

MINORITIES: GENERAL - 2006

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Political parties rake up religious conversion issue (7)

Chandigarh : In a bid to take political mileage in the forth coming Assembly elections, all major political parties have been raking the issue of 'religion conversion in rural Punjab' instead of social issue. Now a days, this issue has become hot cake among Punjab politicians. Meanwhile, this issue is missing the real topic which is forced conversions. Everyone is putting blame on others. BJP has trained their gun against State Chief Minister Capt Amarinder Singh. In mudslinging, even they are not ready to excuse their partner Shiromini Akali Dal (SAD) for not raking up this issue. "Capt Amarinder Singh is shutting up his eyes only to please people at 10 Janpath, more than anything else," alleged Harjit Grewal, general secretary, Punjab unit of BJP. Interestingly, the BJP's partner in the State, SAD however, does not recognise the problem as such. While talking to The Pioneer, SAD spokesman Daljeet Singh Cheema said, "They have not witnessed any such incident of mass conversion in the State. Whereas, the newspaper has confirmed news that the home constituency of SAD chief Prakash Singh Badal, Lambi, has seen the 1,233 families getting converted either into Christianity or Islam." On this aspect, their party is still on look out for such cases and whenever we will witness such incident, we will speak out. Mr Cheema added. Meanwhile, sticking to their stand, Mr Grewal said, "There were at least 1,500 voters for SGPC polls in Punjab, who had converted in the last one-year." However, the Congress has defended their party stand by calling it is BJP's false propoganda against the good work of their party and the State Government. (Pioneer 5/1/06)

Orissa asked to explain on plea (7)

New Delhi, Jan. 4: The Supreme Court on Wednesday sought an explanation from the Orissa government on a petition by a Muslim couple that the state was not providing them protection and security to live together after local community forced them to stay separately. The community gave the judgment following claims by members of the public that the husband had uttered triple talaq while intoxicated. A bench headed by Justice Ruma Pal issued notice to the state government on the petition challenging the Orissa high court judgment which did not give relief to the couple. The couple, Nizama Bibi and Ser Mohammad, has sought a direction to the police to take action against those villagers who are threatening and not permitting them to reside together with their four minor children. The couple through their counsel said that the interference by the local community was affecting their fundamental right to stay together. "An impression seems to be created that mobs have a right to take law into their hands and the police will not intervene because it is supposedly a religious matter," the petition said. (Asian Age 5/1/06)

UPA accused of "minorityism" (7)

NEW DELHI: The former Human Resource Development (HRD) Minister, Murli Manohar Joshi, on Tuesday held his successor Arjun Singh responsible for the "minorityism" of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Government. Addressing a press conference here, Dr. Joshi said: "A weak Government, unable to understand the games being played by its own ambitious Minister can never be expected to see reason and checkmate the impending disasters in education." He was critical of the decision to keep minority institutions out of the ambit of the Constitutional Amendment to provide reservation in all unaided educational institutions and the HRD Ministry's position on the "minority" status of the Aligarh Muslim University (AMU). From the platform of Shiksha Bachao Aandolan Samiti, Dr. Joshi said "the policy of creating permanent divisions and dissensions in Indian society in the name of minorities and their so-called welfare are blatantly against the national interests and communal harmony." Accusing the Government of pursuing a single-point agenda in education on how to convert minorities into a committed vote-bank, he questioned the setting up of the National Commission for Minority Educational Institutions (NCMEI). According to him, the Commission had eroded the credibility of institutions like the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) and University Grants Commission (UGC). "Are UGC and AICTE not trustworthy enough to deal with minority institutions?" Stating that it was "majority-minority" politics that

had partitioned the country in the first place, he said "this jaundiced view of education" would create mutual distrust among the youth of the country. The Constitutional Amendment, he said, was not only flawed but also injurious to the rights of a large section of the population as it denied reservation to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other backward classes of citizens in minority educational institutions. (The Hindu 18/1/06)

PM vows he will protect minorities in Assam (7)

Guwahati, Jan. 17: In an obvious attempt to lure the minority voters, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said here on Monday that his government would not allow the harassment of minorities in the name of detection and deportation of foreigners in Assam. Talking to reporters at Raj Bhawan Prime Minister indicated that his government may consider certain amendments in the Foreigners Act to protect the minorities of Assam who continue to be sceptical about their position since the controversial IM (DT) Act was scrapped by the Supreme Court. Dr Singh assured minorities in Assam that all necessary steps would be taken to protect their legitimate interests in the wake of scrapping of IMDT Act by the Supreme Court and there would be no harassment of genuine citizens. He said: "A Group of Ministers (GoM), which went into the issue, will complete the task (of drafting an alternative law) in the next few days and I would like to assure minorities of Assam that nothing will be done which will give rise to their harassment." Meanwhile, the government sources indicated that Foreigner's Act would be suitably amended so that minorities were not harassed in the name of detection and deportation of foreigners. The Prime Minister said that Assam chief minister Tarun Gogoi, who was sitting by his side at the press meet, has told him that no case of harassment has come to the notice of the state government in the past eight months since the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act was struck down. (Asian Age 18/1/06)

Make minorities partners: Congress (7)

HYDERABAD: The three-day Congress plenary that concluded here on Monday called upon the United Progressive Alliance Government to make the minorities partners in progress by enhancing their opportunities for education and employment. There could be no development when a considerable portion of the population remained backward due to social, economical and political reasons, it said. It also urged the Government to initiate a national debate on the role of the private sector in affirmative action programmes to fulfil the aspirations of the youth belonging to the weaker sections. The Government could seek legislative and administrative support to its policies in this direction if needed, it suggested. The session, which deliberated on the issue of social justice while endorsing the economic resolution, said the Congress was the only hope for the minorities and the backward classes and hence it should help them in every segment, including education and employment. Appreciating the "Prime Minister's New 15-Point Programme for the Welfare of the Minorities," it endorsed the proposal to advise the State Governments to give "special consideration" to minorities in recruitment to the State and Central Services, particularly in the Police Department. The other Ministries and Departments too could give special consideration to this section, the meeting said without making any direct reference to reservation. It welcomed the UPA Government proposal to earmark a certain percentage of the physical and financial targets under the Indira Awas Yojana for the minorities. (The Hindu 24/1/06)

Minority institutions act to be amended (7)

New Delhi, Jan. 24: The President has promulgated an ordinance to amend the National Commission for Minority Educational Institutions Act 2004. Significantly, one of the provisions of the ordinance is to "empower the National Commission for Minority Educational Institutions (NCMEI) to determine the minority status of educational institutions where such status is disputed". However, at the recent Editors' Conference in the capital, Union HRD minister Arjun Singh claimed that the move to promulgate such an ordinance "has nothing to do with" the recent judgment of the Allahabad high court that Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) is not a minority institution. The Union government has already declared its intention to protect the "minority status" of AMU. The ordinance will also ensure that minority educational institutions in each state are exempted from granting reservations for weaker sections of society. The Union Cabinet had, on January 6, approved the proposal to promulgate such an ordinance. According to the government, the ordinance is on the lines of the provisions of the NCMEI Act Amendment Bill that had been introduced in Parliament in the last session. However, the bill was not passed by Parliament. "Since the NCMEI Act amendment bill could not be taken up by Parliament and the admission process is underway, it was considered urgent and necessary to promulgate an ordinance...", the Centre stated (Asian Age 25/1/06)

Panel can now decide institutes' minority status (7)

New Delhi, Jan. 28: The National Commission for Minority Educational Institutions (Amendment) Ordinance, 2006, having the power to decide the minority status of an educational institution and investigate into the complaints of the deprivation of educational rights of minorities, has been notified in the Gazette of India on January 23. According to the ordinance, the commission shall have the power to decide on the minority status of an educational institutions by virtue of insertion of Section 12B amending the National Commission for Minority Educational Institutions Act, 2004.

