

is it difficult to grant citizenship to Chakmas?

Why has the issue been raked up?

On September 13, Home Ministry officials held a meeting with Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu and Union Minister of State for Home Kiren Rijiju, who represents the State in Parliament, on various administrative issues. The subject of granting citizenship to the Chakma-Hajongs was also discussed. After the meeting, Mr. Rijiju said a “middle ground” would be chosen so that the Supreme Court’s 2015 order to grant citizenship to Chakma-Hajong refugees could be honoured and the rights of the local population not diluted. “The Supreme Court order has to be honoured. Chakmas are settled in Arunachal Pradesh since 1964. But the Scheduled Tribe status and indigenous people’s rights won’t be diluted,” he said in a tweet later. This led to widespread outrage in the State and several incidents of violence were reported.

What was the Supreme Court order?

In September 2015, the court, after hearing a petition filed by the Committee for Citizenship Rights of the Chakmas, directed the State government to grant citizenship to Chakmas and Hajongs within three months. The State government had opposed the move in court. After giving a statement that the order had to be honoured, Mr. Rijiju changed his stand and said it was not implementable. He clarified that since the Home Ministry was the implementing authority for granting citizenship, it would approach the Supreme Court to modify its order.

What is the controversy now?

After violent protests in the State following Mr. Rijiju’s comments, Mr. Khandu wrote to Home Minister Rajnath Singh on September 18 that the State was not ready to accept any infringement on the constitutional protection bestowed on the tribals of the State. Mr. Khandu said the State’s unique history was governed by a special Act and the Constitution gives special protection rights to the predominantly tribal State. “These provisions were legislated with the singular objective to protect the tribes of the State from the onslaught of alien culture and overwhelming influx of non-Arunachalese in the State,” his letter said.

Mr. Rijiju blamed the Congress for settling outsiders in a tribal State in the first place. “Originally 2,700 families were settled in Arunachal Pradesh by the then Congress government from 1964 to 1969. The settlement itself was not as per regulations. The settlement violates the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, 1873, or the Inner Line Permit system,” he said. Since Arunachal Pradesh is a protected State, any outsider visiting the State needs a permit to do so. Mr. Rijiju had earlier said that Chakma-Hajongs would not get any rights to buy property or land in Arunachal Pradesh.

When did Chakmas flee to India?

In the 1960s, over one lakh Chakmas and Hajong refugees, Buddhists and Hindus, fled to India from the Chittagong Hill Tract area in the then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), facing religious persecution. The areas where the Chakma-Hajongs lived was submerged following the construction of the Kaptai Dam. They were made to settle in the Tirap division of Arunachal Pradesh, then known as the North East Frontier Agency, administered by the Ministry of External Affairs through the Governor of Assam. Arunachal Pradesh became a Union Territory in 1972, which coincided with the formation of Bangladesh, and soon local political parties began protesting against the settlement of outsiders in the State. The agitation gained momentum in 1987 when Arunachal Pradesh became a State.

What's the road ahead?

The logjam persists even as the government looks for damage control. Mr. Rijju said Chakma-Hajongs were entitled to live anywhere in India but their stay in Arunachal Pradesh would violate the constitutional rights of indigenous tribes protected by Article 37 IH.

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