

MINORITIES – GENERAL - 2007

(January to December)

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Karnataka Government accused of 'anti-minority bias' (7)

BANGALORE: Several representatives of Muslims and Christians on Thursday complained to the National Commission for Minorities that the Karnataka Government had what they termed an "anti-minority bias." They said their confidence was low and they were feeling insecure after the recent communal riots in Mangalore and parts of Bangalore. The representatives of minorities, especially Muslims, spoke about the problems they are faced with, at a meeting with members of the commission, who were in Bangalore to hear their views on law and order, development programmes and other subjects. Several Muslim leaders charged the police with taking sides during the communal violence. They alleged that lower-level officials of the Police Department had supported attacks against them. Compensation was yet to be paid to some of those injured in police firing, they said and submitted to the Commission a CD containing views of the victims of communal violence. The leaders of minorities, including religious heads, demanded that the Police Department recruit Muslims and Christians in proportion to their population. Such a step would make the police force neutral, they said. Christian leaders took serious exception to the recent decision by the State Cabinet to withdraw nearly 30 cases booked against those charred with inciting violence during the protests against the prayer meeting addressed by the U.S.-based evangelist Benny Hinn in Bangalore in 2005. Father Ambrose Pinto, principal of St. Joseph's College, Bangalore, charged the Government with showing a "terrible anti-minority bias." In addition to the communal violence, raking up of contentious issues such as Bababu-dangiri were also causing communal tension every year, he said. Chairman of the National Commission for Minorities M.H. Ansari called on Chief Minister H.D. Kumaraswamy, who explained the various steps taken by the Government to safeguard the interests of minorities. (The Hindu 2/3/07)

PC faces attack over minority commitment (7)

New Delhi, March 13: Finance minister P. Chidambaram on Tuesday came under attack from the Opposition and the Left parties alike for not doing enough to ensure that loans are made available to the minorities on a priority basis. As many as six members of the Rajya Sabha, belonging to the BJP, CPI(M), Congress and Samajwadi Party, wanted to know why the government was not coming out with a clear policy document so that banks can be mandated to disburse a certain percentage of loans for the minorities. The latest salvo comes at a time when Mr Chidambaram has barely managed to recover from the volley of criticism, from the Opposition parties and from his own party, for failing to curb the prices of essential commodities from escalating beyond the reach of many people. Mr Chidambaram sought to reassure the House that the government was in talks with the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and the Indian Banks' Association (IBA) for ensuring "equitable credit" to the minorities and that the government would come out with a policy in the immediate future. The minister's reply did not satisfy the members. An exasperated Brinda Karat of the CPI(M) felt that all members could learn from Mr Chidambaram, a lawyer by profession, how not to give a straight answer. Even Rajya Sabha chairman Bhairon Singh Shekhawat couldn't resist asking the minister. "How much time will the government take (for finalising this policy)?" Mr Shekhawat wanted to know. "I can't fix a date," Mr Chidambaram replied. "I will do my best ... to ensure that the RBI and the IBA are on board as early as possible." He explained that there was "a difference of perception and approach" between the government and the RBI on the issue of loans to minorities on priority basis. The RBI felt that "double counting" of minorities and weaker sections might take place if banks were directed to pay a fixed percentage of loans and that the "correct approach" would be to identify the districts having a concentration of minorities and focus on them. The avalanche of questions began soon after the minister finished replying to the question raised by Laljan Basha of the Telugu Desam Party. Mr S.S. Ahluwalia of

the BJP wanted to know how minority is defined and the objections raised by the RBI and the IBA. Ms Karat said the minister has misled the House and not acted on the letter written by the Prime Minister's Office, asking the ministry of finance to fix an "appropriate percentage" of priority sector lending for minorities..... (Asian Age 14/3/07)

Rs 749 cr set aside for minority uplift (7)

NEW DELHI, MARCH 16: The Human Resource Development Ministry has set aside Rs 749 crore to mobilise "awareness" about "literacy and education among Muslims." According to a paper prepared by the ministry, the money will be utilised over the next five years in 103 districts of the country. While Rs 440 crore has been set aside for camp-based literacy cum vocational training programmes for Muslims in 88 districts, Rs 40 crore has been earmarked for group activities and door to door campaigns in 20 states. A whopping Rs 50 crore is "annual plan expenditure," for "TV/AIR publicity, newspapers and other printed media". Further, the ministry has asked for Rs 5 crore for "monitoring, evaluation and consultancy" of the programme. It may be recalled here that before the last Lok Sabha elections, when the NDA government spent crores of public money on publicising "achievements" of the government, independent agencies had indicted the government in some way or the other. While the present case is not exactly publicity for the government, questions could be raised on the use of funds for a cause like this. Apart from money set aside for the "media campaign", the additional Rs 5 crore that has been set aside for "exposure visits to different nations and within the country for sharing experiences in promoting literacy and education among Muslims" could also invite criticism. The funds set aside for "exhibition/promotional drives at major dargahs during annual urs" was Rs. 8.75 crore and about Rs 2 crore has been put aside as expenses for "messages/posters indicating the sayings of the Prophet regarding promotion of knowledge/education" for the Plan period. The HRD ministry estimates that "meetings with other stake-holders" on this matter would cost Rs 5.15 crore over the next five years, and "academic input" which includes preparation and printing of Urdu primers, "neo-literate material" and IT package" would cost Rs. 14.50 crore for the five year period. (Indian Express 17/3/07)

NCM wants data on SC segments (7)

New Delhi, April 11: In a move which could re-ignite the debate on dividing citizens on communal lines, the National Commission for Minorities (NCM) has asked the Delimitation Commission to find out the component of minority voters in reserved constituencies. Explaining the rationale behind the demand, NCM chairman Hameed Ansari said the Sachar Committee report mentions that it was brought to their notice that Muslim concentration Assembly constituencies were declared reserved constituencies where only Scheduled Caste candidates can contest elections. "So we have asked the Delimitation Commission to find out how many reserved constituencies have a large number of minority population," he said. Mr Ansari stressed that this exercise was not related to any election but was based on the Sachar Committee report's mention of this finding and since that was just a sample survey, the NCM would like to know what was the picture in the whole country. However, there is no time limit to giving the report as Mr Ansari said the data has to be collected, analysed and then reported to the NCM. He said there was no need to make the issue linked to any communal divide but that this was just one of the studies that the commission was planning to conduct as it did in various other issues. In the Sachar Committee report, it is mentioned on page 25 that "while the committee could not look into the issue of voter lists, an effort was made to ascertain the facts on the issue of reserved constituencies. Our analysis relating to the reserved constituencies for SC candidates in three states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal suggest that there is truth in the allegation". The argument is that since constituencies with large Muslim populations are reserved for SCs, Muslims are being systematically denied political participation, as is mentioned in the report. Appendix 2.2 of the Sachar Committee report shows that in UP there are eight constituencies which are reserved for SCs but has more Muslim population than SCs in the constituencies. Likewise, in Bihar, there are nine such constituencies and in West Bengal there are 10 such constituencies. (THE ASIAN AGE 12/4/07)

Probe activities of communal outfits: CPI(M) (7)

NEW DELHI: Seeking to draw the attention of the Centre to a pattern in the incidents in different States of "communal forces" whipping up passions in the name of security of Hindu girls, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) has sought a comprehensive probe into it. "I appreciate that law and order being a State subject, the main responsibility lies with the State governments. However, given the national implications of the above developments, I would request you to consider whether it would be appropriate for the Central Government to have a comprehensive inquiry into the activities of such organisations, which are being formed in different States and into the sources of their funding. This will assist in [their] monitoring, and enable prompt action by the relevant authorities against communal incidents," said Brinda Karat, Polit Bureau member and MP, in a letter to Home Minister Shivraj Patil. Drawing his attention to the violence unleashed against a television news channel in Mumbai by the Hindu Rashtriya Sena, she said only 18 of the approximately 40 criminals in the group had been arrested. The attack was "clearly made to threaten the channel because it dared to show the pathetic plight of the inter-religious couple, who were looking for shelter from the attack of similar forces in Gujarat." "Not surprisingly, the protests from these criminals is not because of concern that the girl is a minor, but because the person she eloped with is a Muslim," she said. The Minister should ensure that all the culprits were arrested and the case closely monitored. The violence against the news channel was not an isolated incident. Ms. Karat pointed to another case in Bhopal, where two consenting adults belonging to different religions eloped to Mumbai, and the family of the Muslim groom was threatened. While the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Bajrang Dal held violent demonstrations, the police arrested the brother of the groom, who was released only on the intervention of the Bombay High Court. It was not a coincidence that a compact disc with inflammatory language and visuals against the constitutional and legal rights of consenting adults in self-choice inter-religious partnerships was released by the BJP during the Uttar Pradesh elections. She said though the CD had been withdrawn, the BJP had not spoken against its contents. "A pattern is apparent where communal forces in different States, particularly where the BJP is in office, are trying to whip up communal passions in the name of security of Hindu girls. The proliferation of such groups or organisations under various banners and nomenclatures indulging in blatant communal propaganda and practice has very grave implications for communal harmony, as well as individual rights," she said. (THE HINDU 20/4/07)

