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Gujarat passes Bill against religious conversion

SATISH JHA
AHMEDABAD, DHNS

As promised during the recently held local body poll campaigns, the BJP government on Thursday got a Bill passed in the Assembly to amend the Gujarat Freedom of Religion Act, 2003, to curb forced religious conversions through 'marriage' and other 'allurements'.

The Bill has the provision of imprisonment from three to five years for individuals while four to seven in case of women, minor or people from Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe. The proposal also

targets institutions involved in religious conversion.

The Bill states that maximum punishment in such cases will be up to 10 years and a fine of Rs 5 lakh on each member of the organisations involved.

Minister of State for Home Pradipsinh Jadeja tabled the Bill in the Assembly and said, "...Earlier to stop cows from going into the hands of slaughterers and to stop cow slaughter we brought special law and now, to stop daughters from going into the hands of jihadis we have brought a law in connection with love jihad. In Hindu religion, both the daughter and the cow are considered sacred."

Although the bill doesn't mention the term "love jihad" in the draft, the minister used the term multiple times during the debate. This was also pointed out by Leader of Opposition in the Assembly

Paresh Dhanani while criticising the Bill.

The Bill's passage triggered protest by Congress legislators amid several controversial remarks by BJP ministers in favour of the Bill. Many of the leaders took the names of famous interfaith couples to prove their point against and in favour of the bill.

In the bill, the definition of "allurement" has been broadened by inserting the words such as "better lifestyle, divine blessings or otherwise" so that the persons who offer any person a better lifestyle, divine blessings or otherwise may be punished under the provision of the said Act."

The amendment also defines acts of "impersonating by false name, surname, religious symbol or otherwise" as fraudulent means. Family courts will have the power to declare marriages of such nature as void.