

HUMAN RIGHTS BILL CLEARED AMID PROTESTS

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The Protection of Human Rights (Amendment) Bill, 2019 was cleared by a voice vote in the Rajya Sabha amid criticism from the Opposition that the legislation will ensure that only the government's nominees are appointed to the National Human Rights Commission. The Bill was cleared by the Lok Sabha on Friday.

Responding to the criticism, Union Home Minister Amit Shah said at the conclusion of the debate that such an apprehension was unfounded. "The chairperson is not appointed by Prime Minister on recommendation of Home Minister. There is a committee which includes Prime Minister and Opposition leaders of both the Houses. The House should trust the wisdom of such a committee," he said.

Choice of Chairperson

The Protection of Human Rights (Amendment) Bill, 2019 amends the Protection of Human Rights Act, 1993 to include the provision that apart from a former CJI, a former judge of the Supreme Court can be the Chairperson of the NHRC. Under the Act, only a person who had been the CJI could be made the NHRC chairperson.

Congress MP Vivek Tankha, speaking during the debate, said many provisions in the Bill gave discretionary powers to the government to pick the NHRC chairperson.

"The Bill says that if a Chief Justice of India is not available for the post, then there is an option to appoint a Supreme Court judge. But there is no clarity that if there is an existing Chief Justice, will he be overlooked and a certain hand-picked judge be appointed chairman," Mr. Tankha said.

RJD MP Manoj Jha echoed the criticism saying the Bill paved the way for appointment of "yes men" on the body.

The discussion on the Bill started amid an uproar from the Opposition benches who had been protesting since morning on the Sonabhadra killings and political crisis in Karnataka. The House was adjourned at 2.20 p.m. Later when the house met at 3 p.m., Trinamool Congress leader Sukendu Shekar Ray registered his protest saying that the House did not get enough time to study or move amendments.

Trinamool leader Derek O'Brien, while opening of the debate, had raised the same point saying that the Bill was cleared by the Lok Sabha on Friday and moved in Rajya Sabha this morning. None of the amendments moved by members were circulated. It is a violation of the rights of members he said. The party members walked out of the House.

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