

A night of trouble in Sialkot

Date : 5th June 2018

The act of preserving historic buildings owned by Ahmadis was checked by the local clerics of Sialkot, who oddly absolve themselves from the incident by stating, “All is well that ends well”

One of the oldest localities of Sialkot, Kashmiri Mohalla, was a sorry sight on the eve of May 24. A mob of about 300 charged men, allegedly supported by the local administration, while chanting religious slogans like *Allah O Akbar*, started to destruct the 144-year-old Ahmadi worship place, Baitul Mubarak.

As the night progressed, the mob demolished the minarets and façade of this historic building spread over three marlas. They also managed to raze two small houses owned by the Ahmadi community located next to the worship place.

“We bought these two small and dilapidated houses, spread over a total of six marlas, from the family of Hakeem Hissamuddin in recent years. Since our spiritual leader, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, spent some time in these houses, we decided to preserve these buildings in his memory,” Abdul Sattar, a leader of Jamaat-e-Ahmadiyya tells *The News on Sunday*.

As work started on the project, some local Muslim clerics raised objections to the repair work. “Some clerics thought we were building a museum in memory of Mirza Sahib. Some of them also thought we were extending the place of worship,” says Sattar.

The local Muslim community had no objection to the renovation. “We submitted an affidavit as well, stating that we are not building a museum or extending the worship place. But some mullahs, not belonging to our locality, continued to propagate against us,” he says.

“It is our right to preserve our historical places,” he adds. “We tried to buy another property in the vicinity where Mirza Sahib lived. But the owner refused to sell it to us.”

The renovation work started about two years ago. In May last year, “Sahibzada Hamid Raza started to propagate that we are building a museum, and complained to the municipal authorities. The work remained halted for more than two months, till we submitted affidavits, assuring the authorities that no museum was being constructed. The administration then allowed us to resume the work,” says Mudassir Ahmad, who supervised the renovation.

“We called the police just when the mob started to demolish the structure. But no one came. Later, when the building was severely damaged, the police came and took over control,” says Ahmad.

But this May the community was asked by the local authorities to stop the work again. The two adjoining houses were sealed and they were directed to show the records, approved maps and copy of permission letters that were already with the administration. Some days later, the district administration lodged a case of non-compliance against ameer of the Jamaat for failing to bring legal documents of the community and sent them a notice to demolish the two houses. Ahmad recalls that the local authorities told his community elders that they are under “immense pressure”, not describing by whom, “to demolish the structures”.

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The local police has sealed the narrow streets of Kashmiri Mohalla where the worship place and the two houses are situated. A week after the tragic incident, the area around the properties is occupied by police in uniform and plainclothes. The interior of one of the two houses is severely damaged and the compound has a heap of rubble. Ahmadis are allowed to enter the worship place during prayer times only. The visiting journalists are not allowed to take pictures. The locals hesitate to talk about the incident.

An inquiry committee has been set up, comprising representatives of police and district administration, to identify the attackers. “For the house demolishing case, only district administration can do something,” says Asad Sarfaraz, district police officer.

“No case has been lodged against the attackers yet. We are waiting for the findings of the inquiry report headed by a senior police official.”

District administration denied to comment on the case despite several efforts made by *TNS*.

Kashmiri Mohalla is of special national significance as it is the birthplace of Allama Muhammad Iqbal. Historically, Muslims and Ahmadis lived together peacefully for years after Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the founder of Ahmadi faith, claimed prophethood in 1879. He lived in this locality for some years in late 1860s while working as an assistant reader/clerk in Sialkot courts. During his stay in Sialkot, he developed acquaintance with Hakeem Hissamuddin, a cousin of Meer Hassan who taught Quranic teachings to Iqbal. When Mirza claimed prophethood, Hissamuddin’s family became Ahmadis. The two houses that were damaged by the angry men on May 23 belonged to the Hissamuddin family and were recently bought by Jamaat-e-Ahmadiyya. This worship place was also built by Hissamuddin in 1874, and was later donated to the Jamaat-e-Ahmadiyya. According to some claims, Meer Hassan taught Iqbal in the same building.

It is claimed that one of Iqbal’s wives and his son Aftab Iqbal were also Ahmadi by faith. According to some locals, his picture and name was prominently mentioned in the ancestral house of Iqbal, located close to the demolished structures, but some years ago his picture was quietly removed.



“According to law, Ahmadis are not allowed to build minarets or give Islamic references to their worship places. The state’s failure to check this development compelled us to take action,” says Hamid Raza, the *imam* who led the charged mob, while talking to *TNS*.

Raza can be seen in video clips shared on social media, where he thanks the police and municipal authorities for their cooperation in demolishing minarets and two houses. He also warns of further “consequences” if police cases are lodged against him and other attackers.

“Ahmadis recently bought these houses and were spending lavishly on them, to convert them into a museum to honour Mirza Ghulam Ahmad,” says the imam.

To the question why the minarets were not demolished earlier, he says, “All is well that ends well”.

Zaheer Shah, who lives near the destroyed structures, thinks this act to be a “mischief” and “design” to spread anarchy in the area ahead of the general elections. “It is very strange that they realise after more than 40 years that the minarets of this place are illegal,” he says. “Strangely, people who were Muslims became non-Muslim after 1974. Similarly, what were called mosques became worship places,” he says while referring to the Second Amendment proposed by Zulfikar Bhutto.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) condemning this action against the beleaguered Ahmadiyya community has urged the state to ensure the community’s places of worship and sites of religious significance are protected as far as possible.

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