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 borders 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\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

\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 Natioanl 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