The aggrieved person could appeal against the order of the competent authority. On receipt of the appeal, the commission may, after hearing the parties, decide on the minority status of the educational institution and shall proceed to give such directions as it may deem fit which shall be

binding on the concerned parties, according to clause 4 of Section 12B. Section 12C empowered the panel to cancel the minority status of the educational institution under two circumstances. First, if the constitution and objectives of the institution which has enabled it to obtain minority status was subsequently amended in such a way that it no longer reflects the purpose of a minority educational institution. Second, if on verification it was found that it has failed to admit students belonging to minority community as per the rules and prescribed percentage governing admissions during an academic year. The panel shall have the power to investigate into the matters relating to deprivation of the educational rights of the minorities by virtue of the insertion of Section 12D. (Asian Age 29/1/06)

BJP attacks Centre over ministry for minorities (7)

New Delhi, Jan. 30: BJP spokesperson Ravi Shankar Prasad on Monday came out in support of the editorial in RSS mouthpiece Organiser praising Congress chief Sonia Gandhi for her attack on the Left. Asked whether the BJP disagreed with the Organiser's view on Mrs Gandhi, Mr Prasad said that the editorial had merely "highlighted" her criticism of the Left parties. He then went on to launch a scathing attack on the UPA for setting up the ministry of minority affairs. Mr Prasad accused the Congress-led UPA of indulging in "worst kind of votebank politics." Mr Prasad pointed out that from the time of Jawaharlal Nehru to Rajiv Gandhi, there had been no tradition of setting up such a ministry which "smacked of votebank politics." Claiming that the BJP was "not against the welfare of the minorities," Mr Prasad said that the party was any "against any kind of appeasement." (Asian Age 31/1/06)

AIDWA condemns Modi's remarks (7)

NEW DELHI: The All-India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) on Monday condemned the "uncivilised and offensive" statement reportedly made by Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi against women of a minority community. The "contemptuous" remark, made at a public function in Gandhi Nagar, transgressed all limits of decency and was an assault on all women. "It is a shame that a Chief Minister is callous enough to denigrate the many thousands of women, in Gujarat and outside, who have no access to toilet facilities and face so many problems in relieving themselves. Apart from the grave health problems faced by them, these poor women also have to deal with rape and other forms of sexual harassment on a daily basis," an AIDWA statement said. (Asian Age 31/1/06)

Kalam defends minority data collection in armed forces (7)

Delhi : Despite the raging controversy about the data collection exercise on minorities in the armed forces, the Government defended the exercise while unveiling its ambitious programme for their welfare. The Government, through the presidential address to the joint session of Parliament on the first day of the Budget Session here on Thursday, also talked of a two-pronged approach to tackle the menace of terrorism in the country. The President said, "A Committee under Justice Rajinder Sachar is studying in-depth the condition of minorities and is expected to recommend steps for their economic and social development and empowerment." He said this reeling different welfare measures the UPA Government had taken for minorities after coming to power. The President said, "The Government has created a new Ministry of Minority Affairs to focus concentrated attention on the problems of all minorities, including religious minorities. A National Commission for Minority Educational Institutions has been established. A Bill for providing Constitutional status to the Minorities Commission has been introduced in Parliament." he added: "A new 15-point programme for minorities is under preparation. This programme will aim at enhancing the social development of minorities, especially the poor, modernise madrasa education, and provide financial support for entrepreneurship development and self-employment.

"The Government also intends to propose statutory measures to prevent and deal effectively with communal violence and to enable rehabilitation of victims of communal riots." (Pioneer 17/2/06)

15-point scheme for minorities: Kalam (7)

New Delhi: Claiming to have restored "pluralism, tolerance and compassion," the Manmohan Singh Government used the President's Address to Parliament on Thursday to announce that "a new 15-point programme for the minorities is under preparation." In the President's customary address to a joint sitting of the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha at the beginning of the budget session, the Government not only showcased its achievements in internal security, economy management and foreign policy but also softly sent out a message to friends, allies and the Opposition that it would stay the policy course. As for the programme for the minorities, he explained that it was aimed "at enhancing the social development of the minorities, especially the poor, modernise madrasa education, and provide financial support for entrepreneurship development and self-employment." He mentioned about the Justice Rajinder Sachar Committee, which would "recommend steps for their [minorities] economic and social development and empowerment." The only concession to the Left, which is unhappy over what it considers the erosion of an independent foreign policy, was the conspicuous omission, from A.P.J. Abdul Kalam's address, of the American President's coming visit. Mr. Kalam claimed that "our relations with the United States underwent a substantial transformation in 2005, and we carry forward our strategic partnership based on the July 18 Joint Statement." (The Hindu 17/2/06)

Missing NCM annual reports irk panel (7)

New Delhi : The Standing Committee on Social Justice and Empowerment in its 14th report pulled up the Government for 'tardiness' in tabling the Annual Reports on the National Commission for Minorities. The panel, under Ms Shumitra Mahajan, felt alarmed that the last annual report tabled by the Government pertains to 1995-96. The panel noted "the reply of the Ministry that Annual Report of NCM for the period 1993-98 were submitted only in 1998" as the response to recommendations could not be received before that. The Committee pulled up Government saying that the panel is "not satisfied with their reply and strongly feel that non-tabling of the reports negates the effectiveness of the working of the commission." The panel also expressed surprise that while restoring Constitutional status to the NCM, the Social Justice and Empowerment Ministry did not realise that the panel in absence of powers like inquiry and investigation will not be confidence inspiring. Even "with constitutional status, it would be a toothless tiger," concluded the panel on The Constitution 103rd (Amendment) Bill, 2004 and The National Commission for Minorities (Repeal) Bill, 2004. The Standing Committee in its report also did not think that the post of the chairman and vice-chairman should be rotated among the eminent persons of all five notified minority communities. The panel asked the ministry to ensure that. (Pioneer 12/2/06)

Recruitment based on merit: Pranab (7)

NEW DELHI: The Government on Tuesday asserted that recruitment to the armed forces was based on merit and open to every citizen, including Muslims, without discrimination on the basis of their caste, creed, religion or region. Making a suo motu statement in the Rajya Sabha, Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee said the armed forces were professional, apolitical, secular and highly disciplined and every State contributed a fair share of manpower to them. The Justice Rajindar Sachar Committee was set up on March 9, 2005 to prepare a report on the social, economic and educational status of Muslims. It was mandated to obtain information from the Union and State Governments and prepare a database so that the Government could make interventions, if necessary, for their uplift, Mr. Mukherjee said. The Defence Ministry, in a letter to the committee on September 14, 2005, said the recruitment policy was based on merit. Replying to letters from the committee, the Navy gave some statistics on its civilian personnel. The Air Force also provided some data. The Army, however, did not give any information. "No survey has been conducted, or is proposed to be conducted for compilation of any statistics than what is maintained in the existing database of the armed forces," Mr. Mukherjee said. The Defence Secretary met Mr. Justice Sachar on January 17 and again a month later to clarify that recruitment was based on merit and open to every citizen. A letter to this effect was also sent to Mr. Justice Sachar. Replying to clarifications sought by Sushma Swaraj (BJP), Brinda Karat (CPI-M) and Abu Asim Azmi (Samajwadi Party), Mr. Mukherjee said the Government was not at all "apologetic" about setting up the committee. (The Hindu 22/2/06)

