Implications of “Citizenship Amendment Bill, 2016”

What is the issue?

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- Citizen amendment bill (2016) seeks to ease norms for religious minorities from neighbouring countries (non-Muslims) to get Indian citizenship.
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- But it has polarised regions in borders states like Assam as the locals fear a demographic change might be ushered due to immigration.
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What is the amendment bill about?

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- “Citizenship Act, 1955” allows an immigrant to apply for citizenship if he/she has lived in India for 12 months immediately before applying.
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- Additionally, the applicant should’ve also resided in India for 11 of the last 14 years before the date of application.
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- In 2016, an amendment bill was introduced, for relaxing the 11-year cutoff to 6 years out of 14 for immigrants of the 6 religious faiths.
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- It is for enabling “Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis & Christians” from Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Pakistan to apply for Indian citizenship.
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- In other words, the amendment seeks to make non-Muslim illegal immigrants from three neighbouring countries eligible for Indian citizenship.
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- Also, the government passed two notifications for exempting such immigrants from the Foreigners Act 1946 and the Passport (Entry into India) Act 1920.
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- Notably, this meant that they can’t be deported – thereby enabling them to continue living in India (provided that they had arrived before 2015).
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What were the subsequent political developments in Assam?

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- The bill has stirred protests in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam, which has a predominantly Assamese speaking population.
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- But on the contrary, the Bengali speaking region of Barak Valley in Assam has largely welcomes the proposal.
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- Notably, Barak Valley is a breakaway Bengali speaking region from the erstwhile East-Bengal, which became East-Pakistan (Bangladesh) in 1947.
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- Though the region was joined with Assam for administrative convenience, it has retained its Hindu-Bengali identity over the years.
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- A parliamentary committee was sent to Guwahati (Brahmaputra Valley), Silchar (Barak Valley) and Shillong (Meghalaya) to seek public opinion.
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- The bill received acceptance only in Silchar, and it was met with stringet opposition from Gawhati (Meghalaya's cabinet also opposed it).
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- The BJP is pushing for the Bill, but all other parties in Assam are against it.
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- Even within the parties, there is a geographical divide as many leaders have contradicted their party line and aligned themselves with their constituencies.
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- Assam's BJP CM Sarbananda Sonowal has merely stated that he would step down if the rights of Assam's citizens aren't protected.
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What are the different perspectives?

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- **Opponents -** They vouch that the bill will aggravate the illegal migration, from Bangladesh, which might alter the demography of the state.
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- The bill is also in violation of the 1985 Assam Accord, which was signed to end illegal Bangladeshi migration (irrespective of religion).
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- Under the Accord, any person who came into Assam after midnight of March 24th 1971 (just before Bangladeshi war), would be identified as a foreigner.
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- **Supporters -** They of the amendments argue that it is to save the victims of Partition (Hindu-Bengalis), who got stuck in east-Pakistan in the initial years.
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- Notably, religious minorities in Bangladesh are indeed being persecuted by non-state actors (Islamic extremists) and are said to be in desperation.
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- Subsequently, many have crossed the borders and settled down in border states illegally, and they remain stateless for years now.
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- The supporters of the amendment bill have also asked for further reduction in the time period for citizenship.
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What are the implications of getting the bill passed?

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- Since 1971, about 20 lakh Bengali Hindus are living illegally in India.
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- The current bill seeks to relax citizenship rules for these people who are living in India illegally (since before 2015) by giving them due recognition.
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- Additionally, as the bill also seeks to relax citizenship rules for religious minorities from the neighbourhood, it might enhance influx.
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- Notably, some estimates hold that as many as 1.70 crore Hindus who are currently living in Bangladesh, might want to get Indian citizenship.
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- Nevertheless, some legal experts have opined that the amendment bill will not stand legal scrutiny as it discriminates on the basis of religion.
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Is the Citizen’s Registry Update related the amendment?

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- An exercise for updating the Natioanl Registry of Citizens (NRC, 1951) is currently underway, which is in order to weed out illegal immigrants.
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- While the NRC update operates with March 1971 as the cutoff date, the current citizenship amendment bill has set Dec 2014 as the cutoff date.
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- Hence, opponents of the bill feel that the amendment undermines the NRC update exercise, but the supporters have disputed this.
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- Significantly, NRC Update has also polarised the state as many Bengalis of the Barak Valley fear that they might not find a place in it.
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Source: Indian Express

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