

Govt plans housing scheme for Dalits

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Mumbai: The government, in an apparent bid to woo Dalits ahead of the state elections, plans to offer them a bonanza in the form of free houses.

The government will introduce a proposal in the cabinet in the next couple of weeks to provide free houses to Dalits living in mud shelters in rural areas, those staying in urban areas, and without proper dwellings, will be entitled to a sum of around Rs 1-1.5 lakh to buy their own houses. It is estimated that there are more than 1 crore Dalits in the state, of whom nearly 30 lakh live in the metropolis.

Explaining the scheme, minister for social justice Chandrakant Handore said, "Once the draft is finalised, it will be tabled before the cabinet. To begin with, we will extend assistance to 50,000 families a year and the scheme will continue till

every family is covered."

The minister said modalities such as eligibility criteria, disbursal amount and area of a house were being worked out. "The chief minister has approved the idea," he added.

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According to sources, it will be interesting to note how the Dalits react to the proposed scheme. In Maharashtra, the community has had to cope with the killing

of a priest at Deonar and the Khairlanji incident.

The Uttar Pradesh factor, too, has made the Congress-NCP combine nervous. After her victory in the UP elections last year, BSP leader Mayawati announced in her November rally in Mumbai that the party was keen on expanding its base in the state.

Mayawati had said the BSP planned to contest nearly all the Assembly seats in Maharashtra. Interestingly, after UP, Maharashtra has the largest number of Dalit voters in the country.

In the 2004 Assembly and parliamentary elections, while the BSP could not win a single seat, it caused the defeat of some Congress and NCP candidates. The ruling combine knows it well that if the Dalits choose to go with Mayawati, then it will find it hard to come up with the required numbers and retain power in the state.