Minority measures range from scholarships to aid hike (7)

NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 28: In keeping with the UPA government's pro-minority stance, Finance Minister P Chidambaram has announced a slew of measures for minority communities in the Budget. The measures range from special scholarships for students to an increase in Central assistance for the National Minority Development and Finance Corporation. "I propose to extend greater financial support for the organisations actively involved in the welfare of minorities," Chidambaram said in his Budget speech. And that includes 20,000 merit-cum-means scholarships for students to encourage them to pursue higher education, much in consonance with the government's initiative to improve the socio-economic and educational status of the minority communities. However, the scholarship amount or the overall allocation was not specified. Once the scheme is finalised in 2006-07, the Finance Minister said he intended allocating the necessary funds. As part of the same policy, he proposed to double the corpus fund of the Maulana Azad Educational Foundation to Rs 200 crore and increase the Central allocation to the National Council for Promotion of Urdu Language from Rs 10 crore to Rs 13 crore. To strengthen the National Minorities Development and Finance Corporation, his Budget carried proposals of Rs 16.47 crore. "In line with the PM's announcement on August 15, 2005, the Corporation will intensify efforts to reach out to artisans and weavers living in urban and peri-urban centres, especially in districts with concentration of minorities," Chidambaram said. (Indian Express 1/3/06)

Meet discusses Parsis' problems (7)

March 24, 2006: "Parsis who constitute about 70,000 in the country, are Indians of the Iranian origin following the Zoroastrian faith. Out of these, almost 25 per cent live below poverty line. This comes to me as a great shock," pointed out Lt. Gen. (Retd.), A.M. Sethna President of the Delhi Parsi Anjuman while tracing the roots of the Parsi Community at symposium organised by Jamia Milia Islamia on Thursday. The symposium titled "Parsis in India: Strengths and Challenges" was organised by the institute's Dr. K.R. Narayanan Centre for Dalit and Minorities Studies. In the discussion which coincided with the celebration of "Navroz" (Parsi and Iranian New Year) many eminent people participated. Initiating the discussions, Prof Mujtaba Khan, Director of the Centre observed that while the Jews have survived and grown amidst persecution and migration surprisingly the Parsis on the other hand, who found a safe and secure home in India failed to grow and prosper in terms of their demography despite successfully establishing an economic empire in the form of the Tata Industries. (The Pioneer 24.3.06)

End minorityism, join hands, Advani tells Congress (7)

New Delhi Leader of Opposition and senior BJP leader LK Advani said on Tuesday that if the Congress shuns minorityism in politics and governance, it would set a firm foundation of cooperation with the BJP making common cause with the Congress. Endorsing Congress president Sonia Gandhi's veiled criticism of Left parties for "communalising" the country's foreign policy in a signed article in the party's mouthpiece, Sandesh, Mr Advani said, "No Indian can disagree with this view. But at the same time, we urge the Congress president and her party to introspect on whether it was wrong to communalise foreign policy, but right to communalise domestic policy." Mr Advani was addressing a joint Press conference with party president Rajnath Singh before embarking on an intensive five-week twin Bharat Suraksha Yatra beginning from April 6. Mr Advani would begin his yatra on Ramnavami from Rajkot after offering prayers at the Dwarakadheesh temple and paying homage to father of nation Mahatma Gandhi at his birthplace in Porbander. This is the sixth yatra in Mr Advani's political career. Rajnath Singh's yatra will hit the road from Bhubaneswar after paying obeisance to Lord Jagannath at Puri on the same day. "A firm foundation will have to be laid for the two principal national parties in India's bipolar polity, BJP and Congress, to make common cause in a very wide area of politics and governance," said Mr Advani, putting a condition that the Congress should honestly reverse its politics of minorityism. "Minorityism of Congress is bad and will hurt minorities also. I hold the Congress guilty of communalising domestic politics," he said. While asserting that the BJP was not against minorities, Mr Advani warned that if unchecked, the "politics of minorityism" will prove a disaster for the Indian nation. "Far from helping the minorities, it actually undermines their development and well-being," he added. (Pioneer 5/4/06)

Rs 206cr aid for '84 riot victims (7)

New Delhi, April 5: The Delhi Cabinet on Wednesday approved a Rs 206 crore rehabilitation package to provide additional relief to the victims of 1984 riots. An amount of Rs 206 crore will be distributed on account of death compensation, compensation in respect of damaged residential properties and damaged uninsured commercial/industrial properties and pension to the old aged persons and widows due to the

riots, Delhi chief minister Shiela Dikshit said. "Ex-gratia amount of Rs 3.5 lakhs would be paid in each case of death during the riots," she said, adding that "this will be in addition to the amount already paid by the state government. Ex-gratia payment in case of injuries will be paid Rs 1.25 lakh minus the amount already paid by the state government." Compensation for damaged residential properties and damaged uninsured commercial/industrial properties would be paid 10 times the determined amount, minus the amount already paid, while pension to all widows and old-aged parents of those who were killed in 1984 riots would be paid at the uniform rate of Rs 2,500 per month for their whole lifetime. These enhanced amount of ex-gratia would be available only to those persons who had earlier been granted relief. The government has already disbursed an amount of Rs 94 crores to the riot victims. The Cabinet has also approved Rs 216 crore project for setting up of an autonomous Delhi State Cancer Institute in the premises of GTB Hospital in Dilshad Garden. (Asian Age 6/4/06)

Despite SC disapproval, Govt set to give minority status to Jains (7)

NEW DELHI, MAY 9: Despite the Supreme Court's direction against any addition to the list of "notified minorities," the Centre is drawing plans to give Jains the status of a religious minority. Minister for Minority Affairs, A R Antulay, who has held talks with "various Jain organisations", told The Indian Express there was "consensus in the community" for the minority status under Section 2 (C) of the National Commission for Minorities Act, 1992. "We want to broaden the concept of minorities by including communities like Jains and Kashmiri Pandits," he said. The move flies in the face of a SC judgment delivered last August. A bench headed by then CJI R C Lahoti, while dismissing a plea to direct the Centre to notify Jains as a religious minority, said identification of minorities on the basis of religion would further divide the country. (Indian Exp 10/5/06)

Religious minority status for KPs (7)

New Delhi : After years of neglect, the homeless Kashmir Pandits have finally something to cheer about. The Centre will soon grant status of religious minorities to Kashmir Pandits and Jains, Minority Affairs Minister AR Antulay said on Wednesday. "In order to ensure that Kashmiri Pandits, who have been reduced to the state of refugees in their own homeland get equal opportunities - be it social, economic or educational - it is necessary that they be accorded the status of religious minorities," Antulay told newsmen. "A notification declaring them as minorities will soon be brought out after thorough consultation within the Cabinet and also after taking the Jammu and Kashmir Government into confidence," Antulay said, adding Jains would also be accorded the same status. (Pioneer 11/5/06)

