspirations** brought about by ethnic and community campaigns.
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What is the history?

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- The period, 1900-1947, witnessed massive migration from the then East Bengal to present day Assam. This was initially to address a labour shortage.
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- Vast fertile land had been left uncultivated due to low population density with the British keen to increase revenue collection here, emphasised on population transfer from Bengal to Assam.
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- This colonial scheme of bringing Bengal farm workers to Assam was endorsed by the Muslim League government of Sir Syed Muhammad Saadulla in 1943.
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- The 1943 policy rendered obsolete **the Line System,** adopted by the colonial government in 1920 as **a measure to protect the lands of indigenous-tribal people from non-tribal encroachers.**
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- With the system gone, all grazing fields, forests and khas lands were thrown open for cultivation by immigrants.
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What are the measures taken after Independence?

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- The (Constitutional) provision of tribal belts and blocks was created, one that would safeguard tribal lands falling within 45 newly-created tribal belts and blocks.
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- But despite the good intentions enshrined in that provision, subsequent governments in Assam have continued to pursue a policy of population assimilation, one that has led to massive settlement of non-tribal population on supposedly protected tribal belts and blocks.
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- While Partition caused more harm to Assam than to Punjab, with thousands of families having crossed over to Assam till 1964, the Bangladesh liberation movement added to the state's woes in the shape of a large-scale exodus of both Hindus and Muslims.
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- **The Assam Accord of 1985** legitimised all migrants who entered the state before 1971. But while it was largely believed that the accord would bring the curtains down on the illegal migrants issue, the reality is that the problem continues to bog the state.
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- For tribal communities, the issue is not only about these migrants, irrespective of their religion or language, but about non-tribal migrants as a whole.
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- **The tribal political space has gradually been captured by the non-tribals,** thus turning them into a minority in many belts and blocks areas.
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What is happening at the moment?

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- Today, tribals have lost faith in any government run by the non-tribals, and therefore are on the warpath demanding safeguards for culture, language as well as political identity.
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- Both native tribals and the non-tribal Assamese people have commonness in one issue — their political pre-eminence and land rights being **gravely**

endangered by the growth of the illegal migrant population.
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- Many modern political thinkers are of the opinion that the denial of Sixth Schedule status to tribes living in the plains was equally responsible for large-scale immigration to Assam.
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- In 2003, the Sixth Schedule was extended to plains with certain modifications, thus creating the Bodoland Territorial Areas districts.
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- By that time, however, the demographic of Assam's tribal area had already been altered and vast tracts of tribal land had already passed into the hands of non-tribals.
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- The migrants issue was first **seen only through the language prism** in Assam, leading to the establishment of Assamese as the official language in 1960.
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- But it gradually turned political, with the 'religious minority' beginning to enter the political arena.
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- Thus, a movement that began to protect the language and culture of the indigenous Assamese people by 1985 turned into one to protect political identity too.
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What is the way ahead?

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- The governments, both at the Centre and in the state, have to treat both issues with equal seriousness.
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Source: Indian Express

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