...to civil servants, he says be sensitive to minorities' issues (7)

New Delhi, April 21: The Centre's commitment to minorities came to the fore again with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh reiterating his government's resolve of "appropriate affirmative action for all disadvantaged segments". Addressing a gathering of top bureaucrats from across the country today, the Prime Minister said, "We will ensure that constitutional commitments are fulfilled and that women and minorities are properly represented at all levels in the government." Singh also had a word of advice for the bureaucrats gathered to hear him. "Civil servants should be sensitive to the concerns of weaker sections, particularly Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, minorities and women and children," he said. Addressing an audience, which included the Cabinet Secretary, secretaries of Central ministries and departments, chief secretaries from states and heads of police and intelligence agencies, Singh outlined steps needed to retain the government's relevance in times of change. "The challenge before us is to change the role of civil servants in society, without diluting quality and standards and retaining the regard of the society," he said. Referring to administrative reforms, the Prime Minister talked about "agents of change" — public-oriented personnel of outstanding calibre who would be strategically located to engineer reform. "A proposal is being prepared for appointing agents of change who would catalyse process reform initiatives," he said. He pointed out that Cabinet Secretary B K Chaturvedi had already discussed the idea with the chief secretaries at a meeting yesterday. On the Second Administrative Reforms Commission, the Prime Minister said a group of ministers and the Cabinet Secretary were monitoring its progress and he hoped to see results soon. "They would be free from departmental baggage and work on a full-time basis within the system to deliver results," he said. He felt that the most difficult area of reform in the government was procedural. Emphasising that all-India services had to preserve their national character, he said, "In an era when the polity is getting increasingly fragmented, the responsibility on the all-India services of maintaining a national outlook has definitely increased." He presented the first Prime Minister's

Award for Excellence in Public Administration to Rajiv Chawla, Secretary, Government of Karnataka, and R S Pandey, Steel Secretary, Govt of India. Those who attended the function included Suresh Pachauri, Minister of State for Personnel, Cabinet Secretary B K Chaturvedi, Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister T K A Nair and Rajani Razdan, Secretary, Department of Administrative Reform. (Indian Express 22/4/07)

Tamil Nadu tops in providing financial aid to minorities (7)

New Delhi : Tamil Nadu has topped in doling out financial assistance to the minority communities under the micro-financing scheme for self-employment in 2006-07. The State Government helped 14,239 persons belonging to the minority community by disbursing Rs 672.45 lakh among them. In all, 25,482 minorities were helped by different States by disbursing Rs 1317.12 lakh among them during the period against 10,893 in 2005-06. In 2004-05, 11,034 minorities were financially assisted. During 2006-07, the Centre had the target to help 45,700 minorities by distributing Rs 120.60 crore among them."The number of beneficiaries would go up after all the State Governments submit the details of beneficiaries. Many States like Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Jammu & Kashmir, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Manipur and Maharashtra have not yet submitted the number of beneficiaries," an official said. The National Minorities Development and Finance Corporation (NMDFC) of Ministry of Minority Affairs provides financial assistance on concessional terms to the minorities for pursuing self-employment through the State Governments. The Corporation gives them term loans as well as micro credit through the State channelling agencies for pursuing self-employment activities. The Left-ruled West Bengal and Kerala helped 3,692 and 3,200 minorities respectively during the last financial year, while the number of beneficiaries from Assam and Andhra Pradesh were 2,080 and 893 respectively. Among the northeastern States, Nagaland tops the list by assisting 702 minorities by disbursing Rs 150 lakh. According to Minority Affairs Minister AR Antulay, the NMDFC disbursed Rs 9,958 lakh under the term loan scheme among 22,301 in 2006-07. West Bengal, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh Governments helped 6,230, 5,469 and 4,224 minorities respectively under the term loan scheme in the last financial year. In 2005-06, 23,408 minorities were helped through term loans by disbursing Rs 9,810 lakh. The highest number of beneficiaries under the scheme, however, was recorded at 35,552 in 2004-05 when the different State Governments disbursed Rs 13,072 lakh among the applicants. (Pioneer 30/4/07)

NCM to get statutory status (7)

New Delhi, May 3: In a bid to infuse a sense of confidence among minorities, government on Thursday night decided to move a Constitution Amendment Bill to grant Constitutional status to the National Minorities Commission. Union information and broadcasting minister P.R. Dasmunsi said that the Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh gave its approval to move the Constitution (103rd Amendment) Bill 2004 to grant constitutional status to the NCM. Along with this bill, the government would also move a legislation to repeal the National Commission for Minorities Act. "These amendments would infuse a greater sense of confidence amongst the minorities," he said, but did not elaborate. Mr Das Munshi said the Cabinet also decided to table the report of the Justice Kochar Commission, which probed the 2003 collapse of the bridge over Daman Ganga river, connecting Nanhni Daman and Moti Daman, in both Houses of the Parliament. Along with the probe report, the action taken would also be placed, he said. The Union Cabinet also gave its approval by accepting the recommendation of the Joint Committee that a member of parliament will be allowed to engage any number of persons either in Delhi or in his constituency for obtaining secretarial assistance within the total monetary ceiling of Rs14,000 per month. Out of them at least one person should be computer literate and the certification by the MP about the computer literacy of such person would suffice. (Asian Age 4/5/07)

NCM's plea to Chhattisgarh Government (7)

NEW DELHI: The National Commission for Minorities (NCM) has asked the Chhattisgarh Government to ensure that social and political groups are not allowed to exploit religious sentiments for their narrow ends. "Such groups have been assiduously indulging in hate propaganda against Christians in general and Christian missionaries in particular," a statement

issued by the Commission said here on Friday. It has also drawn the State Government's attention to areas where the naxal movement was strong and asked it not to lower its guard. If a section of the citizenry feels it is marginalised and has no stake in the future of the country, it could be an easy prey to elements whose main aim is to destabilise society, the Commission said. The first step to stall such a development will be to suitably amend the Chhattisgarh Land Revenue Code or to interpret it in the widest possible manner, it said. The observations came following complaints received by the Commission from tribal Christians in Jashpur district, alleging partisan and discriminatory treatment from the district administration at the instance of "vested interests." A NCM team visited Jashpur in March and organised public hearings where people alleged that the Government was interpreting and implementing the Chhattisgarh Land Revenue Code 1959 in a manner harmful to the interests of tribal Christians. Section 170 B of the Code bars the sale of Adivasi agricultural land to a non-advasi to protect the interests of the poor and illiterate tribal people. They alleged that the provision was being used to prevent Christian tribals from setting up schools and dispensaries that could cater to the needs of their community. They said that since they were not in a position to set up schools or hospitals themselves, they handed over their land to societies formed for the purpose but these efforts were stalled because the sale of such land was not permitted to the societies either. (The Hindu 5/5/07)

MP religion Act: AGI says it violates basic rights (7)

BHOPAL, JUNE 12: The Attorney General of India has given an adverse opinion on the amendment to the anti-conversion law passed by the Madhya Pradesh Assembly nearly a year ago. Governor Balram Jakhar had sought the AGI's opinion on the controversial amendment to the Freedom of Religion Act passed without any discussion. According to the AGI, the Act violates the Fundamental Rights enjoyed by citizens. The Act was first passed in 1968 by the then Congress Government and amended last year by the ruling BJP Government. The Opposition was not present in the House when the amendment was passed. The amendment makes it compulsory for potential converts to take prior permission of the administration. It provides for stringent punishment and fine for failure to notify the authorities. Priests or organisers of conversion ceremonies have to inform the district magistrate a month in advance the name and address of the potential converts, besides the venue and details of the ceremony. The district magistrate will then write to the superintendent of police, who in turn will ask the respective police station to inquire into the case and give his report. The magistrate will give his consent only if he is satisfied about the circumstances and after establishing that people were not lured into or forced to convert. The Governor was not happy with the way the legislation was amended and said there should have been discussions on the crucial amendment. He did not sign the amendment and sought the AGI's opinion last year. When the Governor did not receive the AGI's opinion, he sent a few reminders. On his part, Jakhar had sought details of conversions that took place in the state in the past five years. He wanted to find out whether the amendment was warranted by a spate of conversions in the recent times. He also wanted to know the religions involved, age group of the converts and how many of them were tribals. The Government gave the details of only 20 out of 48 districts. Jakhar sought the AGI's opinion because the figures provided by the Government did not justify the amendment. Several backward districts did not report any conversions, contrary to the Government's stand that conversions were rampant in such areas because the poor were getting allurements. The Governor received the AGI's opinion a fortnight ago and is studying it. The Congress, Left parties and several minority organisations have already petitioned him to send the Bill back. Sources in the Home department confirmed that the Government was prepared for the eventuality of the Governor sending the Bill back for reconsideration. The Legal department has already dug up old court cases related to the legislation. A senior officer told The Indian Express on Tuesday that the Government was confident of taking on the legal challenges because the Madhya Pradesh High Court had in 1997 held the constitutional validity of the Act. (Indian Express 13/6/07)