Reworked minority welfare scheme will be sent to Cabinet this month (7)

NEW DELHI, JUNE 4: Reworking the ambitious Minority development scheme of the Congress's 15-point programme, the Ministry of Minority Affairs is all set to bring it before the Cabinet this month. The revised format of the programme, first proposed by Indira Gandhi and started by Rajiv Gandhi, will incorporate suggestions from the Prime Minister's Office for "stringent monitoring mechanisms". "Our objective is to get the 15-point programme implemented and monitored in the best possible manner. The Cabinet will finalise the finer points," A R Antulay, Minister for Minority Affairs told The Indian Express. The revised programme will have increased emphasis on two counts: one, strong measures to deal with communal tension; two, ensuring "adequate minority representation" in police forces, jobs in public sector enterprises, railways and nationalised banks. Though the programme for the "economic, social and educational development of the minorities" was first conceived in May 1983, it didn't take off in most parts of the country for many reasons, including poor monitoring. More recently, even the Rajinder Sachar panel on minorities, during its visit to the states, found the programme mostly absent. Sources said that the new monitoring panel is likely to comprise a representative each from the five notified minorities (Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Parsis, Buddhists), state chief secretaries and other government officials. As per the revised programme, district and police officials known for their efficiency and impartiality will be posted in areas identified as "communally sensitive and riot prone". Prevention of communal tension will be a primary duty and performance in this regard would be "an important factor in determining their promotion prospects". In the recruitment of police personnel, state governments will be advised to give special consideration to minorities. For this, the composition of selection committees will be representative with "adequate minority members on board". The Central government will be expected to take similar steps while recruiting personnel for Central forces. Public sector enterprises, nationalised banks will also be asked to give special consideration to "the recruitment of minorities". (Indian Exp 5/6/06)

Bajrang Dal disrupts minorities' Press meet in Bhopal (7)

Bhopal : Activists of the Bajrang Dal created a stir at the Apsara Restaurant in Bhopal on Monday when they attempted to prevent a member of the Madhya Pradesh State Minorities Commission, Indira Iyengar from holding a Press conference. Iyengar was presenting two tribal women who were allegedly raped in Naadia village of Khargone district before mediapersons when the activists attempted to prevent her. The Governor intervened and directed the Chief Secretary and Director General of Police (DGP) to furnish a detailed report of the incident and provide police protection to Iyengar, who later urged the DGP to register a case against Devendra Rawat, under whose leadership the Bajrang Dal activists had tried to prevent her from holding the Press conference. She also sought police protection pleading that the religious bigots could cause her harm. Notably, the Congress- led Government had in the recent past asked the National Commission for Minorities (NCM) to conduct an "on the spot assessment" of complaints of atrocities on Christians in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Rajasthan - all ruled by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The trouble started when Bajrang Dal district convenor, Devendra Rawat stormed into the restaurant where Indira Iyengar was addressing media persons. Iyengar had presented two tribal women before mediapersons who she claimed were allegedly raped by anti-social elements protected by BJP leaders in Naadia village of Khargone district last month. Accusing Iyengar of tarnishing the Dal's image and also that of the BJP, the convenor held Christian missionaries responsible for religious conversion. After arguing with the convenor for few minutes, Iyengar left the place. Later, Rawat apologised to the journalists but remained firm in his stand against conversion carried out by the Christian missionaries. The convenor even alleged that the Christian missionaries were promoting conversion by luring the poor with employment and other benefits and declared that he would expose their misdeeds to acquaint people with reality. The argument between Iyengar and Bajrang Dal district convenor ended after a few journalists intervened. (Pioneer 6/6/06)

Public opinion on SC converts sought by panel (7)

NEW DELHI, JUNE 8: THE National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities (NCRLM) headed by Justice Ranganath Misra has sought public opinion on "requests to designate Scheduled Caste Hindu converts to Islam and Christianity as SCs." The NCRLM is also holding discussions with various private and non-government agencies over the matter, a statement issued by the Ministry of Minority affairs said today. NGOs and members of the public are requested to inform the Commission of their views within a period of three weeks. Last year, the Centre directed the NCRLM to look into the demands to specify Scheduled Caste converts to Islam and Christianity as SCs as part of its larger terms of reference. Headed by former Chief Justice of India Ranganath Misra, the Commission is entrusted with the responsibility to recommend welfare measures for disadvantaged sections among religious and linguistic minorities including reservation. (Indian Express 9/6/06)

Move debate on welfare of minorities to specifics: Sonia (7)

NEW DELHI: Recounting the commitment of the United Progressive Alliance Government to social harmony and the welfare of minorities, Congress president Sonia Gandhi said the endeavour now was to move the debate to specifics and make efforts to produce results in a specified time frame. Outlining the approach of the UPA, Ms. Gandhi detailed seven challenges: generating awareness of the problems that exist; discuss issues rather than brush them under the carpet; explore equitable, cooperative, solutions that would strengthen the social fabric; reduce levels of deprivation; attend specifically to the problems of women and children with focus on girl-child; respond to the educational and employment aspirations of the youth; and widen levels of prosperity and make all sections of the community stakeholders in the new India that is emerging. "While the Government is committed to deliver in areas of its responsibility, civil society has to shoulder its own share of the burden and assist the process," she said here in her address at the inauguration of the India Islamic Cultural Centre (IICC). She said it was here that an institution like IICC could play the catalyst to initiate debate, develop awareness and explore options. Ms. Gandhi said such an approach would add a relevant dimension to the intellectual and cultural activities of the centre aimed at informing the public about the heritage of Islam and the Indian contribution to it. "This contribution must not remain a matter of nostalgia alone. As a living reality, it should be explored to seek ideas and solutions to the problems of underdevelopment in contemporary India," she said. (The Hindu 13/6/06)

Minorities programme revamp okayed (7)

NEW DELHI: The Union Cabinet on Thursday approved the revision of the Prime Minister's 15-point programme for minorities as was promised by Manmohan Singh in his Independence Day speech last year. It has also been decided that 15 per cent of the funds be earmarked wherever possible under schemes/programmes for the nationally declared minorities. Formulated in May 1983 by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, the programme has been recast to focus action on issues "intimately" linked to the social, educational and economic uplift of the minorities. Broadly divided into four components, the new programme seeks to enhance opportunities for education, ensure them an equitable share in economic activities and employment, improve living conditions, and prevent and control communal riots. Six areas will get focussed attention in education. Besides improving access to school education, the programme will ensure equitable availability of Integrated Child Development Services to the minorities. More resources will be made available for teaching Urdu and madrasa education modernised. Scholarships will be provided to meritorious students and educational infrastructure improved through the Maulana Azad Education Foundation. The programme will provide opportunities to the poor in self-employment and wage employment. Skills will be upgraded through technical training, credit support enhanced for economic activities, and special efforts made to recruit the minorities to State and Central services. To improve living conditions, the Government will ensure them an equitable share in rural housing schemes and improve their slums. Steps will be taken to prevent communal incidents, communal offences will be prosecuted and riot victims rehabilitated. (The Hindu 23/6/06)

Religious freedom day being planned (7)

