

Haj subsidy: government proposes, others oppose

The India government's decision to hike Haj subsidy for 10,000 more pilgrims annually has reopened the controversy whether such a sop is needed for religious pilgrimage, even as Muslim intellectuals pooh-pooh the government's argument that the move upholds the country's secular credentials.

The row received a sharper edge in the wake of recent findings submitted to the government that Muslims in India, home to the world's second largest Islamic population after Indonesia, lag far behind every other community on economic, social and educational indicators.

While Muslim intellectuals fiercely oppose Haj pilgrimage, the government argues that it is only assisting poor Muslims to fulfil their dream of a Haj pilgrimage and upholding the country's secular credentials.

'For those who are going for Haj, it's a life time dream. The government is giving only travel subsidy to those who cannot meet the expenses - its not cash in hand,' Minister of State for External Affairs E. Ahamed, who is in charge of Haj affairs, told IANS.

'The presence of Indian Muslims is felt in big way in an international congregation. Now the world realises that India is home to the second largest Muslim population. It upholds our secular credentials,' Ahamed added.

But academicians like Firoz Bakht Ahamed rubbished the argument.

'This is an argument that supports the compartmentalisation of people into religious groups. India is not going to enhance its status by sending more Haj pilgrims,' said Feroz Ahamed, a grand nephew of freedom fighter Maulana Abul Kalam Azad.

'Going for Haj is a desire and it should be done keeping in view the economical status also. The government is not helping Muslims by providing subsidy when the community lags behind in all social indicators. It is just vote bank-politics.

'Instead, there should be a concrete plan to uplift the community, especially in girls' education,' he said.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's government last week decided to pay the round trip fare to 10,000 more Haj pilgrims every year, taking the total number entitled to the subsidy to 110,000.

The government has spent nearly Rs.1.80 billion on the last Haj and the increase in the number could push this expenditure by at least 10 percent.

Muslim intellectuals point out that even Saudi Arabia, home of Mecca, believes that any subsidy for the Haj goes against the spirit of the Shariat, the Islamic law.

They say Haj is a religious duty only for those who can afford it and that the pilgrimage may not be 'accepted by god' if money spent on transport to reach the holy sites and on food is not the pilgrim's own.

Pakistan discontinued Haj subsidies to pilgrims as well as goodwill delegations after a 1997 court ruling that any expenditure defrayed by the government was contrary to the Shariat.

Syed Shahabuddin, former diplomat and a community leader, also opposed the idea. 'I am against subsidy,' Shahabuddin told IANS.

'I have told successive prime ministers that this Haj subsidy is there because of their political need, it has never been our demand,' he said.

However, Quasim Rasool Ilyas of All India Muslim Personnel Law Board put a slightly different spin.

'The entire subsidy has to be relooked. The cost of the Haj pilgrimage will be reduced if the government is ready to put Haj affairs under an autonomous body. Now the government subsidy goes to the state-owned Air India. What Haj pilgrims get as subsidy they would get as discounts on other airlines.'

He alleged that there was 'deep rooted' corruption in hiring houses for pilgrims in Mecca and Medina. 'The pilgrims are given cheap houses far away from Kabbah but charged more,' Ilyas said.

He suggested an autonomous body should be formed on the lines of Malaysia's Tabun Haji, which according to him invests the government subsidy for the pilgrims in business. The profit is used for the pilgrimage and developmental activities.

The Haj season begins later this month.

Liz Mathew (© IANS / India eNews)