

**Stay the course**

In its September 2015 order, the Supreme Court had told the Centre and the Arunachal Pradesh government that citizenship be conferred on the Chakmas and Hajongs at the "earliest, preferably within three months". The authorities did little to enforce the court's directive in two years. A week ago, the Centre gave a commitment that the court order will be enforced. However, on Tuesday, Minister of State for Home Kiren Rijiju said the apex court order was "unimplementable". He called for the order to be modified so that the rights of the indigenous population of Arunachal Pradesh are not diluted. This flip-flop may appeal to nativist outfits like the All Arunachal Pradesh Student's Union (AAPSU), which forced a bandh in the state on Tuesday to protest the Centre's decision, but it exposes the government as weak and incapable of a firm and ethical stand. The government must take necessary action for the enforcement of the court order and tell outfits such as the AAPSU in clear terms that it will not allow law and order to be disrupted.

Migration and citizenship issues are sensitive matters across the Northeast. State authorities should not let anyone communalise these or exaggerate their implications for the local society. Unlike the Rohingyas, the Chakmas and Hajongs came as refugees to India from Bangladesh in the 1960s and were settled in the then North East Frontier Agency (NEFA). As per a treaty India signed with Bangladesh in 1972, it was agreed these refugees would be granted citizenship rights. Though only 5,000 of the original 14,888 persons settled in NEFA, which later became Arunachal Pradesh, are alive, the refugee population has swelled to nearly a lakh, many of them born in India. For all practical reasons, these stateless people are Indians having lived all their lives in refugee settlements in Arunachal Pradesh. The government must assuage the local populace of their fears that the Chakmas and Hajongs are a threat to their cultural identity and social fabric. Much of the social tensions between the indigenous people and the refugees are triggered by competition for meagre economic resources, especially land, and lack of employment opportunities. Leaders like Rijiju, who command influence at the Centre, ought to devise ways to expand the economic pie instead of flowing with the populist current.

The BJP has big plans for the Northeast and sees itself as a party of governance in the region. The refugee issue is a test for the party to negotiate faultlines in the region without taking recourse to identity politics.

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