NEW DELHI: To mark the completion of 2,550 years of "Parinirvana" of Lord Buddha and also his birth anniversary, the All-India Confederation of SC/ST Organisations and the All-India Christian Council are organising a "Religious Freedom Day" at Nagpur on October 14. The "Dhamma Diksha" led by B.R. Ambedkar will also be completing its golden jubilee on the same day. At a press conference here on Thursday, Confederation chairman Udit Raj said the World Conference would see the participation of champions of religious freedom, political personalities, industrialists, social activists and Hollywood stars. "Film star Richard Gere, Uma Thurman, Martin Luther King's relative and British and European Parliament members will attend the conference. Invitations will also be extended to Hindu and Muslims religious heads. We will also be extending an invitation to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh," said Mr. Raj. To mobilise believers of religious freedom at the global level, All-India Christian Council president Joseph D' Souza is on a tour of European countries. (The Hindu 23/6/06)

NCM may be made a statutory outfit (7)

New Delhi, June 26: The ministry of minority affairs is considering introducing a proposal during the Monsoon Session of Parliament to give the National Commission for Minorities (NCM) more teeth by making it a constitutional body. Currently, the NCM is a statutory body and it lacks executive powers which has restricted its ability to investigate allegations of atrocities against minorities. Though not wanting to reveal much about the proposal, minister for minority affairs A.R. Antulay said they are thinking of introducing the proposal to make NCM a constitutional body. The standing committee submitted a report in February 2006 that NCM should be made a constitutional body and given more teeth. Unlike the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), which has its own investigation mechanism in place, the NCM's powers are restricted to issuing directions to the police, state and district authorities to investigate complaints of religious rights violations. Only four of its reports have been tabled in Parliament since the NCM came into being in 1978, because of delays sometimes in investigations recommended by the commission and sometimes in related reports from state and district authorities and other departments and ministries, minority affairs ministry sources said. They said the government is also planning to empower the NCM with authority to summon individuals accused of acts against religious minorities. At present, the NCM can summon government and police officials if they do not act on its directions. "But many a time, officials get away with vague responses like 'the matter is under investigation', to the commission's repeated notices or summons," the sources said. (Asian Age 27/6/06)

Hyderabad observes communal harmony with mass marriages (7)

Hyderabad : It was the tradition of communal harmony at its best when the people cutting across the religious lines came together sharing their joy. The occasion was the "Mass Marriage" of Hindu, Muslim and Christian couples organized by a social service organisation Hyderabad Welfare Society (HWS) on

the sprawling Exhibition Grounds in Hyderabad on Sunday. Twenty seven Muslim, 17 Hindu and seven Christian couple took the vow as the customary religious ceremonies were performed according to their faith to solemnise their marriages. While the Muslim grooms were clad in their traditional dress of Sherwani and Churidars, Hindu grooms came in the customary Dhotis and Kurtas. The Christian groups were decked up for the occasion in their perfect white with silk ties. All the girls were in the glittering bridal costumes covered in flowers and jewelries. Mass marriages have now become an annual feature in Hyderabad where the boys and girls from the poor families are brought together and marriage ceremonies are performed in a simple way. HWS and Zahid Ali Khan, editor of a Urdu daily "Siasat", who acted as the patron, arranged for the entire expenditure of the marriages through contributions. This year the society spent Rs 18000 on each marriage. Apart from arranging household items like a cot, bed, cub board, show case and utensils for each couple the society also organized lunch on the occasion. The HWS has been organising the marriages of the poor families from 1985 but with each year, the number of couples entering the wedlock under the aegis of the society has been increasing. Expressing his grave concern over the increasing demand for the dowry in all the communities, Zahid Ali Khan said that it is a curse and made it impossible for the poor families to arrange the marriage of their daughters. (Pioneer 27/6/06)

Persecution of minorities is breakdown of law & order' (7)

New Delhi, July 9: Deliberate persecution of either a community or a group of people belonging to a religious or linguistic minority is not a law and order situation but the breakdown of law and should be treated as such, Union minister for minority affairs A.R. Antulay said. He was speaking to The Asian Age on the report submitted by the National Commission for Minorities on allegation of atrocities against members of the Christian community in Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. In their report, NCM has asked the Centre to take action to prevent some fundamentalist organisations from targeting members of the Christian community. Mr Antulay said he would take up this matter with the home ministry and ask them to seriously pursue it. He said he had already spoken to the chief ministers of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and even Rajasthan and written letters to them about alleged harassment of Christian in their states and asked what the government was doing to curb this. Speaking about the dismal situation of the Wakf boards in the country, Mr Antulay said, "I will apply my mind on how best state Wakf boards can be brought under the Central Wakf Council so that beneficiaries of the Wakf properties are benefited and not those who are sitting on Wakf properties illegally." Replying to a question, Mr Antulay denied that it was a controversial issue and instead said the controversy would be only for those whose benefits will cease. He further said that he wants to bring even Hindus who are in minorities in some states like Jammu and Kashmir and Punjab under the ambit of notified minorities but he said nothing will be done in haste. He claimed, "I want to create a consensus on the matter." (Asian Age 10.7.06)

Meanwhile, Chhattisgarh to amend law on conversion in tribal areas (7)

RAIPUR, AUGUST 3: The Chhattisgarh government has proposed a change in the anti-conversion law apparently to keep those who re-converted to Hinduism out of the purview of the legislation. Moving a Bill to amend the Chhattisgarh Dharma Swatantraadhiniyam 1968, Home Minister Ram Vihar Netam yesterday said it was common practice to change religion especially in tribal areas through force, lure or fraudulent means. To check such conversions, it was necessary to amend the law to enable people to return to their original religion, he said. In the Bill, the government has proposed an amendment so that "returning to forefather's religion or his original religion will not be treated as conversion". The government also proposes to include a clause that if people want to change their religion, they will have to apply to the district collector at least 30 days in advance. (Indian Exp 4/8/06)

Governor seeks advice on amendments to Freedom of Religion Act (7)

MP Governor Balram Jhakar has sought legal advice on the controversial amendments to the Freedom of Religion Act passed in the State assembly last month. The Governor informed this to a delegation of the All India Christian Council led by Abraham Mathai that had met him on Saturday evening. Jhakar had sought the opinion of experts in Constitutional law on the legislation, which has alarmed the minority and Human Rights world. The Association in a statement informed that MP has had a law against forcible and induced conversions for 40 years, but the recent amendments, as in the case of Chhattisgarh, aggravate the punitive provisions to target Christian priests and curb the freedom of faith guaranteed by the Constitution. They also, by default, encourage conversions of tribals to Hinduism by leaving such actions outside purview of the legislation. The piece of legislation itself was passed under highly controversial

circumstances. It was one of nine sets of new Bills that were rushed through the State Legislative Assembly on a voice vote even as the House was in an uproar in a confrontation between the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party members and those of the opposition Congress, it alleged. (Pioneer 7/8/06)

Minorities in Gujarat still eyed with suspicion: Karat (7)

Ahmedabad: CPM general secretary Prakash Karat said on Saturday that since the 2002 carnage, the situation in Gujarat has not changed and post-Godhra riot victims have not been rehabilitated properly. He said some residents of Ahmedabad, whom he met on Saturday, told him that minority community was being viewed with suspicion in Gujarat. "The government should implement constitutional provisions regarding minorities in the state," Karat said. Stating the Indo-US nuclear deal was a matter of "national importance", CPM general secretary reiterated the demand for a discussion on the deal in Parliament. Karat told reporters: "It is surprising that our parliament is not discussing the deal but US Senate is holding threadbare discussions on the nuclear issue." Times of India 6/8/06)