Minority panel suggests rethink on changing definition (7)

NEW DELHI, JULY 3: The newly-constituted National Commission for Minority Educational Institutions (NCMEI) has submitted a 10-page report to the Centre, saying that it "must reconsider" bringing the Constitutional Amendment in the monsoon session of Parliament, which

envisages a change in the way that minorities are defined in India, as that could mean “the country getting divided “ and nearly “two nations” in one. As first reported in The Indian Express, an important consequence of the 103rd Amendment to the Constitution Bill--set to be tabled when Parliament reconvenes, is set to change the way minorities are defined. It would set the population in states as the administrative unit, and there will be no concept of “national” minorities. The Bill also has provisions which say that while states would be consulted on who is a minority there, any change in status of any community would have to be voted upon in Parliament. The Centre's argument is that this would be a more rational way of assessing minorities, and in keeping with what the Supreme Court has said on various occasions, in the TMA Pai matter, the P A Inamdar case and in the matter relating to St Stephen's College. All these are high-profile judgments relating to the implementation of Article 25-30, which confer special rights to religious and linguistic minorities and give them the right to safeguard their identities. But now, the three-member NCMEI (headed by Justice MSA Siddique and with former MP B S Ramoowalia and the Principal of St Stephen's Revd Valson Thampu as members) is quoting from the same judgments and Constituent Assembly debates to make its case that any such attempt would prevent such a society from coming up where all citizens are treated as equals with “no majority and no minority”. The report even quotes Sardar Patel from the Constituent Assembly debates saying that any bid to tightly demarcate who is a minority and who is not would perpetuate the division of India into Minorities and the Majority. Incidentally, St Stephens' College has this year made allowances to enable separate reservations for “Dalit Christians” as a category, a move that has been criticised by several quarters. The NCMEI report says such an amendment would run contrary to the Constitution, which according to it, has deliberately not defined a minority. The report feels this has been deliberately kept ambiguous and no attempt must be made “to supercede their (founding fathers') wisdom”. The report says “views of the Commission on proposed Constitution amendment defining minorities” was submitted to the Centre on June 5, and is the result of the Commission “taking suo-moto action” based on the news report on the proposed amendment. The Commission falls under the purview of the Human Resource Development Ministry. (Indian Express 4/7/07)

Look beyond Muslims: Minority panel member (7)

New Delhi : Minorities do not mean Muslims only. There are other minority communities too who need Government's due attention," said Lama Chosphe Zotpa, member of the National Commission for Minorities (NCM), in the wake of Andhra Pradesh earmarking four per cent quota in the Government jobs for backward Muslims. Lama, hailing from Ladakh in J&K, says that there are many among non-Muslim minorities like Buddhists, where social, economic and educational backwardness is acutely rampant. "It is good to empower the backwards, but the approach should be inclusive. It should be ensured that no section is left out from the purview of any affirmative measures," he added. Economic backwardness should be the sole criterion for distributing the benefits of quota among the society's targeted groups, Lama said, and added that the whole purpose of affirmative policies would be defeated if the State adopted an exclusive approach. "In such a situation, one of the best ways for equitable distribution of quota facilities would be earmarking a certain percentage against each stakeholder. If it is not done, the haves among the marginalised sections are seen usurping all benefits," Lama said. In order to substantiate his stand, Lama referred to the plight of India's Buddhists, spread over right from Uttaranchal, Ladakh, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim in Himalayan region. "Nothing has been done for their upliftment over the years. They continue to be in the morass of educational, social and economic backwardness," he said. Lama said that the long pending demand for financial assistance to the traditional monastic schools had not revoked any response from the Government. "There are only around 7000 such schools in the country, but the Centre is not ready to bear the financial burden at all. While in the case of madarsas, there a slew of concessions for their running. Herein lies the dichotomy in our approach," he said. "Nobody is against the modernisation of madarsas and making the Government funds available for them, but what about others. Cannot the Government bear the maintenance cost of these schools remains a million dollar question. What prevents the Centre from setting up a Buddha Foundation along the lines of Maulana Azad Foundation or BR Ambedkar Foundation," he added. The grievances of Lama are not like cry in the wilderness. Such complaints are now pouring from different sections,

ever since the Centre opened the quota gate. The Meenas from Rajasthan have already petitioned the Prime Minister Manmohan seeking the exclusion of 'creamy layer' from availing the benefits of quota. The Supreme Court too has raised the issue of 'creamy layer' among the SCs and the STs. (Pioneer 11/7/07)

'Presence of militants violates sacred place' (7)

New Delhi, July 12: The Lal Masjid siege may have been brought to an end through military action by Pakistan President General Pervez Musharraf. But to his troubles seem far from over, according to some prominent members of the Muslim community. Indeed, according to them, the trouble was the creation of Pakistan state itself. Vice-chancellor, Jamia Millia Islamia, Prof. Mushirul Hasan said that the presence of so many militants in a prestigious mosque "is a violation of a sacred space", adding "religious places should not be used for offering refuge to militants or for organising a confrontation with anybody". "If this is done, then the state has an obligation to act in the best interests of the country," he added. According to Prof. Hasan, the Lal Masjid episode "clearly suggests that militancy has assumed serious proportions in Pakistan and militants are using religion to masquerade their own interests". "Such individuals and groups have no place in a modern society," he added. Mahmood Madani, member of Parliament and the general secretary of the Jamiat-Ulama- e-Hind while describing the entire incident as "regrettable" said that the government of Pakistan itself is responsible for it. Stating that those who had been holed up inside the Lal Masjid were "a product of the ISI and the Pakistan government", now these people had turned against the government. Moreover, Mr Madani said both the US and Pakistan have adopted double standards where terrorism is concerned. They talk against terrorism but nurture it too. Samajwadi Party member of Parliament Shahid Siddiqui echoed similar sentiments. Mr Siddiqui said that the Lal Masjid incident could be seen coming in view of the policies that have been pursued by Pakistan's rulers in the past. "Something like this was bound to happen," he remarked. According to Mr Siddiqui, Lal Masjid isn't the only one of its kind in Pakistan. If not thousands, there must be hundreds of such Lal Masjids in Pakistan, all perpetuated by the state, he said. And these Lal Masjids will strike back at President Musharraf, said Mr Siddiqui. "So Musharraf will either have to go all out in his battle against the militants or face the consequences of his action in Islamabad," said Mr Siddiqui. (Asian Age 13/7/07)

Meghalaya Cong, allies against state-wise minority status (7)

Shillong, July 15: The Meghalaya Congress, along with the regional parties like the United Democratic Party (UDP) and the Khun Hynniewtrep National Awakening Movement (KHNAM) — they are also part of the Congress-led Meghalaya Democratic Alliance (MDA) Government in the state — have asked the Union Government to rethink the proposed 103rd amendment of the Constitution. The proposed amendment seeks to accord state-wise minority status to communities instead of having a national parameter for the same. Senior Congress leader and Union Tribal Minister P R Kyndiah met Union Minority Affairs Minister A R Antulay recently and asked for a national parameter to recognise minority communities in the country. He has conveyed to the Union Minister that the present minority communities would suffer if the proposed amendment is carried out. The UDP said the Union Government's effort to bring about the amendment was "against the spirit of the Constitution". UDP leader Bindo M Lanong said the party is surprised at the myopic vision of the present leadership in Delhi, which is trying to make such a decision. He also said the state parameter, which the Union Government proposes to use for according minority status, threatens to deprive Christians in the Northeast of their minority status. The Christian community in Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland, at present, fall in the Christian tribal category which has been accorded minority at the national level. The KHNAM is already on the job of creating a consensus in the state to oppose the proposed amendment. KHNAM general secretary Erwin Sutnga told The Indian Express that his party is talking with the church leaders, women's groups and other leaders to evolve a consensus on this. Sutnga said that the KHNAM would also approach all the political parties in the state to join efforts to impress upon the Central Government to accord minority status as per the present national parameter. He said the proposed state wise parameter for recognizing minorities would create problems for minority communities like Khasi, Jaintia and Garo tribes. Even the Garo Students Union (GSU) has expressed its opposition to the proposed amendment. (Indian Express 16/7/07)

Naqvi: No Muslim dalits (7)

