

LOK SABHA DEBATES

LOK SABHA

*Wednesday, April 9, 1986/Chaitra
19, 1908 (Saka)*

*The Lok Sabha met at Eleven of
the Clock.*

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

[*English*]

Reported Move of South African Government to Demolish the Building in Pietermaritzburg where Mahatma Gandhi Lived

*618. SHRIMATI USHA CHAUDHARI : Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state :

(a) whether the Government's attention has been drawn to a news item appearing in the "Hindustan Times" dated 5 March, 1986 that the Indian community in South Africa's Natal province is agitated over reported move to demolish the building in Pietermaritzburg where Mahatma Gandhi is believed to have resided;

(b) if so, whether facts have been ascertained in the matter; and

(c) the reaction of Government thereto and the steps proposed to be taken with that country to preserve and maintain the building associated with the greatest leader of our age ?

THE MINISTER OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI B. R. BHAGAT) : (a) The Government has seen the "Hindustan Times" report dated 5 March, 1986 to the

effect that an old dilapidated building believed to have been occupied by Mahatma Gandhi during his stay in South Africa, and now threatened with demolition, has become the centre of controversy among the Indian community in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.

(b) and (c). There is no independent confirmation of the report which appears to have been put out by the Press Trust of South Africa. It is well known that in accordance with our consistent policy, we do not maintain any contacts with the racist regime of South Africa. However, the Government is in touch with our Missions in neighbouring African States to try and keep a close watch on the situation developing in South Africa. We are also in touch with the South African Liberation Movements.

PROF. MADHU DANDAVATE : What is your information ? You do not know where Gandhiji stayed.

[*Translation*]

SHRIMATI USHA CHAUDHARI : Mr. Deputy Speaker, Sir, the role of India has been that she wants to pave a new path of peace and solidarity in the world. Therefore, while paving a new way it is our duty not to lose sight of the fact that our old footprints are not obliterated. Whether we are having political relations with South Africa or not, we must strive to demolish the social discrimination being practised there. In order to keep the memory of Mahatma Gandhi alive and to safeguard our culture there, it becomes necessary to get an inquiry conducted there through our agencies or through the neighbouring countries. I want to know whether the Government are going to have talks with a body like the U.N.O. with a view to maintaining and protecting the colony where Gandhiji had stayed ?

SHRI B. R. BHAGAT : Hon. Deputy Speaker, Sir, I agree with the hon. Lady

Member that our old footprints should not be obliterated and it is our foremost duty to keep the memories of Mahatma Gandhi intact in history. So far as South Africa is concerned, we do not have relations with them. With regard to the question of the hon. Lady Member that we should get some information through the good offices of the U.N.O., I would say that the U.N.O. too have no relations with them. South Africa stands expelled from that body. As I have said, the missions of the neighbouring front line States have also been told to gather information about their activities. We are also engaged in a dialogue with the organisations engaged in the liberation of South Africa so that they could also inquire into it.

SHRI V. TULSIRAM : Mr. Deputy Speaker, Sir, South Africa has a Government of the Christians. Here in India also, there are many Christian memorials which are being protected by the Government. Demolition of the building where our reverend Bapuji lived has the same importance for as their* and their memorials in India...

[English]

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER : Why are you bringing that ? Don't bring that.

SHRI S. JAIPAL REDDY : It should not be allowed to go on record.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER : I don't want it, because our Indians are there; Christians are there. Why are you bringing it ? Regarding Mahatma Gandhi's residence what do you want ?

[Translation]

SHRI V. TULSIRAM : Our Government back home is protecting their memorials, but how bad it is to demolish the house where our reverend Bapuji once lived ? I want to know what action our Government contemplate in that regard ?

SHRI B. R. BHAGAT : Mr. Deputy Speaker, Sir, there is no question of religion

in it. It will not be proper to bring religion in it. Reverend Bapuji supported all religions and he had equal respect for all the religions. The question there is that of apartheid and Gandhiji had started a movement there to end this apartheid. As I told earlier, we have no direct link with that country. If they want to demolish it, they might be doing so and we cannot do anything directly, but we shall do everything within our reach to preserve his great heritage. We are looking into it through other agencies and are doing whatever is possible.

SHRI V. TULSIRAM : Mr. Deputy Speaker, Sir, I did not speak about religion. What Government are doing to ensure that their Government do not touch that property there ?

[English]

SHRI R. L. BHATIA : Sir, Mahatma Gandhi worked in South Africa before 1920. Now, 60 to 65 years have elapsed. Why did not the Government of India think of setting up a monument over the place where he was staying ? Even now, the news has come to us saying that they are going to demolish that building. Sir, if there is a will, there is a way.....

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER : Do you want to put anything new regarding this ?

SHRI R. L. BHATIA : If there is a will, there is a way. There are so many agencies by which they can be approached and this monument must be maintained.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER : That is your suggestion then.