NCM takes notice (7)

New Delhi, Aug. 9: The National Minorities Commission has expressed serious concern about the targeting of a "particular community" by the Maharashtra government. In response to this newspaper's reports about the interrogation of Muslims who travel frequently by the police in Mumbai, the commission on Wednesday noted, "While every effort must be made to identify and punish those responsible for the July 11 carnage, the commission views with serious concern the targeting of a particular community in the investigative process and the impression being created that a whole group is stigmatised, and is required to prove its innocence." The commission has pointed out that reports in the media that members of the particular community were being harassed in connection with the investigation of the serial blasts have "caused consternation and alarm". It added, "India is a plural, secular and democratic society, based on the rule of law and due process of law. The concept of presumption of guilt, and of group guilt, is alien to it and must not be allowed, even by default, to enter official functioning and public discourse." The Minorities Commission goes on to urge the concerned authorities to correct expeditiously any impressions that might have been created erroneously, and that no innocent persons are harassed. It has appealed to civil society to "spare no effort to reinforce the secular fabric of our society and to safeguard the human rights of all citizens". The Maharashtra police commissioner and authorities went to overdrive, meeting select groups to insist that Muslims were not being targeted. This newspaper, however, received telephone calls from Mumbai speaking of harassment on strict conditions of anonymity. Well-informed sources said the Maharashtra home ministry had sanctioned the new turn in the investigations to question Muslim frequent travellers. Mumbai police commissioner A.N. Roy, who first denied that any such questioning took place, told activists in Mumbai that even non-Muslims had been interrogated according to a list of those who travelled every 10 days or so. The vice-president of a multinational who was questioned is a Muslim and was the only one from the company to be subjected to this interrogation although all executives are frequent travellers..... (Asian Age 10/8/06)

Minorities form new Council in Madhya Pradesh (7)

Bhopal: Alleging that the official minorities bodies had failed to address their problems, Muslim, Christian and Buddhist representatives on Thursday declared the formation of a Madhya Pradesh Minorities Council to "combat atrocities" against their communities. They said the Council would oppose a Bill passed by the Assembly to amend the anti-conversion law. "Muslims have been victims of atrocities for ages. Now we find that Christians and Buddhists have also become soft targets. Thus we have decided to unite," Council president Mufti Abdur Razzaq Khan told reporters here. Madarsas, which embody a rich tradition and were used by kings and nawabs to educate members of their courts, were now being dubbed as centres of terrorism, he said. After being isolated for long, Muslims had decided to join hands with Buddhists and Christians to "fight for their rights", Mr. Khan said. Buddhist leader B S Sagar, who is the Council's Secretary, said freedom of religion was bestowed on the people by the Constitution and the penal provisions in the Bill to amend the Madhya Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act 1968 went against this. Alleging that the amendment would be used as a tool to target Christians, who were treated as "second-class citizens", former State Minority Commission member and the Council Treasurer's Indira Iyengar said the commission had been ineffective in helping minorities as its members are appointed by the government and "carried a similar stream of thoughts as the ruling party". "The Commission might

make recommendations, but the government often ignored them," she alleged, adding the Council will act as a medium to move the masses against atrocities on the Christians. – PTI (The Hindu 11/8/06)

NCM team to probe 'haircut' (7)

New Delhi, Aug. 26: The National Commission for Minorities (NCM) is sending its fact-finding team to Jaipur in connection with the forcible haircut of a Sikh teenager recently. The team led by NCM member Harcharan Singh Josh will meet chief minister Vasundhara Raje, top state police and government officials as part of its probe into the assault on 17-year-old Inderpreet Singh, the commission said. The NCM team, which leaves on Sunday will also meet Mr Singh and members of the Sikh community to gather information about the immediate response of the state authorities to the attack, which triggered Sikh protests in several parts of the country, the sources added. In April, an NCM probe, headed by Mr Josh enquired the Aligarh clash on Ram Navmi, found that authorities in SP-ruled Uttar Pradesh had "failed" to prevent the violence despite clear signs of tension. In June, the NCM carried out another fact-finding visit, again led by Mr Josh, to Bhopal in connection with allegations of anti-Christian attacks in Madhya Pradesh. (Asian Age 27/8/06)

JD-U to oppose ban on religious conversions (7)

New Delhi : Taking strong exception to the proposal of Jharkhand Government to impose a ban on religious conversion, coalition partner Janata Dal (United) on Sunday threatened to oppose the move and asked for withdrawal of ban from all parts of the country. "The JD (U), is a coalition partner in the Jharkhand Government, but has not been consulted on the issue. But we have heard from the Chief Whip of the BJP in the Jharkhand Assembly about such a move in the winter session of the assembly. The party would oppose any such legislation," party president Sharad Yadav told reporters after the two-day national executive of the party. "The decision to oppose the BJP move in Jharkhand has been taken unanimously by the national executive of JD (U)," he said, adding the party was opposed to ban on religious conversion in any part of the country. In the two-day national executive of 135 members, various resolutions were adopted including one on making a comprehensive policy on agriculture. " The UPA government has destroyed the food security of the people and for that matter, it is also in the process of dismantling the public distribution system," Yadav said, demanding a ban on forward trading system in food grains with immediate effect. Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, who was present at the meeting, apprised the first national executive about implementation of the commitments made to the people of Bihar during the elections after the NDA came to power in the state. "He spoke for an hour about the developments that are taking place in the state for the last nine months and we are satisfied," Yadav informed. (Pioneer 28/8/06)

'Redress grievances of minorities' (7)

NEW DELHI: Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Tuesday said that it was "unfortunate" that terrorism has resulted in certain sections of the country's population being targeted with the result that a wrong impression has been created of the radicalisation of the Muslim community. Presiding over a meeting of the Chief Ministers on Internal Security, Dr. Singh said that it was imperative that "we embark upon a pro-active polity to ensure that a few individual acts do not result in tarnishing the image of an entire community, and remove any feelings of persecutions and alienation from the minds of the minorities." On a cautious note, the Prime Minister referred to the prevailing sense of insecurity among minorities, especially Muslims and warned that the "adverse consequences of this can be extremely deleterious for our polity. The responsibility to ensure that this does not happen lies squarely upon all of us." He asked the Chief Ministers to ponder how to assuage feelings of insecurity among the minorities, especially Muslims. "We must recognise that the Muslim community in large parts of our country nurses a strong grievance of not having been active participants and beneficiaries of processes of social and economic development. All of us have an obligation to redress legitimate grievances of our minorities," he said. He advised the Chief Ministers to pay personal attention to ensuring that the minorities "are effective partners in the process of social and economic change." While dealing with terrorism, scrupulous regard and respect for fundamental human rights of citizens, particularly of minority communities, ought to be a core concern of law enforcement agencies, he said. "No innocent person should be harassed in our struggle against terrorism. If a mistake is made, effective remedial corrective measures must be taken well in time. Government agencies, particularly law enforcement agencies, must establish intimate contacts with

community leaders and show adequate sensitivity to their concerns. Chief Ministers ought to put in place effective mechanisms to achieve these objectives." (The Hindu 6/9/06)

