

Nod for Bill to protect children from abuse

It provides for stringent punishment for offenders and setting up of special courts

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NEW DELHI: The Lok Sabha on Tuesday passed the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Bill, 2011. The Bill, already passed by the Rajya Sabha, will protect children below 18 from sexual abuse. It seeks to set up special courts for speedy trial of cases against them and provide stringent punishment extending up to life term for offenders.

“The Bill is gender-neutral. It seeks to protect children from sexual offences and the burden of proof will be on the accused,” Women and Child Development Minister Krish-

na Tirath said.

Ms. Tirath said all those below 18 years would be treated as children and efforts had been made to keep the provisions of the Bill child-friendly, including in-camera trial of offences.

Piloting the Bill, Ms. Tirath said the legislation had been necessitated by the fact that incidents of child abuse had increased immensely, particularly in the National Capital Region. According to a study conducted by her Ministry in 13 States, 53 per cent of children admitted that they had been sexually exploited.

The Minister said the Bill had a provision for the State

governments to set up special courts to try the offences. It had another provision for a stringent punishment to perpetrators extending up to life term and a heavy penalty — the quantum will be decided by the court.

“Whoever uses a child for pornographic purposes shall be liable for rigorous imprisonment which may extend to five years and shall also be liable to fine and, in the event of second or subsequent conviction, with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to seven years and also with fine.”

The Lok Sabha also passed the Anand Marriage Act,

meeting a long-standing demand of the Sikh community for a law allowing them to register their marriages under a separate Act, instead of the Hindu Marriage Act.

Sikhs could register their marriages under the Anand Marriage Act, Law Minister Salman Khurshid said replying to a debate on the amendment Bill, which was later approved by voice vote. It was earlier passed by the Rajya Sabha.

Although the Anand Mar-

riage law was enacted in 1909, there was no provision for registration of marriages. Hence marriages were registered under the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955.

Admitting that it had taken a lot of time to pursue amendments, Mr. Khurshid said this was a symbolic gesture and “we should respect the sentiments of all communities.”

Sikh groups have maintained that members of the community face problems abroad as their certificates are

issued under the Hindu Marriage Act. Besides Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists are issued certificates under the Hindu laws. Sikh marriage ceremonies are known as ‘Anand Karaj’ (blissful event). According to the amendment Bill, couples whose marriages have been registered under this Act will not be required to get their marriage registered under the Registration of Births, Marriages and Deaths Act, 1969 or any other law for the time being in force.