

Lawmakers stir 'ghosts' of Mohatta Palace, Hindu Gymkhana

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Karachi

Old controversies about the ownership of historic Mohatta Palace and Hindu Gymkhana reverberated through the Sindh Assembly on Friday as lawmakers stressed handing back the properties of minorities. Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) parliamentary leader and provincial minister Syed Sardar Ahmed surprised the legislators during the question-hour when he claimed that the government "forcibly" occupied Mohatta Palace using the name of Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, prompting its owner to leave the country.

A Hindu trader, Shivratan Chandraratan Mohatta, had built the palace in his name in Clifton in the late 1880s. After the creation of Pakistan in 1947, the trader preferred to stay but the government took over the palace stating the Quaid-Azam and his sister Fatima Jinnah wanted to live there, said Ahmed, a former chief secretary of Sindh. The Mohatta family's belongings were thrown out and the dismayed family left the country later.

Once Mohatta had said that if Jinnah had wanted, he would have given his palace to him voluntarily, the MQM leader recalled.

Sindh Culture Minister Sassui Palijo's written reply to the question by Anwar Ahmed Khan Mahar, however, differed from Ahmed's observations.

After Partition, the Mohatta Palace was "acquired" by the then government to house the foreign affairs ministry, she said, but when the foreign office was shifted to Islamabad in 1964, the palace was given to Fatima Jinnah. After her demise in 1964, her sister Shireen lived there till her death in 1980.

The property then went into litigation and remained sealed until 1995, when it was formally purchased by the federal government, the culture minister said. It was agreed that the monument would house a "museum" to foster awareness and appreciation of the cultural heritage of Pakistan and the region, she believed.

The provincial and federal governments both provide funds for Mohatta Palace. A new scheme has also been launched under the president's directives. A board is now running the palace, the culture minister added. However, when PPP lawmaker Saleem Khursheed Khokhar asked whether there were any Hindu members on the board, Palijo replied they did not have "much involvement".

Hindu Gymkhana

The Benazir Bhutto regime had handed over the gymkhana to the Hindu community but the Pervez Musharraf-led government granted its control to the National Academy of Performing Arts (Napa), the culture minister said. Dismayed by the decision, the Sindh government and the Pakistan Hindu Council have filed petitions in the Sindh High Court.

In order to "compensate" Hindus, Palijo said, the culture department was planning to construct complexes for the community in seven districts where they have sizable population.

MQM's Sardar Ahmed, who was a provincial minister during the Musharraf era, said he had opposed giving the gymkhana's control to Napa. The gymkhana should be given back to Hindus for their community activities, he stressed.

Historical buildings

Several hundred historical buildings in Karachi are in a "real state of disrepair", the culture minister admitted in response to a question by Nusrat Saheer Abbasi.

Many of these buildings are listed or are in the process of identification and assessment for enlistment under Sindh Cultural Heritage (Preservation) Act 1994. She pointed out different reasons for their neglect ranging from "pressure to commercialise" to "multiple ownerships".

"The Sindh government is mulling over making changes in building regulations to reduce commercial pressure," Palijo said. "The evacuee trust properties laws are being examined to mitigate the negative effects of multiple ownerships of old buildings."

She pointed out that the renovation of seven heritage buildings – Edward House, Board of Revenue building, Freemasons Lodge, Old Mitharam Hostel, Old Principal House (DG College) and Frere Hall – were under way.

Antiquities Act

Around 192 archaeological sites have been declared as heritage in Sindh, the culture minister responded to a supplementary question.

After devolution, the authorities are planning to amend the Antiquities Act and enhance the workforce to

preserve them, she said, hoping that the amendments were likely to be tabled in the current session of the legislature as assured by the law minister.

Reference:

<http://images.thenews.com.pk/09-02-2013/ethenews/e-158880.htm>