New Delhi, July 19: There are Christians and there are Muslims but there is no such thing as dalits among them said, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) vice-president Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi, when asked about the recommendation by the National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities (NCRLM) on giving scheduled caste (SC) status to dalit Christians and dalit Muslims in the country. Mr Naqvi, often described as the Muslim face of the BJP, said that Islamic laws are based on equality and granting such a status will indirectly open the doors to religion-based reservations. In this regard, he cited the recent move by the Andhra Pradesh government to provide four per cent reservations in jobs and employment to 15 Muslim groups considered "socially and educationally backward." Stating that the backward classes had already been covered by the Mandal Commission, Mr Naqvi said that granting SC status to dalit Muslims and Christians "won't be in national interest, neither will it help them progress" and "all this will only be reduced to vote-bank politics". But, former Union minister C.K. Jaffar Sharif of the Congress contended that the issue really is of the welfare of the weaker sections. Classifying them thus, he said, will be for their economic benefit. Stating that he welcomed the Commission's recommendation, Mr Sharif said that this will help improve the lot of those, who are socially and economically oppressed. Also happy with the Commission's recommendation is the Church of North India (CNI), which has been pushing for the inclusion of dalit Christians in the SC net. CNI general secretary, CNI, Rev. Enos Das Pradhan said that non-inclusion of dalit Christians in the SC category "amounts to discrimination in the name of religion." Stating that the SC status of a person should be made "religion neutral", Rev. Pradhan said that giving this status to dalit Christians will help improve their economic condition. Nearly 80 per cent of CNI's membership is that of dalits, according to Rev. Pradhan. Also dubbing as "discriminatory" the prevailing status of dalit Muslims was Niaz Ahmed Farooqui of the Jamiat Ulama-e-Hind. "In free India, it is a shame that we have this discrimination," said Mr Farooqi and that it will be good if the Misra Commission's report is implemented. At the same time, he sounded a note of cynicism pointing out that numerous other reports in the past have made suggestions regarding the Muslim community. And these recommendations have never been implemented. (Asian Age 20/7/07)

UDF to back stir by minority communities (7)

Thiruvananthapuram: The United Democratic Front (UDF) on Wednesday protested against what it termed the CPI(M) leadership's attempts to gain control over the education and cooperative sectors. The UDF high power committee that met here decided to support agitations by minority communities to protect their rights guaranteed by the Constitution and through various judicial verdicts. Addressing a press conference after the meeting, UDF convener P.P. Thankachan said the moves to empower local bodies to control the functioning of schools had created apprehension among minority communities. Local Administration Minister Paloli Mohammed Kutty's statement in the Assembly was not conclusive enough and suggested that the matter was still open. The UDF appointed a sub-committee to formulate its approach towards the CPI(M) initiatives to gain control over the cooperative bodies in time for the proposed Cooperative Congress the Government plans to organise to discuss issues related to the sector. The meeting protested against the CPI(M)'s moves to open education institutions, libraries and welfare societies in the cooperative sector and the Government's moves to disband cooperative bodies controlled by the UDF. "Quota for mobilising funds for these cooperative bodies had been earmarked at the district level," Mr. Thankachan said. The UDF also decided to organise a campaign on five main issues leading to an agitation in August. These include the CPI (M)-mafia links and the new modes of corruption, the problems in the education sector, the Munnar-mafia links, attempts to suppress criticism, be it from political leaders, media, religious leaders or judges, and law and order issues. It demanded an inquiry into the Kerala Mineral and Metals Ltd.'s deal with a Russian arms manufacturer "bypassing" global tender procedures. It also protested against Finance Minister T.M. Thomas Isaac's move to bring an amendment to remove 24 life-saving drugs from Schedule I and including it in Schedule III of the Value Added Tax regime attracting four per cent tax. (The Hindu 26/7/07)

Demand for minority status for two districts (7)

JAIPUR: The Rajasthan State Minorities Commission on Wednesday called upon the Centre to include Jaisalmer and Sriganganagar districts of the State in the list of minority-dominated identified districts and release special package for their development in view of a significant population of Muslims and Sikhs, respectively, living in the two districts. The Commission's Chairperson, Jasbir Singh, in a letter addressed to Union Minority Affairs Minister A.R. Antulay registered his protest against the exclusion of the two districts from the list comprising 90 districts situated all over the country and pointed out that minorities in Jaisalmer and Sriganganagar were backward on both social and economic indices. "The yardstick for inclusion of a district in the list of identified districts is 25 per cent population of minority communities and their socio-economic backwardness. There is no justification for leaving out the two districts in Rajasthan as they meet the criterion," he said. Mr. Singh pointed out that the State Government had also observed recently that the Centre had discriminated against Jaisalmer and Sriganganagar. He said the Union Ministry's decision would deprive the two districts of the special package of Rs. 50 crores each. (The Hindu 26/7/07)

BJP to oppose Minority Bill in Parliament (7)

DIMAPUR: The BJP on Saturday said it will oppose in Parliament what the party called the "designs" of Congress to further divide the nation by introducing a controversial amendment bill to redefine the minority status in states. BJP president Rajnath Singh on Saturday said that the Congress-led UPA government was to introduce the controversial bill in the ensuing Monsoon session of Parliament, seeking to redefine minority status based on the state population and not on the national population census. Singh questioned Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and the Planning Commission's move to select 90 backward districts on the basis of religion and provide development funds, saying these were Muslim dominated districts. Asserting that the selection of districts should be on the basis of their backwardness and not on religion, the BJP chief alleged that the Congress-led government at the Centre had gone against the spirit of the Constitution and again proved its "Muslim appeasement by selecting only Muslim populated districts". On the political developments in Goa, Singh said the BJP led alliance had already filed a petition in the Supreme Court and hoped that justice would be done to the alliance. The petition would come up for hearing on August 6. Appealing to the people of Nagaland not to be "misled" by the Congress campaign on secularism, Singh asserted that BJP believed in equality for all and appeasement to none. Singh, who addressed the BJP Nagaland executive during the day, said the UPA government failed to implement the Rs 1,052 crore special economic package announced by former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee in 2003. He expressed confidence that the party's alliance with the Nagaland Peoples Front (NPF) would be further strengthened in Nagaland and the coalition would do much better in the coming assembly elections early next year and would continue to remain in power. Welcoming the extension of cease-fire between the Centre and NSCN (IM), Singh said the UPA government should seize the initiative and give impetus to the peace process as had happened during the time of the NDA government. "It is important that the Centre take all sections of Naga society, particularly all underground factions, into confidence to make the process broad based and comprehensive," he said. (Times of india 4/8/07)

20,000 minority students to get scholarships (7)

New Delhi, August 4 : In keeping with the Sachar Committee recommendation of giving financial assistance to Muslim students, the Government has announced 20,000 merit-cum-means scholarships for minorities. The scholarships, the cost of which will be borne by the Centre, will be distributed through an agency decided by the state and Union Territory Governments. They will target students from all notified minorities for pursuing "professional and technical studies" in India. Across the country, 14,585 scholarships will be made available for Muslims, 2,540 for Christians, 2,028 for Sikhs, 840 for Buddhist and seven for students from the Parsi community. The scholarship is proportionate to the minority population in each state and Union Territory, the Ministry of Minority Affairs said. And going by that criteria, Uttar Pradesh will get a share of 3,371 scholarships, West Bengal 2,223, Maharashtra 1,840 and Kerala 1,469. Out of the total scholarships, 30 per cent will be reserved for girls of each minority community in a state, which would be transferable to male students of that community in case of non-availability of female candidates in the concerned state. As per the provisions of the scholarships, the financial

assistance will be given to pursue degree and or postgraduate level technical and professional courses from a recognised institution. Maintenance allowance (Rs 10,000 for a hostelier and Rs 5,000 for a day scholar) will be credited to the student's account. The course fee (Rs 20,000 per annum or actual, whichever is less) will be paid by the state directly to the institute concerned. The scholarship is tied with the "satisfactory progress and conduct" of the scholar. If it is reported by the head of the institution at any time that a scholar has by reasons of his/her own act of default failed to make satisfactory progress or has been guilty of misconduct such as resorting to or participating in strikes, irregularity in attendance without the permission of the authorities concerned etc, the authority sanctioning the scholarship may either cancel the scholarship or stop or withhold further payment for such period as it may think fit, the guidelines set by the Ministry of Minority Affairs said. (Indian Express 5/8/07)

Minority status amendment: Cong must tread carefully (7)

With regional political parties and Church leaders opposing the Congress-led UPA coalition Government's proposed 103rd Amendment of the Constitution, it is not surprising that the North East Congress Coordination Committee (NECCC) has decided to approach the Union Government to request for a rethink. The proposed 103rd Amendment suggests deciding the minority status on a statewise parametre instead of the current practice of using the national parametre. After flu scare, little for the chickens to feed on Why the Valley should be wary of fleeing migrants Vasundhara in control, it's testing time for MLAs Law institute plan has a snag: Who holds ceremonial posts NICE okay but for Govt global consortium better. If Parliament passes the proposed 103rd Amendment, Christians of the three Christian dominated Northeastern states of Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland would lose their minority status. This could prove dangerous for the Congress in these states, where elections are scheduled for next year, as it would be viewed as an anti-Christian tribal party. Therefore, the NECCC decided to dispatch a delegation to and try and convince the Centre to do a rethink on the proposed amendment and protect the minority status of Christian tribals here. NECCC Chairman and Meghalaya CM D D Lapang said after the NECCC meeting last Friday that the NECCC Standing Committee would meet the Congress Central leadership and the Centre and ask them to continue to protect the Christian minority. Union Minister of State Oscar Fernandes has also been roped in to convince the Centre. Senior Congress leader and Union Tribal Minister P R Kyndiah has already met Union Minority Affairs Minister A R Antulay and requested him to use the national parameter to recognise the minority. He felt if the proposed 103th Amendment is carried out, the present minority communities would suffer. Regional parties—United Democratic Party (UDP) and Khun Hynniewtrep National Awakening Movement (KHNAM)—in Meghalaya have already termed the proposal as anti-Christian tribal. UDP leader Bindo M Lanong said that the proposal threatens to deprive Christians in the Northeast of their minority status. He said, "The proposed amendment goes against the spirit of the Constitution." There is no doubt that the proposal will provide regional parties with ammunition to fire at the Congress during the forthcoming Assembly elections. Meanwhile, the Presbyterian Church of India (PCI) has expressed its displeasure over the proposed amendment. It has written to Governments and MPs to oppose the amendment. (Indian Express 6/8/07)

