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Gujarat withdraws conversion Bill

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GANDHINAGAR In deference to the wishes of Governor Nawal Kishore Sharma, the Gujarat government on Monday withdrew a Bill permitting conversions from one denomination to another in the same religion.

The "Gujarat Freedom of Religion (Amendment) Bill" was passed in 2006 by the Assembly despite objections from the Opposition. It sought to amend the Freedom of the Religion Act, 2003, which made any act of conversion by force or allurement punishable and made it mandatory for any religious sect to seek permission from the District Collectors concerned for conversions.

The amendment, however, sought to exclude conversions from one denomination to another the same faith from the purview of the 2003 Act. It defined Buddhism and Jainism as denominations of Hinduism; Shia and Sunni as sects of Islam; and Catholic and Protestant as denominations of Christianity, permit-

ting conversions without requiring prior approval from the Collector.

Why Bill was returned

However, the Governor, on July 27 last, returned the Bill for reconsideration of the House, pointing out that it violated Article 25 of the Constitution under which the state was bound to protect all people against any forcible conversion.

The Governor noted that Jainism and Buddhism had been recognised as separate religions. Even the Supreme Court had defined Jainism as a "special religion" though for purposes of personal laws, Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism were treated alike. He said it would be the duty of the government to protect Buddhists and Jains from being forcibly or by allurement converted to Hinduism and vice versa.

The amendment Bill created furore especially among Buddhists and Jains, who not only sent delegations to the Governor but also petitioned the Union government.