

Parliament passes bill to extend SC/ST reservation in legislatures

The government also assured the opposition members in Rajya Sabha that the issue of extension of reservation for Anglo-Indians will be considered at a later stage.



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Parliament on Thursday passed a Constitution amendment bill to extend quota to SCs and STs in Lok Sabha and state assemblies by another 10 years with Law Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad asserting that the Modi government will never stop the reservation system.

The government also assured the opposition members in Rajya Sabha that the issue of extension of reservation for Anglo-Indians will be considered at a later stage.

The Constitution (126th) Amendment Bill was passed in Rajya Sabha with 163 members voting in favour and none against it. Since it was a Constitution amendment bill, the voting took place through division. Lok Sabha had passed the bill on December 10.

Reservation for members of Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), given for the past 70 years in Lok Sabha and state assemblies, is due to end on January 25, 2020. The reservation for Anglo-Indians in the form of "nomination" is set to expire on January 25 as the bill does not extend the facility to the community.

With approval of both the Houses, the bill would now be sent to states for ratification by 50 per cent of the assemblies before it comes into force.

Replying to the debate, Prasad assured the House that the Modi government will not end reservation or do anything which is against the spirit of the Constitution.

"It's been time and again said that the Modi government will scrap reservation system. We want to say it clearly that the Modi government will never scrap reservation system. It is also been said that the Modi government is distorting Constitution. This is absolutely wrong," he said.

He said SC/STs are backward and there is no need to further divide this class into "creamy layer".

Recently, the government had urged the Supreme Court to reconsider its stand that socially, educationally and economically advanced cream of Scheduled Castes/ Scheduled Tribes (SC/ST) communities should be excluded from the benefits of reservation in government services.

"I acknowledge the contribution of Anglo-Indians in education and armed forces. They have done a good job. When you acknowledge 20 crore SCs and 10 crore STs population as per the census, then why you are not believing the figures of Anglo-Indians," Prasad asked.

"We have told it that we will consider it later. But as mentioned by member Swapan Das Gupta, it is time for us to think about new categories of people," he said.

The minister said the contribution of "Anglo-Indians will neither be minimised nor be recognised only by representation. What is important is their contribution is recognisable. We are considering it". On concerns raised over atrocities against SC/STs, he said the such action faced by SC/ST is still a challenge that needs to be accepted and addressed. "The good news is there are Dalit priest these days," he added.

The debate witnessed heated exchange between Prasad and Leader of Opposition Ghulam Nabi Azad, after which Congress members staged a walkout.

Congress members later returned to the House for the voting process after Chairman M Venkaiah Naidu and Leader of the House Thawar Chand Gehlot appealed that members should come back and vote on an important Constitution amendment bill.

Naidu also assured that if there is any unparliamentary word, it will be removed from the records.

When Congress and other opposition members returned to the House, Azad said there was no question of disrespecting the Chair.

However, he said: "We also expect some respect from the Chair.

Sometimes, we don't want to be treated as students."

Azad said the government should not compete and score points against Opposition parties members, who only have the right to speak and not legislate.

Earlier moving the bill in the Upper House for consideration and passage, Prasad said that "all those who don't come from the SC/ST communities have also extended help for their welfare". "We have a large number of SC/ST members," he said.

Lauding the efforts made for the welfare of deprived classes, Prasad took the name of BSP chief Mayawati and said she is working towards the welfare of these communities in her own way. He also remembered tribal freedom fighter and folk hero Birsa Munda.

On the Anglo-Indians issue, he told the House that there are 296 members of the community in India.

Prasad said as per the 2011 Census, the SC population was 20.13 crore and ST population 10.45 crore which was 5.13 crore and 1.91 crore at the time of India's independence.

There are 84 members from the Scheduled Caste and 47 from the Scheduled Tribe communities in Parliament. In state assemblies across India, there are 614 SC members and 554 ST members.

During the debate, the Samajwadi Party, BSP, Biju Janata Dal, Janata Dal(U), AIADMK, DMK, AAP, JD(S), YSRCP, RJD and Left parties demanded that the government consider extending reservation to Anglo-Indians under the bill.

TMC MP Derek O'Brien supported the bill but as a member of the Anglo-India community expressed dismay over its benefit not being extended to his community.

O'Brien asked the government how is it nominating an Anglo-Indian to Lok Sabha when there are only 296 members of the community in the country.

SP leader Ram Gopal Yadav said, "I support the bill but not the exclusion of Anglo-Indians. If 2-3 Anglo-Indians come to power how will it affect the government. Please have a large heart."