Plan for minority districts soon (7)

New Delhi, Aug. 6: The Union ministry of minority affairs is in the process of formulating a multi-sectoral central scheme that will target the 90 minority concentration districts (MCD) in the country. The scheme is being envisaged as a 100 per cent centrally funded scheme, according to ministry sources. The scheme, once in place, is expected to give a push to the grand "Prime Minister's new 15-point programme for the welfare of minorities". The ambitious programme is aimed at improving the condition of minorities, among other things talk about locating "a certain proportion of development projects in minority concentration areas". The 90 districts have already been identified by the ministry on the basis of the 2001 census and their selection is based on the minority population, its socio-economic status, as well as the availability of basic amenities. Of the 593 districts in the country, the 90 identified districts have nearly 31 per cent of the country's total population living in them, said a ministry official. According to 2001 census estimates the country's minority population comprises 18.94 crore people. Of these, Muslims account for 13.4

per cent of the population. While the districts have been identified, more work needs to be done in order to better target the districts in terms of development schemes. The ministry, therefore, plans to have a baseline survey done in all the 90 districts. The survey is likely to be done by the Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR). The minority affairs ministry hopes to be able to know the development deficits in each of these districts once the survey has been completed so that it can better target the interventions required. Significantly, the ministry plans to target the entire district and not merely those areas where the minority population is concentrated in terms of providing basic amenities like water and sanitation. Ministry officials admit that the minorities are not doing too well on many fronts and therefore are in need of special treatment. However, the mantra of inclusive growth too has to be kept in mind, they say. So the objective will be to "benefit the maximum number of people through a focused approach," they said. Among the areas that will receive particular attention in these districts are education, housing, water supply, electricity, sanitary toilets and nutrition, say ministry officials. The aim will also be to create income-generating activities for the minority officials, they added. While other central government schemes, for instance those managed by the rural development ministry or the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana, are already in place in the districts, the minority affairs ministry hopes that its own scheme will be able to make up for the "missing linkages". (Asian Age 7/8/07)

NCM summons top official (7)

New Delhi, Aug. 9: Gujarat chief secretary Sudhir Mankad told the National Commission for Minorities (NCM) on Thursday that 30,000 people of the 50,000 who had not returned to their homes after the 2002 communal carnage, have returned to their original places of residence by now. Mr Mankad had been summoned by the NCM to give details of the steps being taken to help these riot victims not only return to their homes, but also ensure decent living conditions for them. For even five years after one of the worst communal carnages to rock the country in recent times, these riot victims continue to live in inhuman conditions in what is loosely described as "relief colonies". Thursday's meeting was chaired by NCM vice-chairman, Michael P. Pinto with members Zoya Hasan, Harcharan Singh Josh, Dileep Padgaonkar and Lama Chosphele Zotpa also present. The NCM also took stock of the living conditions of the 20,000 persons who have not dared to return to their homes even five years after the 2002 carnage. The NCM told the Gujarat chief secretary that it would like these persons also to be able to return to their homes. These 20,000 persons are part of the 5,000 families that the Gujarat government now says are living away from their own homes. Living amidst extreme deprivation, the NCM once again directed the Gujarat government to ensure that these people are provided with basic amenities like water, electricity, sanitation and roads. Schools for the displaced children and employment for those in need of it were other issues focused on. (Asian Age 10/8/07)

18 months on, Minority Affairs Min yet to prepare roadmap for 2007-08 (7)

New Delhi : The hype over the creation of Ministry of Minority Affairs is still to be translated into action. Almost over 18 months back, the Ministry was created to boost the welfare and empowerment of minorities in the country, but to date the Ministry has not been able to prepare the roadmap for the current financial year 2007-08. Except the merit-cum-means scholarship recently approved by the Cabinet, the Ministry has not yet been able to finalise any other schemes. The other important scheme in the process of finalisation is the coaching scheme, for which the Ministry has invited tenders to empanel the institutions and colleges to impart coaching to the poor minority students for clear competitive examinations. For the merit-cum-means scholarship for 20,000 students, the Ministry has earmarked Rs 54 crore for the current year. "The scholarship scheme has to be implemented through the States. The effectiveness of the scheme would depend a lot on the kind co-operation the Ministry gets from the States," an official said. "The coaching allied scheme is an old programme, earlier with the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. The entire scheme is being revised. The new institutes have to be empanelled, for which the process has been initiated. for this, we have earmarked Rs 10 crore," the official added. The Centre has allocated Rs 500 crore to the Ministry to initiate several schemes and programmes for economic and educational empowerment of the minority communities. There is a proposal to spend Rs 6 crore on the publicity, media research, monitoring and evaluation of development during the current year. The Ministry's mega project,

'multi-sectoral development programme for the minorities concentration districts,' is yet to be put on the fast track. The Ministry has identified 90 districts across the country with 'unacceptably low levels of either socio-economic or amenities indicators' among the minorities. Though all ministries are supposed to take care of these districts by ensuring that the benefit of programmes of poverty alleviation, education, health and provision of basic amenities reach these district, the Ministry of Minority Affairs is also supposed to play a pro-active role by devising specific schemes. In the Budget, the Ministry has allocated Rs 120 crore for the multi-sectoral development of minority concentration districts, but the detailed guidelines are still awaited. "It is a new scheme and would take some time to be finalised. Similarly, the ministry is working hard to announce the pre and post-matric scholarship for the minority students, for which Rs 180 crore has been set aside," the official said. (Pioneer 14/8/07)

MIM goes to rights, minorities panels against Taslima (7)

Hyderabad : Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (MIM), which is under fire over the assault on Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen, has now knocked on the doors of the State Human Rights Commission and the State Minorities Commission seeking to know how a refugee woman can travel across the country hurting the religious sentiments of the citizens of this country. In a petition filed before the commissions, MIM has urged that the commissions should seek an explanation from the organisers of Taslima's function in Hyderabad on August 9 why they had invited the author. On the petition filed by MIM's Member of Legislative Council Altaf Haider Razvi, the SHRC chairman Justice Subhashan Reddy said that he would issue a notice to the Hyderabad Police Commissioner seeking to know why the organisers failed to inform the police in advance about Taslima's programme in the city. The MIM petition alleged that Taslima was guilty of violating the fundamental rights and religious freedom of Muslim community in the India by insulting their religion through her writings and interviews in the media. State Minorities Commission Chairman Yusuf Qureshi said that this was a fit case for the Commission to look into the circumstances in which the organisations had brought the author to Hyderabad and the purpose of her visit. The Commission will also look into the rights of a refugee whether he or she can travel around freely and express her views. (Pioneer 16/8/07)

Workers from minorities more vulnerable' (7)

New Delhi, Aug. 16: Being a part of India's 395 million strong workforce in the unorganised sector may be bad enough. But it's worse still for those belonging to certain socio-religious groups in the country as they seem to battle adversities brought about both by their poor economic status and the caste or class they belong to. As the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector says in its report on conditions of work and livelihoods in the Unorganised Sector: "Socio-religious identity adds another dimension of vulnerability." It also notes that poverty ratios are highest among casual labour and within the social groups, Hindus SC-ST and Muslim OBCs." The commission headed by economist Arjun Sengupta in its latest report says that during 2004-05, nearly 836 million of the country's population earned less than Rs 20 per capita per day. "These are the poor and vulnerable segment of the Indian population," notes the commission. Adding in the very next sentence, "About 79 per cent of the unorganised workers, 88 per cent of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, 80 per cent of the OBC and 84 per cent of the Muslims belong to this category of the poor and vulnerable." What's even worse is that the number of people coming under this segment has been increasing steadily over the years, according to the commission. Detailing the condition of the 167 million people who fall in the category of unorganised non-agricultural workers, agricultural workers have been dealt with separately, the report says that what has contributed to their vulnerability is their social status along with gender and their education-level. Landlessness too is the highest among Hindu SCs and Muslim OBCs and the least among Hindu upper castes, says the report. On the education front too, the report says that among unorganised non-agriculture workers, STs have the lowest average years of schooling (3.8 years) followed by Muslim OBCs, Hindu SCs and Muslim Others. Upper caste Hindu workers had the highest average years of schooling at 9.5 years, it adds. It draws attention to the "affirmative action" promised to SCs and STs by the Constitution and to OBCs by the Centre and state governments. And yet, this affirmative action seems to have done little to ameliorate the condition of a category of people who belong to have a particular socio-

religious identity. The report says, "All workers belonging to socially backward and minority communities within the unorganised sector and unorganised non-agricultural workers are more vulnerable in terms of poverty." As the report notes, in poverty ratios STs seem to be the worst off and upper caste Hindus being on top of the heap. Also, it points out that the poverty ratio of the Muslim OBC workers is close to the Hindu SCs, about 40 per cent in urban areas. "In rural areas, both Muslim OBCs and Muslims Others have a poverty ratio of 21.5 and are slightly better than Hindu SCs who have a poverty ratio of 26.2," the report said. The vulnerability of those belonging to certain socio-religious identities is evident in certain sub-groups of unorganised workers too. Women SC/ST workers, for instance, are at a greater disadvantage, the report says. And migrant workers who the report describes as belonging to "the poorest sections of the population" comprise primarily those belonging to SCs, STs and weaker sections like women and children. It's the same story with bonded labour where again the report says, "A high proportion of bonded labourers were from the SCs (61.6 per cent) and Scheduled Tribes (25.1 per cent)." Affirmative action clearly has a long way to go for those comprising the country's unorganised non-agricultural workforce. (Asian Age 17/8/07)

