

# Punjab's new Blasphemy Bill

### What is the issue?

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- $\bullet$  Punjab Cabinet recently decided to amend the law to make acts of "sacrilege against the religious books" punishable with life imprisonment. \n
- $\bullet$  This move is regressive, excessive, and fraught with undesirable consequences.  $\ensuremath{^{\text{h}}}$

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### What is the context?

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- $\bullet$  The Punjab assembly had passed a bill in 2016 for protecting the "Guru Granth Sahib" (holy book of the Sikhs) against sacrilege acts.  $\$
- The Centre had then returned the Bills, saying that protecting the holy book of only one religion would make it discriminatory and anti-secular.
- Notably, prior permission of the Central or State government is needed to prosecute someone under such sections.
- Hence, currently, the same bill has been cleared with slight amendments to cover other religious books like the "Bible, Koran and Bhagvad Gita".  $\$  \n
- $\bullet$  The bill, if passed, will strengthen the existing 'blasphemy law' which criminalises acts that outrage religious feeling.  $\$

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## What are the problems with the bill?

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- **Populism** The 2016 bill was piloted by the Shiromani Akali Dal government following allegations of desecration of the holy book.
- Back then, opposition to the Bill was then limited to the question whether holy books of other religions did not warrant the same protection.
- The bill was a clear case of pandering to religious sentiments for political populism, and there was little concern for the long term implications.
- Considering the tenets of the bill, it may also set off a needless flurry of legislation in the rest of India to pander to different groups.
- Notably, existing provisions under the "Indian Penal Code" itself is sufficiently strong to protect the sanctity of religious symbols and sentiments.

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- **Disproportionate** Present Blasphemy Laws (to protect religious faith) already provide for a 3 year jail term for disrespecting religious symbols.
- But the current bill's proposal for enhancing the punishment to a "life term" is a little excessive and problematic.
- **Intention** Blasphemy laws are largely aimed at preserving public order that might get disturbed by actions that flare up religious sentiments.
- While the sanctity of the religion is indeed important, a secular state works not to preserve religion but to preserve law and individual freedoms.

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 In this context, actions perpetrated with the deliberate and malicious intention of outraging religious feelings and stir passions is to be curtailed.

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 $\bullet$  Hence, while laws need to be a minimum safeguard and limited in scope, the current proposal seeks to appease religious groups disproportionately. \n

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## What is the way ahead?

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• Significantly, 'sacrilege' itself is a vague term, and would render the

- $\bullet$  Notably, there is a history of misuse of laws aimed to protect religious sentiments, which is a convenient tool to curtail liberal views. \n
- Many fringe groups weaponise these provisions for their own political ends, despite a clear lack of ground to press charges against the accused.
- $\bullet$  Hence, there is actually a case to dilute the existing provisions and no rational to further the pandering of religious groups.  $\$

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**Source: The Hindu** 

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