Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order (Amendment) Bill 2021 - Devendrakula Velalar Issue

Why in news?

- The Government of India tabled the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order (Amendment) Bill 2021.
- It groups 7 SC sub-sects under one name (Devendrakula Velalar).

What is the Bill about?

- The Tamil Nadu government proposed certain modifications to the list of the Scheduled Castes.
- It groups seven Scheduled Caste sub-sects in Tamil Nadu under the heritage name 'Devendrakula Velalar' (DKV).
    - These castes existed as separate entries.
- Any change in the lists of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes requires a constitutional amendment.
    - The Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order (Amendment) Bill 2021 would give effect to the change.
- The grouping of the castes is a long-standing political demand in Tamil Nadu.
- However, the Bill does not address the other demand of some community leaders - removal of their castes from the Scheduled Caste list.

How influential are these sub-sects?

- These sub-sects have a predominant presence in south Tamil Nadu, which is a communally sensitive region.
- As per Census 2011, the seven subsects constitute about 17.07% of the Scheduled Castes.
- In the southern districts, the concentration of their population in many constituencies would be far greater.

What is the rationale for grouping?

- Caste-based political parties and organisations feel that shedding individual Dalit caste tags would help in the social advancement of the community.
- Their argument is that existing caste names were being used more in a derogatory sense to belittle the community.

- It is said that the DKVs were prosperous wetland owners, and not oppressed sections, socially or economically.
- Besides, these seven Scheduled Caste subsects share similarities, culturally.

How did the demand evolve?

- The demand for such grouping has its genesis in latter day British India.
    - Back then these subsects were included under the Scheduled Castes on the basis of their economic conditions.
- However, the voices remained feeble for long, only gaining traction in the 1990s with the emergence of influential community leaders.
- There were caste clashes between the Mukkulathors, an Other Backward Classes (OBC) community, and the Pallars, in the latter half of 1990s.
    - This was over the naming of districts and transport corporations after community leaders.
    - The clash led to a community consolidation of the subsects.
- In the 2000s, the community leaders placed an unusual additional demand.
    - This was the delisting of the seven subsects from the Scheduled Castes category.
    - They argued that being in the Schedule, instead of being a facilitator, served as a detriment to social advancement.
- Notably, this was at a time when some OBC communities were vociferous in wanting to be socially devalued and included among the Most Backward Classes.

How is the response for the Bill?

- Community leaders welcome the Bill.
- However, they still insist on the fulfilment of the second demand of exclusion from the Scheduled Castes.
- Besides, there has been opposition from within.
- A section of Pallars and other castes is apprehensive of losing the benefit of Scheduled Castes reservation.

What are the concerns and challenges with the move?

- Delisting and shuffling of castes from one reserved social class to another is fraught with political and administrative risks.
- It could disturb the internal sharing of the communal reservation quota pool by existing castes.
- Also, it could invite objections from other communities or spur political demands for similar reclassification.
- **Vathiriyans** - There is resistance from one of the subsects, the Vathiriyans,

for the grouping.

- They even moved the court challenging the demand for grouping.
- **Vellalar** - There is an undercurrent of resentment from within the Vellalar community, an influential OBC segment, to the assignment of the DKV title.
- The traditional Vellalars are spread across Tamil Nadu under sub-groups such as Kongu Vellalar, Thuluva Vellalar, Saiva Vellalar, Choliya Vellalar, Chera Vellalar and Pandya Vellalar.
- Vellalars claim entitlement for the exclusive use of the 'Vellalar' title.
- They see the demand for use of the same title by the Dalit subsects as "identity theft" and "cultural misappropriation".
- They claim that the use of the 'Vellalar' title by the subsects was a modern day inclusion by community leaders and not a historic practice.
- They have no objection to the social advancement of the seven subsects including their demand to be delisted from the Scheduled Castes.
- The Vellalars suggest that the subsects could be grouped under the title 'Devendrakulathars' or 'Devendrakulars', but not 'Vellalar.'
- **Dalit concerns** - Among the Dalits too, opinion is divided on the grouping of subsects under a common title.
- There are apprehensions that over time, this could trigger arguments as to which of the larger groups is numerically stronger.
- This, in turn, might cloud the larger Dalit cause.
- They argue that Dalits as such cannot be treated as a homogeneous group.
- There are differences within the entities in terms of social status and geographical identity.

What is the broader message?

- The outcome of the current move is yet to be seen.
- However, it is unique for a community to have placed social advancement as priority to be delisted from the Scheduled Castes forgoing the concessions it offers.
- Also, this would be a precedent for using anthropological study for social grouping in Tamil Nadu.
- Politically, though, this is a challenging move, the implications of which are uncertain.

Source: The Hindu



SHANKAR
IAS PARLIAMENT
Information is Empowering