PM for more minority role in security agencies (7)

NAINITAL: Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Sunday said he was "waiting for the Sachar Committee report" on the social and educational status of Muslims, and action on it will follow soon. The PM was elaborating on his opening remarks at the Congress chief ministers' conclave, wherein he called for increased representation for minorities in police and intelligence agencies. "We have taken the initiative to appoint that committee. This will be the first comprehensive report on the various aspects of Muslims - education, employment etc. Once we get it, we will decide on the further course of action," he said, on being asked there were plans afoot to introduce job reservation for Muslims. Sonia Gandhi also elaborated on her opening remarks about the potential alienation of Muslims. "On several occasions, police have picked up innocent people. It gets wide media coverage. When they are released, that goes unreported. When we take strong measures against terrorism, we must also ensure that innocents are not harassed," she said at the conclave. (Indian Express 25/9/06)

Withdraw conversion laws: CPM (7)

New Delhi : The CPI(M) Central Committee on Tuesday hinted that it would ask the UPA Government to force the BJP-ruled Governments to withdraw some the amendments they recently made in the laws for religious conversion. In a statement, the CPI(M) Central Committee said that these legislations will provide a legal licence to harass and intimidate minorities in the BJP-ruled states. "The CPI(M) demands that these amendments should be withdrawn and the legislation should not get assent for being enforced as laws," it said. (The pioneer 27/9/06)

NCM to visit Gujarat on relief check (7)

New delhi, september 28: The Gujarat riots are now over four and a half years old but the business of compensations and rehabilitation is yet to be resolved. The National Minorities Commission (NCM) has decided to go to Gujarat between October 13 and 17 and take stock of the situation on how the money was distributed amongst the kin of those who died or were affected in the riots and those who have been left out. This would be the first visit to Gujarat by the NCM led by chairman Hamid Ansari after he was appointed in March this year. Acting on complaints about irregularities in the way monies were spent and distributed, the NCM held a meeting on the seventh of this month and a four-member team will now be going there to get a first-hand account. Last year, on December 14, the Gujarat Government informed the National Minorities Commission that it would be returning Rs. 19.1 crore of the total amount of Rs 155.61 crore received from the PM's Economic Package (meant for rehabilitation and relief for victims in the riots). Here in Delhi, in its latest meeting on the matter on September 7, the NCM heard from two complainants — members of NGOs who had worked in Gujarat that more than 500 Muslim families were still forced to live away from their habitual place of residence after the riots of 2002, and are presently staying in makeshift colonies in Gujarat in predominantly four districts of Gujarat i.e. Panchmahals, Sabarkantha, Dahod, Anand and in cities of Ahmedabad and Vadodara. The NCM is neither happy with the state returning the money nor with the explanation it has offered on the distribution so far. Copies of documents obtained by Express reveal some of their concerns: (Indian Express 29/9/06)

Religious Freedom Day on October 14 (7)

NEW DELHI: The All-India Confederation of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and the All-India Christian Council (AICC) will observe "Religious Freedom Day" on October 14 to mark the day when Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar converted to Buddhism in 1956. They will also celebrate the 2550th anniversary of "mahaparinirvana divas" (salvation day) of Lord Buddha at Nagpur on October 13 and 14. Talking to reporters here on Friday, Confederation chairman Udit Raj said dalits and people from other minority communities were welcome to come to Nagpur and convert to Christianity and Buddhism. The two-day function would be marked by a discourse on freedom of religion. (The Hindu 7/10/06)

CPI(M) panel discusses uplift of minorities (7)

NEW DELHI: The minorities sub-committee of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) considered a suggestion whether to ask the Planning Commission to make a sub-plan in the 11th Five Year Plan so that funds could be earmarked for the uplift of the minorities. The committee has party general secretary

Prakash Karat as convener. Its members include Lok Sabha MPs Mohammed Salim and Hannan Mollah and others from State committees. Considering the Justice Rajinder Sachar Committee report at its first meeting, members said the minority communities remained both economically and educationally backward. The view was that although the Constitution guaranteed equality, it was not applied uniformly across the country. Though there was reservation for the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes, the minorities could not derive benefit since they did not fall under the classification. The members shared their experience of working with the minorities. It was suggested that instead of a generalised approach, specific steps should be taken, including exploring the possibility of whether the list of Backward Classes could be expanded to include minorities. (The Hindu 2/11/06)

Survey to identify backward districts (7)

NEW DELHI, NOVEMBER 1 : The UPA government has initiated an exercise to identify backward districts and blocks with a significant minority population to ensure better implementation of welfare schemes. But according to sources, the focus of the exercise could be Muslims, considering the country's demographics. Schools, jobs, poverty, land ownership: on all these counts, Muslims worse off than OBCs. Prison is the only place where Muslims are over-represented. The government on its part says the move is aimed at collecting "recent and accurate" data. As per the existing information — based on the 1971 Census — the government has identified 41 districts with a considerable minority population. However, the data consists of only population figures and doesn't include any socio, economic or human development parameters required to establish that a district is backward. Talking to The Indian Express, Union Minister for Minority Affairs AR Antulay said: "Collecting latest data which has indicators to show backwardness along with population figures means that we can identify the areas where welfare schemes should be most focused on." But he claimed that "welfare schemes are meant for all minorities which are economically and socially backward, and not for any particular community." The government aims to identify more than 100 districts and blocks across the country which have at least a 20 per cent minority population and are faring badly in health, education, sanitation facilities, school enrollments, employment opportunities, purchasing power, women empowerment etc. The exercise will be carried out by state governments which will pass on the data to the Ministry of Minority Affairs. Once the list is complete and has been vetted by the ministry, it is expected to be placed before the Cabinet. (Indian Express 2/11/06)

15% Bengal funds for minorities (7)

Kolkata, Nov. 21: The West Bengal government on Tuesday issued a notification saying 15 per cent of the state's budgetary expenditure must be for the benefit and welfare of the minorities. The notification directs all departments to spend 15 per cent of their budgetary allocations on the minorities. The decision was prompted by the Prime Minister's new 15-Point programme for the Welfare of Minorities. West Bengal will be the first state to implement the programme. The decision was cleared by the state Cabinet on Tuesday. West Bengal chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee presided over the Cabinet meeting. The major departments that will spend 15 per cent of fiscal outlay on minority welfare include finance, panchayat, home, urban development, municipal affairs, school education, technical education and power. Rejecting the suggestion that the government's decision was a sop for the Muslim community, the minister for minorities' development and welfare, Dr Abdus Sattar, said the decision would benefit all minorities, not just Muslims. "In any case, the government sincerely believes that a state cannot progress unless its most vulnerable sections also progress," he added. The state government is also constituting a 19-member state-level monitoring committee to oversee the implementation of its order. The monitoring body will comprise secretaries of the 16 departments, representatives of NGOs and minority institutions. It will be chaired by Dr Sattar. Responding to the government notification, Congress Legislature Party leader Manas Bhuiya said the decision was long overdue. Claiming that the minorities, especially Muslims, have remained backward in the state, Mr Bhuiya said: "The Sachar committee report makes it clear that the Muslims of West Bengal are the poorest of the poor and the most backward. The Left Front government merely paid lip service to the Muslims, but did precious little for their upliftment despite being in power for three decades. Now, forced by the Prime Minister's 15-point programme, it is trying to make amends." (Asian Age 22/11/06)

