

Uniform civil code bill enters Parliament

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A private member's bill to set up a committee to prepare a uniform civil code was introduced in the Rajya Sabha on Friday amid protests from the Opposition, which suspects the BJP will use its majority in Parliament to push this through with an eye on the 2024 Lok Sabha elections.

After the Ram temple in Ayodhya and the abrogation of Jammu and Kashmir's special status under Article 370, a uniform civil code is the next item on the BJP's agenda.

In recent months, the BJP governments in Uttarakhand, Gujarat, Assam and Karnataka have said they want to implement the uniform code in their respective states.

Although the bill has come to the House several times since 2020, this is the first time the BJP has pushed ahead with it.

The bill was introduced after chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar ordered a vote as demanded by MDMK member Vaiko, who led the Opposition's charge against it.

The BJP had come prepared and was able to muster 63 votes in favour of the introduction while the Opposition could manage only 23 against.

The RJD's Manoj Jha said that BJP member Kirodi Lal Meena had tried to introduce the bill at least six times in the past and faced stiff opposition.

"This bill came for introduction on very many occasions earlier. Good sense prevailed. My friends from the BJP requested Dr Kirodi Lal Meena not to proceed further. I am witness to six such occasions," he said.

Vaiko, T. Siva of the DMK and several CPM members had submitted separate notices opposing the introduction of the bill.

Explaining the Opposition's concern, Siva said: "If the bill is introduced, it becomes the property of the House. Automatically, it will be taken up for consideration. When it is taken up for consideration and debated, it will be put to vote, and as they have the majority, automatically it will get passed."

Once a private member's bill is passed, it is up to the government to ignore it or own it and bring an official bill to Parliament for enactment. The CPM's John Brittas underlined that the 21st Law Commission had said: "A uniform civil code is neither necessary nor desirable."

Leader of the House and Union minister Piyush Goyal urged the members to allow the bill to be introduced and said the founding fathers of the Constitution had in their wisdom included a uniform civil code in the Directive Principles of State Policy.

CPI member Binoy Viswam wrote to the Rajya Sabha chairman to register his concern over the bill.

"In today's India, such a discussion would lead to unwanted debates and rift in our social life. I request you to drop the consideration of the bill," he wrote.

Jawhar Sircar of the Trinamul Congress said every Opposition party resisted the bill's introduction.

He described the bill as “unconstitutional, unethical and anti-secular” and said: “It is being introduced as a private member’s bill by an indulgent government to test the waters in a very dangerous game.”

He further said: “There is still time to refrain from making demonstrations of a temporary majority and inflict one-sided opinion on a very secular and plural India.”