Ministry seeks Rs 12,000 cr for minority welfare (7)

New Delhi: In what would leave Finance Minister P Chidambaram and Planning Commission Vice-Chairman Montek Singh Ahluwalia baffled, the Union Ministry of Minority Affairs has sought around Rs 12,000 crore for carrying out developmental programmes for minority communities during the 11th plan. This means the Ministry's annual budgetary allocation should not be less than Rs 2,400 crore against Rs 500 crore Chidambaram announced in his Budget for 2007-08. While taking up the matter with the Plan panel, the Ministry of Minority Affairs (MMA) headed by AR Antulay has argued that Rs 500 crore per annum would be pittance to speed up the overall academic, economic and social uplift of minorities. "The empowerment of minorities would not be possible if the Centre does not make adequate funds available," a Ministry official said. If the Centre agrees to the demand of the MMA, it might open a Pandora's box with other ministries also asking for more funds. "There is hardly any Ministry, not seeking extra funds during discussion to finalise the roadmap for the 11th Plan," a Government official said. Sources claimed that the steep increase in funds allocation for a particular Ministry would raise eyebrows not only in other ministries but also in the political groups, representing different social segments. The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (S&JE), dealing with the welfare of SCs and OBCs has got only Rs 2,001 crore for the current year, though their target population is much higher than that of minorities. The minority division of the S&JE Ministry used to spend between Rs 45 crore and Rs 62 crore annually before the MMA was carved out as a separate Ministry in 2006. The funds allocation in 2006-07 for the Ministry was only around Rs 27 crore, which was revised to Rs 500 crore this year. "Compared to what the Minority Division was being allocated earlier, Rs 500 crore annual allocation for the MMA is not a small amount, and the Ministry is not able to finalise schemes for the funds utilisation so far. The demand of around Rs 12,000 crore is unrealistic. The existing allocation would be revised, but not in tune with the MMA's demand," a Government official said. "We are in the process of negotiation with the Planning Commission," a ministry official said. "More funds would be required for the implementation of 'multi-sectoral development programme for the minorities concentration districts,'" the official added. The Ministry has identified as many as 90 such districts across the country with 'unacceptable low levels of either socio-economic or amenities indicators' among the minorities. "For the current fiscal, Rs 120 crore has been earmarked for the multi-sectoral development of minority concentration districts, with which what kind of development works could be carried in 90 districts," the official asked, justifying the demand to increase the funds allocation. With merit-cum-means scholarship, the Ministry has earmarked Rs 54 crore for the current year and is likely to help out 20,000 students. (Pioneer 23/8/07)

Centre announces measures to improve status of minorities (7)

NEW DELHI: The Centre on Friday announced measures to improve the share of the minorities in government jobs and to study the anomalies in the representation of Muslims in Parliament and the State Assemblies. An Equal Opportunity Commission would be set up to look into the

grievances regarding discrimination against Muslims. There would be a multi-pronged strategy to address the educational backwardness and skills development of Muslims. Efforts would be made to promote micro-financing and step up priority sector lending to the minorities to 15 per cent over three years as a response to the findings of the Sachar Committee. Tabling a statement on the "follow-up action" on the recommendations of the Sachar Committee Report on the "Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community," Minorities Affairs Minister A.R. Antulay said in the Lok Sabha that it was a "historic occasion and a historic statement." Mr. Antulay said guidelines had been issued to improve the share of the minorities in the government, public sector enterprises and banks. A high-level committee had been constituted to review the Delimitation Act regarding anomalies in the representation of Muslims. Targeted intervention would be made in 90 backward districts, which had a concentration of the minorities, for creating employment opportunities and the improvement of basic amenities. An inter-Ministerial Task Force would recommend strategies to improve deficiency in civic amenities and economic opportunities in 338 identified towns and cities with a substantial population of minorities. Public sector banks would open more branches in areas with a concentration of Muslims, and financial institutions would promote micro-finance, especially among women. As part of the strategy to address the educational backwardness, the outreach of upper primary schools would be expanded, particularly for girls. A special literacy drive would be taken up in blocks with a concentration of Muslims. The Madarassa Modernisation Programme would be revised, and the mid-day meal scheme would be extended. The follow-up plan proposed three scholarship schemes exclusively for minorities. The Wakf Act is proposed to be amended to address the "existing deficiencies." A "suitable agency" would assist in the development of Wakf properties. (The Hindu 1/9/07)

Minority body wants member to quit, seeks HRD ministry help (7)

NEW DELHI, SEPTEMBER 6: Reacting to a letter from the National Commission for Minority Educational Institutions (NCMEI), the Ministry of Human Resource Development has asked Commission member Reverend Valson Thampu to consider relinquishing his post at NCMEI. NCMEI, a quasi-judicial body formed to look into the affairs of minority educational institutions under the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), is miffed over Thampu, appointed Officer on Special Duty by St Stephen's College in May this year, holding his position at the Commission. "The legal position is that he cannot hold two offices at the same time," said a senior NCMEI official. While the Commission has stopped paying salary to Thampu for his services as one of the three members of the Commission, it has sought MHRD intervention in the matter. In a letter dated July 16 to the MHRD, NCMEI objected to Thampu's continuation as member of the Commission on the grounds that his appointment at a minority college might impinge on the fairness of judgments delivered by him as member of the Commission. NCMEI decides on disputes relating to the minority status of educational institutions and other related issues. The Commission also argued that no member of NCMEI should accept employment in a private educational institution, especially a minority college, as it "violates" service rules applicable to all members of the Commission. "Our objections are two-fold: as a member, you cannot accept any other post since you are not supposed to hold two offices of profit. And, you can't accept appointment in a minority college as issues of impartiality and fairness are involved," an official added. Acting on the NCMEI letter, MHRD has now written to Thampu. "The Government position is that a member of the Commission can't hold two offices of profit simultaneously, particularly in a minority college since he sits in judgment on them. However, government is not expected to direct or guide people in such respectable positions. But our letter is indication enough that he must not continue," said a Ministry official. Moreover, Thampu is also facing trouble with Delhi University as his appointment as officiating principal of St Stephen's College has not been ratified as yet, sources said. "He doesn't meet the eligibility criteria for a principal or an OSD as he doesn't hold a PhD degree," said a source from the university. Thampu was unavailable for comment. (The Indian Express 7/9/07)

US Govt report notes 'organised' attacks on minorities in India (7)

Washington, September 15: Noting that a vast majority of citizens of all religions lived in peaceful co-existence in India, the Bush Administration has, nevertheless, said there were still some cases

of “organised societal attacks” against minority groups in the country. Mandated by the US Congress to present an annual report on religious freedom around the world, the Administration also speaks of terrorist violence and “atrocities” against certain sections of people, including Kashmiri Pandits, while pointing out that terrorists attempted to provoke inter-religious conflict by detonating bombs. “The Constitution (of India) provides for freedom of religion, and the National Government generally respected this right in practice,” the State Department said in its annual International Religious Freedom Report released on Friday. However, it said, “Some state and local governments, including those of Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, enacted or amended ‘anti-conversion’ laws during the reporting period. The Governor of Rajasthan, later elected to the Presidency, refused to sign her state’s law, effectively nullifying it.” “The vast majority of citizens of every religious group lived in peaceful co-existence; however, there were reports of organised societal attacks against minority religious groups. State police and enforcement agencies often did not act swiftly enough to effectively counter societal attacks,” the report said. In the report, the Bush Administration has Myanmar, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Uzbekistan in Part One of its classification of “Countries of Particular Concern” (CPC). While Uzbekistan enters the CPC list for the first time, Vietnam has not been re-designated in this category. (Indian Express 16/9/07)

Religious minorities vulnerable in Bangladesh: US (7)

