

Out of my mind: A dangerous decision

You expect governments to say one thing and do another. That is politics. But you don't expect a government to change its mind within a week on a fundamental principle.

Take the case of the Chakma and Hajong. One lakh of them have lived in Arunachal Pradesh since 1964. They have limited rights but are not citizens. The Supreme Court ordered the government in 2015 to regularise their status. The Home Ministry decided to comply with the order. But then there were local protests by tribal communities. They complained that the communities in question would upset the 'demography' of the state if they were granted citizenship. It would seem that the citizens of Arunachal Pradesh think they have a right to veto who else becomes citizen of India despite the decision of the Supreme Court. The Minister of State in the Home Ministry has defended the decision therefore to renege on the promise to the Chakma and Hajong. The reason given is that the rights of the indigenous citizens of Arunachal Pradesh would be 'diluted' if citizenship was granted to the Chakma and Hajong. There is 'constitutional protection bestowed' on the citizens of Arunachal Pradesh which will be infringed if more people are admitted as citizens.

This, if true, is an astonishing doctrine. After all, there is only citizenship of India, not of a state within India. If Arunachal Pradesh enjoys special status, is it akin to Article 35A under which Jammu and Kashmir citizens have special privileges? There are restrictions on out-of-state Indian citizens owning land in J&K. Is that also the case in Arunachal Pradesh? The Chakma and Hajong are, however, not from out of the state. They have lived there for 53 years. Are they not to be allowed to enjoy rights that other residents have?

If so, did the Supreme Court not know about this vital protection to the rights of local tribal people of Arunachal? Did the Home Ministry also not know of this valuable constitutional protection last week? There is a BJP-led government in Arunachal. The Chief Minister is reported to have been present when the Home Ministry first made the positive decision to give citizenship rights to the Chakma and Hajong. Subsequently, he seems to have changed his mind.

Now the granting of citizenship to the 'newcomers' will 'disturb the demography of this tribal state and violate the constitutional rights of the tribals'.

What, we may ask, is going on here? Does every state have an inviolable 'demography' which has to be left undisturbed? Is this not really the cynical politics of reservations which the 'local' tribals fear will be diluted by admitting these other tribals to citizenship? Is it not really a question of guarding a vote bank which may be alienated if more were given the same rights?

The consequences of this reversal of a promise to the Supreme Court are more serious than the Home Ministry seems to realise. If the majority community in each state - Marathi speakers in Maharashtra or Tamil speakers in Tamil Nadu - insisted that 'others' disturb the demography of their state, soon we will not have one India but 29.

If each state had individual citizenship denied to 'outsiders', there will be many more partitions of India. Think again please.

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