

Bihar Lokayukta clears House hurdle - Bill passed with voice votes, Nitish calls it historic weapon

OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

Patna, Dec. 7: The Lokayukta bill 2011, which chief minister Nitish Kumar described as a “historic weapon” to enable the political class to wriggle out from the crisis of credibility, was passed in the Bihar Assembly today with voice votes, rejecting all amendments moved from the Opposition benches.

“The political class is suffering from the crisis of credibility in the eyes of people all over. The institution of the Lokayukta that is coming up through the new legislation is a strong weapon in your (legislators’) hands to regain your credibility for it has the public servants, from the chief minister to the mukhiya, and from the chief secretary to the panchayat-level clerk in its ambit,” Nitish said, responding to the amendments and also the plea from the Opposition members to defer it till the budget session.

Turning the table on the Opposition which was, so far, clamouring for the government to wait till the Centre adopts the Lokpal bill, the chief minister asserted: “I suggest that the Union government have a look at what the Bihar House has legislated on the issue dominating the political firmament for quite some time now.”

Signalling that the Bihar government had turned out to be a whistle-blower in combating corruption, Nitish said: “Bihar was the first state to make its public servants, right from the chief minister to all the elected representatives at all levels besides officials, make their assets public every year and put it on the open website. Many states subsequently followed suit and the Centre too has now decided to do what Bihar has done on the matter.”

The chief minister made it clear that the bill was not a brainchild of Anna Hazare or his movement. “Anna Hazare had come to meet me in Bihar Bhavan when I was in New Delhi in connection with some official work. He wanted me to support his Lokpal bill on which I apprised him that we already were at work to set up a strong Lokayukta in Bihar. I had requested him to help us set up a strong Lokayukta in the state,” he said.

Earlier, moving his amendment, leader of Opposition Abdul Bari Siddiqui pointed out that the institution of the ombudsman should have been more autonomous, independent like a high court and free from the influence of the political establishment. “The Legislative Council’s chairman and Assembly Speaker who are in the ambit of the Lokayukta’s probe are convener and member respectively in the selection panel. How can the Lokayukta selected by these political functionaries act against them?” he asked.

Nitish clarified that the selection panel would also have two senior sitting high court judges recommended by the chief justice, besides the outgoing Lokayukta. The selection panel was not empowered to act on its own, the chief minister said, adding: “The selection panel will set up a search committee, which will comprise the judges of the Supreme Court and the experts, that will furnish a panel of the head and other members of the Lokayukta institution which will have its own and structured investigating and prosecution units. We have tried to make it fool-proof, transparent and strong.”

Countering the Opposition’s charge that the Nitish-led NDA government was bringing the legislation in haste to usurp credit, Nitish said: “We have shown zero tolerance for corruption and the Lokayukta bill is a sequel to several legislative measures that we have taken to combat the scourge of corruption.”