DHAKA: Attacks on religious and ethnic minorities continued to be a "problem" in Bangladesh despite the country's declared stance for freedom of religion and inter-community amity, the US has said. "There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious belief or practice....Religious minorities were vulnerable due to their relatively limited influence with political elites," said the US State Department's International Religious Freedom Report 2007 on Bangladesh, which was released from Washington on Friday. The report of the US Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour of the State Department, said violence directed against religious minority communities continued to result in the loss of lives and property. Many Hindus in the Muslim-dominated country, it said, have been unable to recover landholdings lost because of discrimination under the now-defunct Vested Property Act, a pre-independence era law that allowed the government to expropriate "enemy" lands. (Times of India 16/9/07)

Concern over ‘bias’ against minority community (7)

PANAJI: The Citizens’ Initiatives for Communal Harmony (CICH), a local social group, has noted with concern that a pattern has been emerging in Goa of preventing a minority community from practising their faith, thus perpetuating a feeling among people of the community that they are being discriminated against. In its recent representation submitted to Chief Secretary J.P. Singh, CICH conveners Ramesh Gauns and Albertina Almeida said that the State Government must intervene to ensure that the fundamental rights of the said minority community to practise their faith were protected. The memorandum said that the case of the prayer house at Chinchinim in south Goa was among a series of such prevention tactics. The most recent case at Chinchinim was essentially an attempt to stop the people of a minority community from holding community prayers although people in the area had been praying there since 2002, the CICH said. The CICH has drawn the attention of the Government to the fact that myths are being propagated by vested interests to create fear about the place — that it will turn into an abode of terrorists. But during its fact-finding mission, the CICH did not find any person complaining about noise. Another issue that the CICH found being raised is that the prayer hall is in a residential zone. The CICH has pointed out that there is no separate zoning for religious structures. (The Hindu 25/9/07)

Jains denied scholarships granted by Central Govt for minorities (7)

Bhopal : Despite being the smallest religion minority in the country after the Parsis, the Jains are being denied all schemes funded by the Central Government. And the reason for discrimination is that Jains have not been considered separate religious community since the decennial census was introduced. Though, nine States including Madhya Pradesh consider Jains as a religious minority but they are not recognised as per the jurisdiction of the National Commission for Minorities, making them ineligible for procuring benefits announced by the Union Government for the minorities. The discrimination again marred the Jains of the State recently when they were

denied scholarship sponsored by the Central Government for the minority communities. The community, which constitutes only .4 per cent of the country's population and .9 per cent of the State's population as per 2001 census, is again rendered ineligible for procuring benefits just because the Central Government has denied to consider it as a separate religious sect. Recently, the Centre brought a scheme of merit-cum-means based scholarships for students belonging to minority communities (Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists and Parsis). A total of 462 scholarships (Muslims- 406, Christians- 18, Sikhs- 16, Buddhists- 22) were sanctioned for the State. The students belonging to the minority communities would be provided scholarships of Rs 25,000 to Rs 30,000 per annum (whichever is less) of the actual course fee under the scheme. Unfortunately, the Jains could not reap benefits out of the scheme despite being in minority. Senior Congress leader Ashok Jain Bhabha while speaking to The Pioneer informed that Digambar Jain Mahasabha, Akhil Bharatiya Jain Tirth Raksha Samiti, Akhil Bharatiya Jan Parishad and other bodies have been striving to get the status for the Jain community. He however opined that the meagre presence of Jains in Parliament has been preventing the notification from getting published. Chairman of State Minorities Communities Anwar Mohammed Khan on the contrary claimed that the Jain community has not come forward in this regard and if the community members approach the Commission then the issue would certainly be taken to the Central Government. Less political strength (Jains constitute less than 1 per cent of population in all the States) might have been the prime cause for the discrimination but the schemes for welfare of minorities could only bring desired results if the benefits were extended to religious minorities like Jains.(Pioneer 8/11/07)

Rejection of minority sub-plan shows lack of political will' (7)

New Delhi, Nov. 16: The UPA government says it is undertaking affirmative action for minorities through the Prime Minister's new 15-Point Programme for the Welfare of Minorities and the implementation of the Sachar committee recommendations. But not all feel this is enough. The government's decision to not include a minority sub-plan in the 11th Plan shows a lack of political will, says Prof Zoya Hasan, a member of the National Commission for Minorities. The sub-plan, she says, would have allowed targeted allocation of resources for the minorities. For, it would have designed specific programmes and allocations for the minorities, Muslims in particular. Prof Hasan, who chaired the 11th Plan "working group on empowering the minorities", which suggested the minority sub-plan, is "disappointed" that it hasn't found acceptance. The sub-plan had the backing of the Left with the West Bengal government being the first one to moot such an idea earlier in 2007. While the Planning Commission constitutes various working groups to make suggestions on different issues, it isn't under any compulsion to accept their recommendations, say sources in the commission body. A meeting of the full Planning Commission approved the draft 11th Plan on November 8 and now the NDC will meet in December to give the final nod to it. In the case of the minority sub-plan, other than the substantial allocations such a sub-plan would have required, what may have probably weighed more in the government's mind was the politically sensitive nature of such a decision with the BJP always ready to raise the banner of minority appeasement. According to the 2001 Census, minorities number around 18.94 crore people in the country with Muslims comprising nearly 70 per cent of this population. The minority sub-plan, Prof Hasan says, was on the lines of the special component plan for the SCs and STs. Drawing attention to the report of the Sachar committee, which detailed the dismal socio-economic and educational status of the country's Muslims, Prof Hasan says that substantial state intervention is needed to improve the condition of Muslims. The sub-plan would have been very timely as "what the government has done so far is not substantial enough," she adds. Targeting 90 minority concentration districts in the country she observes, "It cannot be a substitute as it will cover only 30 per cent of the minority population. The minority sub-plan would have been universal and brought together all initiatives in a focused manner."..... (Asian Age 19/11/07)

NCM team returns with 'gory' facts (7)

New Delhi: The two-member team of the National Commission for Minorities (NCM) to Nandigram has returned with gory details. The team members visited trouble-torn villages, met victims in camps and heard from them harrowing tales of brutalities to conclude that what happened in Nandigram was a "total failure" of the State Government. "The minority people were not given

due protection by the State Government. We would take up the matter with it. There were several lapses on the part of law enforcing agencies and those responsible for protecting the locals," NCM Chairperson Mohammad Shafi Qureshi said. The investigation by the team also found the role of CPI(M) cadre in inflicting the worst kind of brutalities on those who refused to follow their diktats. "Since the Government did not respond to the alarming situation promptly, there is hardly any doubt about those who were involved in terrorising the people," Harcharan Singh Josh, a member of the NCM team, said. Josh said that the team would submit a detailed report soon to the NCM Chairman. The other member of the team was Lama Chospel Zotpa. The commission would take up the report in the coming meeting and then would decide on sending a full NCM team to Nandigram. "Given the magnitude of crime committed in Nandigram, the full commission would certainly visit the strife-torn place of West Bengal," a source in the NCM said. As per the NCM team's estimation, still over 20,000 people are living in camps, and they are so terrified that they do not want to return to their homes. "They are not able to cope with the trauma they underwent for so long," Josh said. Admitting the incidents of rape, Josh said that such heinous crimes did take place. "Our report would give a complete picture. A lot of things need to be done now to heal the wounds. The victims should be adequately taken care of," he said. Sources said that the commission members were in favour of seeking a white paper from the State Government with regard to the lapses in dealing with the crisis in Nandigram and also an action taken report on the measures initiated against the guilty. "If the perpetrators of violence and crimes were not brought to book at the earliest, the minority community people in particular would feel more insecure under the current dispensation in the State. Having failed to take preventive measures, the Government cannot afford to save the guilty now," a source said. Earlier a delegation of All-India Milli Council (AIMC) to Nandigram had accused the CPI(M) cadre of inflicting brutalities on the locals, while the administration and police just remained passive spectators. "The villagers were subjected to the worst kind of torture and brutalities by the CPI(M) cadre," AIMC general secretary Mohammad Manzoor Alam had said. "The victims are so terrorised that they do not open their mouths against the attackers. The State has failed in protecting them. As much as 80 per cent of the victims are poor Muslims, who have always voted for the CPI(M)-led Left Front in West Bengal," Alam had added. (Pioneer 1/12/07)

Minorities commission: Guilty must be punished (7)

New Delhi, Dec. 2: National Commission for Minorities chairperson Mohammed Shafi Qureshi has said that action should be taken against those found guilty by the Srikrishna Commission which probed the 1992-93 communal riots in Mumbai. "Action should be taken against those found named in the Srikrishna report. We're laying emphasis on the implementation of the report," Mr Qureshi told this newspaper. Mr Qureshi took over as NCM chairperson on September 3 this year. An NCM team had visited Mumbai in early September during which it had conducted a public hearing with the 1992-93 victims. Says Mr Qureshi of the NCM Mumbai visit, "We laid emphasis on action against the guilty policemen and adequate compensation for the riot victims." He said that the NCM has already submitted a report on the matter to the Central government. Mr Qureshi who led the team said that NCM's assessment has been given to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Mr Qureshi also impressed upon the need to implement the recommendations made by commissions such as the Srikrishna panel. He observed, "If the matter is delayed, people will start losing faith in commissions." Speaking about commissions in general, Mr Qureshi said, "Their reports should be implemented. Commission reports are not meant for recitation. They are meant for implementation." The Srikrishna Commission gave its report in 1998 — that's almost a decade ago. The commission was constituted in 1993 under Justice B.N. Srikrishna, then a sitting judge of the Bombay high court. It enquired into the reasons behind the 1992-93 riots and those behind them. The report indicted several Mumbai policemen and politicians, among them Shiv Sena supremo Bal Thackeray and his partyman Madhukar Sarpotdar. Not surprising then that the commission was disbanded in 1996 during the rule of the Shiv-Sena-BJP combine. It was only public pressure that led to its reconstitution some months later. But given the politically sensitive nature of the commission's report, the political leadership has found it inconvenient to implement its recommendations. Not only has no action been taken against those politicians indicted by the commission but even 30 of the 31 policemen found guilty have escaped without any punishment so far. Under increasing pressure to implement the report,

