

## Andhra Pradesh government woos minorities

With assembly elections fast approaching, the Congress government in Andhra Pradesh is going all out to woo minorities by creating a separate wing for Christians' welfare and announcing mass marriage programmes for Muslims.

The state government, which recently announced a subsidy scheme for Christian pilgrims who want to go to Israel, has now decided to create a separate wing for the welfare of the community under the minorities welfare department.

The decision to create the wing, headed by a senior official of the rank of principal secretary was taken Friday at a high-level meeting chaired by Chief Minister Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy, a Christian.

The government has also decided to set up an exclusive finance corporation headed by a managing director for Christians.

The move will address a long-pending demand of the community, which had a feeling that the minorities welfare department and minorities finance corporation were only catering to Muslims.

Christians account for 1.55 percent while Muslims make 9.2 percent of the 77 million population of the state.

Minister for Minorities Welfare Mohammed Ali Shabbir said the proposed finance corporation would fund Christians' pilgrimage to holy shrines in Israel. Under the scheme, developed on the lines of central government's subsidy for the Haj pilgrimage, the government has allotted Rs.20 million for the current financial year.

Officials of minorities' welfare department said about 900 people belonging to the poor Christians families could visit Israel under the scheme this year. The seven-day pilgrimage will cover Jerusalem and four other holy places associated with the life of Jesus Christ.

They said each batch would have 50 to 100 pilgrims. The first batch is likely to undertake the visit next month.

The government also proposed to launch a similar scheme for Sikhs and Parsis to enable them to visit their holy places.

Continuing its sops for Muslims, the Congress government announced mass marriages programme for them on the lines of a scheme launched last year by Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam (TTD).

TTD, which manages the affairs of the country's richest temple at Tirumala, has been organising mass marriages of poor Hindu couples.

Under the proposed programme for Muslim minorities, each couple would be given Rs.15,000 and some essential items for the marriage.

The government allocated Rs.1.27 billion for minorities' welfare in the 2008-09 budget. The government claims that the budget was increased by five times during last four years.

The chief minister directed officials to ensure that funds were spent on all minority communities in proportion to their population.

According to the 2001 census, the total population of Muslims in the state was seven million, followed by 1.2 million Christians and 31,000 Sikhs.

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