Minorities must have first claim on resources: PM (7)

New Delhi: Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Saturday said "innovative plans" would have to be devised for the minorities, particularly Muslims, to empower them to share equitably the fruits of development. Speaking in the context of "collective priorities" for the 11th Plan, he referred to the programmes for uplift of the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes, the other backward classes, the minorities and women and children. "The special component plans for the SCs and the STs will need to be revitalised." Addressing the National Development Council here, Dr. Singh said the Centre had myriad other responsibilities, whose demands would have to be fitted into its overall resource availability. The Planning Commission would review ongoing programmes to eliminate those which outlived their original rationale. "But we cannot escape from the fact that the Centre's resources will be stretched in the immediate future and an increasing share of the responsibility will have to be shouldered by the States." Outlining the collective Plan priorities, he mentioned agriculture, irrigation and water resources, health, education, critical investment in rural infrastructure and the essential public investment needs of general infrastructure along with programmes for the uplift of SCs and STs . . (The Hindu 10/12/06)

Row over Dr Singh's remark on minorities simmers (7)

New Delhi, Dec. 10: The controversy on Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's remark that Muslims should have the first claim on resources refuses to die down even after the government tried to play it down. The BJP said on Sunday that it would raise its objections on Monday in both Houses of Parliament over Dr Singh's remark that the minorities, particularly Muslims, must have the first claim on resources. "These remarks are a matter of grave concern as they amount to dividing the country's resources on religious lines. Our party will raise its objections vociferously in both Houses on Monday over the Prime Minister's comments," said BJP deputy leader in the Lok Sabha Vijay Kumar Malhotra. The Prime Minister's Office, on the other hand, said a controversy had been created by "deliberate and mischievous misinterpretation" of Dr Singh's remarks on minorities at a National Development Council meeting. Parliamentary affairs minister Priya Ranjan Das Munshi said there was no need for the clarification from the PMO on Dr Singh's remarks. "Through a deliberate and mischievous misinterpretation of what the PM said here yesterday (Saturday) at the meeting of the NDC on fiscal priorities of the government, an avoidable controversy has been generated," the PMO clarified. It also accused some sections of the electronic media of "fuelling a baseless controversy" by quoting Dr Singh out of context. According to it, the Prime Minister's reference to the first claim on resources referred to all priority areas, including programmes for the upliftment of SCs, STs, OBCs, women and children and the minorities. (Asian Age 11/12/06)

No need to apologise: Dasmunsi (7)

NEW DELHI: Criticising the Bharatiya Janata Party for disrupting Parliament on a daily basis on one "issue" or the other or even on non-issues like it did on Monday, Parliamentary Affairs Minister Priyaranjan Dasmunsi said Prime Minister Manmohan Singh "will not apologise, for there is nothing he should be apologetic about." The remarks came at the end of the day after both Houses adjourned amid Opposition demands that Dr. Singh clarify the remarks made by him at the National Development Council meeting on Saturday. Mr. Dasmunsi said anyone who read the text could see that Dr. Singh was talking about all disadvantaged sections of society — the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, the minorities, particularly the Muslims, women and other groups — having a first right on national resources. Leader of the Opposition L.K. Advani demanded that the Prime Minister's remarks be "withdrawn." He said the first claim on resources should be of those living below the poverty line. He recalled that after the Gujarat riots of 2002, Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee, had plaintively asked: "How will I show my face?" Unlike Mr. Vajpayee, Dr. Singh had done nothing or said nothing that would make him want to hide his face, Mr. Dasmunsi said (The Hindu 12/12/06)

BJP stir against 'minority appeasement' from Dec 15 (7)

The BJP on Tuesday condemned Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's remarks at the NDC meeting, termed them "divisive": and vowed to launch a countrywide protest programme against "Congress politics of minority appeasement" from December 15. The BJP parliamentary party, which met under the chairmanship of former prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee this morning, adopted a resolution saying the statement of the Prime Minister "is no accident". "It is the latest step in a series by which the UPA Government is seeking to appease Muslims, irrespective of the injury that would be inflicted on national interest and indeed on the Muslims themselves." The BJP made it clear that "the poorest of the poor have

the first claim on the country's resources-not a religious group as a religious group." (Indian Express 13/12/06)

``Credit to minorities not satisfactory" (7)

NEW DELHI: Union Finance Minister P. Chidambaram on Tuesday admitted in the Rajya Sabha that the disbursal of credit to the minorities was not satisfactory. "There has been a visible improvement but the situation is still not satisfactory. We must sharply step up lending to the minorities," the Minister said in response to the main question by C. Perumal (AIADMK). "I would be the first to concede that lending to minorities is not up to the mark," he said and asked those who were refused loans to lodge complaints with the Banking Ombudsman, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) or the Government. The Minister said the Government was committed to paying attention to the credit needs of the weaker sections, especially the minorities. Mabel Rebello (Congress) said that tribals who were minorities suffered from dual disadvantage and not a single loan above Rs. 1 crore had been given to them in the whole of central India. Mr. Chidambaram admitted that there was inadequate access for credit to this section. "Who can argue about that? We are impressing upon the banks to step up lending to the farm sector, students and the minorities. We will sharply step up lending to minorities and among them to the scheduled castes," he added. Mr. Chidambaram was challenged by Brinda Karat (Communist Party of India - Marxist) who termed the inadequate credit disbursal as "outright and blatant discrimination against the minority community. The active discriminatory policies are very clear in the work profile of Muslim minorities. It has the highest percentage of self-employed population and yet credit is not available to them." The Minister's reply led to a brief and hot exchange between him on the one side and Ms. Karat and Shahid Siddiqui (Samajwadi Party) on the other over the use of the word `semantics' at the end of which Mr. Chidambaram apologised. (The Hindu 20/12/06)

Minorities rights award for Fr. Cedric (7)

New Delhi, Dec. 19: The Minorities Rights Award for the year 2006 was awarded to Jesuit priest and human rights activist, Father Cedric Prakash, by National Commission for Minorities on Monday, the UN day for Minority Rights. The award was presented to Fr. Prakash, who is also director of Prashant: The Centre for Human Rights, Justice and Peace, by Justice A. S. Anand, the former chairman of the National Human Rights Commission of India. In his welcome address, Mr M.H. Ansari, chairman of NCM asserted that, "the denial of minority rights amounts to denial of human rights of a country's citizens." Justice Anand said, "Rights without duties, leads to arrogance and duties without rights is only slavery. It is only when the rights of all citizens, including minorities, women and children are respected in the country, would we really have an occasion to celebrate". He went on to describe the situation of the victims of the Gujarat carnage and how it was imperative for institutions like the NHRC to take a proactive stand on behalf of the victims. "The hands of a person are meant to serve and not to strangulate; the heart is for loving and not to hate others. This is what Fr. Cedric Prakash epitomises and that he why he richly deserves this award", said the former Chief Justice. In his acceptance speech, Fr. Cedric Prakash said "On a day like this, I cannot but help think of my Muslim sisters and brothers in Gujarat — many of them still live marginalised and alienated lives and are treated as outsiders in places which they once called their home." Fr. Prakash is the recipient of several national and international awards, which include the Kabir Puraskar from the President of India and the Chevalier de la Legion d'Honneur from the President of France. (Asian Age 20/12/06)