Vilasrao Deshmukh government in Maharashtra had requested the Bombay high court to set up four special courts to deal with some very sensitive cases pertaining to the 1992-93 riots. (Asian Age 3/12/07)

Definition of minorities sought (7)

New Delhi, Dec. 5: The National Commission for Minorities (NCM) has begun the process of consultation for getting an answer to the all-important question: "Who is a minority?" It set the ball rolling in the city on Wednesday by calling for a meeting several Muslim MPs. Other than the definition of minorities, yet another important item on the agenda was the minority sub-plan proposed by a Planning Commission working group headed by Zoya Hasan, who is also a member of the NCM. The working group had suggested that a minority sub-plan be included in the Eleventh Five Year Plan but to no avail. In fact, the NCM has said that a minority sub-plan will help in the "setting of concrete physical and financial targets and allocation of funds for improving the socio-economic condition of minorities". Moreover, it has said that it will indicate the government's commitment to "fair and fast development of all sections of society". The meeting was chaired by NCM chairman Mohammed Shafi Qureshi and vice-chairman Michael P. Pinto. At the meeting, opinion on the definition of "minorities" seemed divided among those present. However, where the issue of a sub-plan is concerned, apart from the NCM stating clearly that "the government should introduce the minority sub-plan in the Eleventh Plan", all the MPs agreed on the need for such a plan. Lok Sabha MP Asaduddin Owaisi said that there is a real need to go in for a definition of minorities as the Constitution does not describe who is a minority. There were divergent views on whether the nation or the state should be the unit for the definition of minorities. Former NCM chairman Tarlochan Singh said that the unit should be the country and not the state. A similar view was expressed by Lok Sabha MPs Preneet Kaur and Iqbal Ahmed Saradgi, both from the Congress. Yet another MP, Ramdas Athawale wanted to know why a definition was required at all. (Asian Age 6/12/07)

Focus on minority won't ghettoise them' (7)

New Delhi, Dec. 11: Is the government's attempt to focus on minority concentration districts and towns in the country an attempt at ghettoisation? Or will the focus on these districts actually bring about an improvement in the availability of basic amenities, among other things, for minorities living in these identified areas? The Planning Commission, for one, says the focus on minority populated areas won't ghettoise them. It says, "The area-based approach is not an attempt at ghettoisation." Rather, the plan-body says, "It is a response to the existing ghettoisation and location of minorities." Adding, "It is an attempt to provide each and every citizen of the country access to all amenities, irrespective of their religion and location." The observation is part of the draft 11th Five year Plan which comes up for final approval before the National Development Council which is scheduled to meet here on December 19. Nearly 18.4 per cent of the country's population comprises the minorities with the Muslim community in a majority with a percentage of 13.4. As the draft plan says, in absolute numbers, Muslims are 140 million of the country's population of a minority population of 189.5 million. The government has identified 90 minority concentration districts (MCDs) and another 338 towns in the country where it plans to improve the availability of civic amenities like water, electricity, roads among other things. It also plans to launch "beneficiary oriented programmes" in minority areas. The 90 MCDs account for 34 per cent of the country's minority population. The draft plan says that these have been identified on the basis of the human development indicators and basic amenities indicators. Among the human development indicators are: literacy rate of minorities, female literacy rate, work participation rate, and female work participation. Among the indicators for basic amenities are: percentage of households with pucca walls, percentage of households with safe drinking water facilities, percentage of households with electricity and percentage of households with W/C latrines. According to the draft document, the "endeavour in the 11th Plan will be to ensure the availability of all essential amenities in not just the identified MCDs and towns/cities, but in all the other minority localities as well. Further, the "preparation and implementation of area/problem specific special developmental plans for these MCDs are already in progress. Aware that apart from implementation monitoring of these programmes, their monitoring will also be required, the draft document says that the setting up of a national resource group for minority affairs in the 11th Plan

will also be considered. Another committee comprising government and civil society representatives "to undertake a six-monthly review of all programmes deemed to be targeting minorities" is also envisaged. Referring frequently to the Sachar Committee report which examined the socio-economic and educational status of the country's Muslim population, the draft plan says, "Though previous five year plans have attempted to focus on weaker sections, they have failed to include many groups, especially Muslims, into the development net. The 11th Plan will, therefore, accord the highest priority to the development of innovative programmes, expansion of existing schemes, implementation and monitoring of all initiatives for minorities by making adequate budgetary allocations at every level of governance." (Asian Age 12/12/07)

Govt plans Rs 3,780-cr scheme for minorities (7)

NEW DELHI, December 17: Almost a year after Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's statement that minorities should have the first claim on resources, the Ministry of Minority Affairs is set to flag off a scheme worth Rs 3,780 crore for 90 minority-concentrated districts (MCDs). The Multi-sectoral Development Programme (MsDP), which will provide over Rs 40 crore to each such district, aims to bring about a "sea change" in the socio-economic condition to foster "more inclusive growth" during the 11th Plan period. The plan will be executed and monitored through a "dedicated cell" within the Ministry of Minority Affairs. The MsDP will try to bring the socio-economic and basic amenities parameters of these districts at par with the national average. The projects will be executed with 100 per cent Central assistance. Though 44 MCDs fall under the existing Backward Region Grants Fund (BRGF) scheme, where the government provides funds of Rs 10-20 crore per annum for each district for area- and problem-specific plans, the MsDP will also cover these districts. The proposal of the Minority Affairs Ministry says the additional 100 per cent Central assistance under MsDP is needed as the existing schemes focus more on Scheduled Castes and Schedule Tribes. The proposal, which has been approved by the expenditure and finance committee, underlines that the MsD plans for each district will have to be prepared on the basis of a baseline survey carried out by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) that would indicate the "development deficits". Specific projects for each district will be prepared with support from reputed universities or IITs, keeping in view of the development deficits indicated. The projects will provide special attention to the regions and blocks with substantial minority population. The proposal has already categorised 90 MCDs into Category A and Category B. According to the proposal, while 53 Category A districts have both socio-economic and basic amenities parameters below the national average, the remaining 37 Category B districts lag behind the national average in either. The proposal says that no district will receive less than Rs 15 crore for bridging its development deficits. The MsDP, which will now be taken to the Cabinet for final approval, will be launched during 2007-08. The government has already allocated a notional Rs 120 crore for the current year. The government is planning to allocate Rs 800 crore, Rs 1,100 crore, Rs 1,100 crore, and Rs 660 crore for subsequent years of the 11th Plan period. (Indian Express 18/12/07)

Activist approach for minorities' (7)

New Delhi, Dec. 18: An activist approach is called for in order to deal with minority issues. This exhortation came from vice-president M. Hamid Ansari in his speech during celebrations held to mark the Minorities Rights Day. The celebrations also saw noted journalist Javed Anand being conferred with the Minorities Rights Award for 2007 by the vice-president. Mr Ansari who was the chairman of the National Commission for Minorities (NCM) prior to becoming the vice-president, also said that "an ongoing movement which would pursue matters of violation" of minority rights is needed. Giving reasons why it was required, Mr Ansari said that minorities constitute nearly 19.4 per cent of the country population which means that "every fifth Indian belongs to a religious minority". He added, "For a galloping India, all segments have to move together. It is not only a question of minority interest but of national interest." Earlier in his speech, the vice-president recalled that while speaking at a seminar in 2006, he had given his candid assessment with regard to minorities. And it was that the "glass is half full. For, there is an upward movement. We are making progress," said Mr Ansari. The vice-president also said that where minorities are concerned, mere theorising is not enough. Moreover, he said that formal institutions have their limitations. Where an institutional structure is concerned, he said "we cannot disagree with it

much given the kind of institutional structures states create". "Then there is also the issue of the extent to which they commit themselves to it and to what extent they take active steps to advance those objectives," Mr Ansari added. Award recipient Anand asked: "What kind of a democracy are we that stands mute witness to three genocidal actions against minorities in 18 years—Delhi (1984), Mumbai (1992-93) and Gujarat (2002)?" He also asked, "How can we even dream of an end to discrimination when two standards of justice continue to operate even today under different governments in Gujarat and Maharashtra?" (Asian Age 19/12/07)