

More time for Citizenship Bill JPC

Up in arms: A file picture of activists taking part in a protest against the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill in Guwahati.

The tenure of the Joint Parliamentary Committee examining the contentious Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2016 has been extended till the last week of the winter session of Parliament, when it is expected to submit its report.

The Bill proposes citizenship to six persecuted minorities — Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, Parsis, Christians and Buddhists — who came to India from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh before December 31, 2014.

There is stiff opposition to the Bill in Assam as it also seeks to grant citizenship to Hindus from Bangladesh. The final draft of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) was published on Monday and 40 lakh of the 3.9 crore applicants did not make it to the list.

Several political and civil society groups in Assam have said the Bill would pave the way for giving citizenship to illegal Hindu immigrants from Bangladesh in Assam — in violation of the Assam Accord of 1985.

JPC chairperson Rajendra Agrawal told *The Hindu* that in the wake of the NRC exercise, the committee would begin consultations again and speak to all the stakeholders.

Speaker's nod

“We moved a motion that the tenure of the JPC be extended till the last week of the winter session. The committee was supposed to submit its report by the end of the current session, but since that has not happened, we sought an extension. The motion was accepted by the Lok Sabha Speaker,” Mr. Agrawal said.

He said the committee would try to build a consensus on the subject. “It’s a tricky and a sensitive issue. We will begin the process afresh, let the sentiments cool down (in Assam). We will ask the people to register their views and will also seek to know the Centre’s view on the Bill. We will accommodate diverse views and only then can come up with any report,” he said. The JPC that visited Assam on May 7 faced severe protests as indigenous groups in Assam view it as a move to legitimise Hindus who had migrated from Bangladesh after 1971.

Through an executive order in 2015, the Home Ministry relaxed the provisions for persecuted religious minorities from the three neighbouring countries in respect of their entry and stay in India without proper documents or after their expiry. There has been no exact numbers of such minority refugees but officials estimate that around two lakh Hindu and Sikh refugees from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan are living in India. There are 400 Pakistani Hindu refugee settlements in cities such as Jodhpur, Jaisalmer, Bikaner and Jaipur.

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