Haj subsidy

Why in news?

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Union government had decided to phase out haj subsidy as early as 2018.

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What is haj subsidy?

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- The Haj subsidy is a subsidy given to Indian Muslim Hajj pilgrims by the Government of India in form of discounted Air fares on Indian Government owned Air India.
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- The program has its origins in British colonial era, in post-colonial era, the Government of India expanded the program in 1959 with the Hajj Act.
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- The subsidy initially applied to Indian Muslim pilgrims traveling for religious reasons to Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iraq, Iran and Jordan.
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- Haj subsidy started in 1954, as an idea initiated by the then government, with flights between Mumbai and Jeddah.
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- Since 1984, all Haj traffic has been shared by Air India and Saudia, the national carriers of India and Saudi Arabia.
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What are some shortfalls in the subsidy?

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- The monopoly of the airlines carrying pilgrimages has proven most contentious point of the subsidy with some Muslims objecting to it.
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- Many pilgrims claim that the real beneficiary is Air India as the subsidy is

actually a discount on an overpriced air fare.
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- Indian government was also providing Hajj subsidies to Muslims identified by central government as VIP's, and the special dignitaries.
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- There are eminent person nominations of 3,000 Muslims per year under so-called Goodwill Delegation to Saudi Arabia.
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- There have also been requests by Muslims to withdraw subsidy including some Muslim Parliament members as it is against Islam even it was beneficial.
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What is government's recent move on the subsidy?

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- Now subsidy is to be phased out, after a Supreme Court order recommended the same to the government in 2012, with 2022 as the outer limit.
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- In 2012, The Supreme Court found that Hajj by Indian Muslims is funded to a substantial extent by the Indian Government.
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- The Court ruled that this subsidy is not only unconstitutional but inconsistent with the teachings of Quran.
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- The Court directed the Central Government to progressively reduce the amount of Haj subsidy and abolish it by 2022.
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- The Court, in its 2012 order, said the Centre should invest that amount in education and other development measures for the minority community.
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- By this the subsidy will be phased out as early as 2018, with the subsidy reduced to "almost nil" from the Rs.450 crore being spent this year.
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What are alternative plans of the government?

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- The Haj Committee reportedly stated the phasing out would affect pilgrims from small towns.
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- Indian government as per SC direction, planned to spend the funds on educational programmes especially for girl children of the minority community.
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- Government is committed to a more transparent and open system for sending pilgrims and their safety and security while they perform the pilgrimage.
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- As a result of this government formulated a new Haj policy, which would be made available to the public soon.
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- Government has already taken measures on Haj quota for India by the Saudi Arabian government.
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Source: The Hindu

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