

Implications of “Citizenship Amendment Bill, 2016”

What is the issue?

\n\n

\n

- Citizen amendment bill (2016) seeks to ease norms for religious minorities from neighbouring countries (non-Muslims) to get Indian citizenship.

\n

- But it has polarised regions in border states like Assam as the locals fear a demographic change might be ushered due to immigration.

\n

\n\n

What is the amendment bill about?

\n\n

\n

- “Citizenship Act, 1955” allows an immigrant to apply for citizenship if he/she has lived in India for 12 months immediately before applying.

\n

- Additionally, the applicant should’ve also resided in India for 11 of the last 14 years before the date of application.

\n

- In 2016, an amendment bill was introduced, for relaxing the 11-year cutoff to 6 years out of 14 for immigrants of the 6 religious faiths.

\n

- It is for enabling “Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis & Christians” from Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Pakistan to apply for Indian citizenship.

\n

- In other words, the amendment seeks to make non-Muslim illegal immigrants from three neighbouring countries eligible for Indian citizenship.

\n

- Also, the government passed two notifications for exempting such immigrants from the Foreigners Act 1946 and the Passport (Entry into India) Act 1920.

\n

- Notably, this meant that they can’t be deported - thereby enabling them to continue living in India (provided that they had arrived before 2015).

\n

\n\n

What were the subsequent political developments in Assam?

\n\n

- \n
 - The bill has stirred protests in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam, which has a predominantly Assamese speaking population.
 - \n
 - But on the contrary, the Bengali speaking region of Barak Valley in Assam has largely welcomes the proposal.
 - \n
 - Notably, Barak Valley is a breakaway Bengali speaking region from the erstwhile East-Bengal, which became East-Pakistan (Bangladesh) in 1947.
 - \n
 - Though the region was joined with Assam for administrative convenience, it has retained its Hindu-Bengali identity over the years.
 - \n
 - A parliamentary committee was sent to Guwahati (Brahmaputra Valley), Silchar (Barak Valley) and Shillong (Meghalaya) to seek public opinion.
 - \n
 - The bill received acceptance only in Silchar, and it was met with stringet opposition from Gawhati (Meghalaya's cabinet also opposed it).
 - \n
 - The BJP is pushing for the Bill, but all other parties in Assam are against it.
 - \n
 - Even within the parties, there is a geographical divide as many leaders have contradicted their party line and aligned themselves with their constituencies.
 - \n
 - Assam's BJP CM Sarbananda Sonowal has merely stated that he would step down if the rights of Assam's citizens aren't protected.

\n\n

What are the different perspectives?

\n\n

- \n
 - **Opponents** - They vouch that the bill will aggravate the illegal migration, from Bangladesh, which might alter the demography of the state.

\n\n

- \n
- The bill is also in violation of the 1985 Assam Accord, which was signed to end illegal Bangladeshi migration (irrespective of religion).
- \n
- Under the Accord, any person who came into Assam after midnight of March 24th 1971 (just before Bangladeshi war), would be identified as a foreigner.
- \n
- **Supporters** - They of the amendments argue that it is to save the victims of Partition (Hindu-Bengalis), who got stuck in east-Pakistan in the initial years.
- \n
- Notably, religious minorities in Bangladesh are indeed being persecuted by non-state actors (Islamic extremists) and are said to be in desperation.
- \n
- Subsequently, many have crossed the borders and settled down in border states illegally, and they remain stateless for years now.
- \n
- The supporters of the amendment bill have also asked for further reduction in the time period for citizenship.
- \n

\n\n

What are the implications of getting the bill passed?

\n\n

- \n
- Since 1971, about 20 lakh Bengali Hindus are living illegally in India.
- \n
- The current bill seeks to relax citizenship rules for these people who are living in India illegally (since before 2015) by giving them due recognition.
- \n
- Additionally, as the bill also seeks to relax citizenship rules for religious minorities from the neighbourhood, it might enhance influx.
- \n
- Notably, some estimates hold that as many as 1.70 crore Hindus who are currently living in Bangladesh, might want to get Indian citizenship.
- \n
- Nevertheless, some legal experts have opined that the amendment bill will not stand legal scrutiny as it discriminates on the basis of religion.
- \n

\n\n

Is the Citizen's Registry Update related the amendment?

\n\n

\n

- An exercise for updating the National Registry of Citizens (NRC, 1951) is currently underway, which is in order to weed out illegal immigrants.

\n

- While the NRC update operates with March 1971 as the cutoff date, the current citizenship amendment bill has set Dec 2014 as the cutoff date.

\n

- Hence, opponents of the bill feel that the amendment undermines the NRC update exercise, but the supporters have disputed this.

\n

- Significantly, NRC Update has also polarised the state as many Bengalis of the Barak Valley fear that they might not find a place in it.

\n

\n\n

\n\n

Source: Indian Express

\n