PROF. MADHU DANDAVATE : Mr. Deputy Speaker, Sir, I am really surprised at the Casual manner in which the Minister has replied to this question. In his reply to the first part of the question, he has said that there is already a controversy among the Indian community people there in Africa, as to whether it was the residence of Gandhiji or not. Sir, merely throwing the ball in the court of the Indian community there is not proper. Since it was the place

of residence of Gandhiji, whose first experiment on Satyagraha and non-violence started there, I would like to know from the Minister as to whether any independent enquiries were made by him to our representatives there to find out as to whether that was the official residence of Gandhiji or not? If it is so, what steps have they taken? Here I may add that this is a very casual way in which they are looking at the historical events and monuments. The best instance is this: In this very city of Dehi, Mirza Ghalib's birth-place is nothing else but a coal godown. That is the manner in which they have maintained the sense of history. So, will they change the sense of history and show better respect for Mahatma Gandhi and find out where he resided and whether that house is protected or not?

SHRI B. R. BHAGAT : I will refer the hon. Member to the question. The question itself says, quoting Hindustan Times, 'Where possibly Mahatma Gandhi is believed to have resided'. This is the question.

PROF. MADHU DANDAVATE : Why are you guided by Hindustan Times? What is your information?

SHRI B. R. BHAGAT : These are the parameters of the reply. You are a distinguished parliamentarian.

PROF. MADHU DANDAVATE : That is the parameter of the Hindustan Times. What is your parameter?

SHRI B. R. BHAGAT : I am coming to the substance of your question. I am explaining the reply. What I said in part (a) of my reply was what appeared in Hindustan Times, because, the question directly and very categorically referred to the Hindustan Times report where it said 'believed to have been'.

According to the information that we have, I can say, Sir, that as far as this particular report is concerned, *i.e.*, the *Hindustan Times* report, we have not seen any confirmed evidence that Gandhiji ever lived in this house and indeed it was marked in any way as having a special significance. However, we will, in response to the anxieties expressed by Members, make

further enquiries and if it is found out in a confirmed manner that Gandhiji did live there, then we will try to protect it to the extent we can do in the situation obtaining there in reality.

PROF. MADHU DANDAVATE : Delhi is also Mirza Ghalib's birth place. Don't reduce it to a coal godown in the city of Delhi.

[*Translation*]

SHRIMATI KRISHNA SAHI : Mr. Deputy Speaker, Sir, in his reply the hon. Minister has stated that a report to this effect has appeared in the newspapers, but it has not been confirmed. I want to know from the hon. Minister that when newspapers have carried reports to the effect that the house where Mahatma Gandhi lived has been burnt, photograph of the said arson has also appeared, so was any communication sent to that Government in that regard and if so, what response have we received from them?

SHRI B. R. BHAGAT : I have told what has appeared in the newspapers, but we have no link with that Government. All the channels have been snapped. We shall not write to them directly nor we intend to do so.

[*English*]

SHRI S. JAIPAL REDDY : Sir, according to the press reports, this building where Mahatma Gandhiji was believed to have stayed is sought to be demolished by a section of Indian community to put up a multi-storeyed structure. Is that true? Is there no means by which we can get in touch with members of our own community in South Africa? Only recently an Arya Samaj group was allowed to go. What is the information from that group?

PROF. MADHU DANDAVATE : The Minister is never worried about Gandhiji.

SHRI B. R. BHAGAT : We do not have any information that this building is to be constructed as a multi-storeyed building. The information that we have about the authenticity of that, whether the same building where Gandhiji lived, we have said

it, I mean, the position that we have at the moment.

(Interruptions)

SHRI S. JAIPAL REDDY : in the wake of this proposal to construct a multi-storeyed structure.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER : Question No. 619—Shri Ram Pyare Panika : absent. Shri Uttam Rathod—absent. Q. No. 620—Shri Ajay Mushran; absent.

Solution of Ethnic Problem in Sri Lanka

*621. SHRI ATISH CHANDRA SINHA† :

SHRI P. KOLANDAIVELU :

Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state :

(a) whether the Sri Lankan Government has turned down the proposal for evolving political solution to the Tamils ethnic problem;

(b) whether the Sri Lankan High Commissioner in India recently discussed certain issues with Union Government on the subject;

(c) if so, the outcome of discussions held; and

(d) what further steps are being contemplated in this regard ?

THE MINISTER OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI B. R. BHAGAT) : (a) Yes, Sir. The Sri Lanka Government has turned down the proposals put forward by the TULF. Earlier the Tamil groups had rejected proposals put forward by the Sri Lanka government.

(b) The High Commissioner for Sri Lanka called on the Prime Minister on 19-3-86. He also separately discussed certain issues with the former Foreign Secretary.

(c) The High Commissioner explained the position of the Government of Sri Lanka. He reiterated the commitment of the Government of Sri Lanka to a political solution and its desire for continued Indian good offices to help in achieving

such a solution. The Prime Minister conveyed to the High Commissioner, Government's concern at the conflicting reports from Sri Lanka, and at the actions of Sri Lankan security forces against the Tamil population. The High Commissioner of Sri Lanka was once again informed of Government's view that there could be no military solution to the ethnic problem, and the onus for creating conditions conducive to a political solution lies on the Government of Sri Lanka.

(d) Further steps will have to be decided in the light of future developments.

SHRI ATISH CHANDRA SINHA : Mr. Deputy Speaker, Sir, in spite of the assurance given by the High Commissioner of Sri Lanka, it seems that the Sri Lankan Government is committed to a military solution, rather than a political solution to the Sri Lanka ethnic situation. We have been bearing reports about the amassing of different types of weapons and all sort of things to repress the Tamils movement. Probably, Sri Lankan Government is thinking that the repression can go to such an extent that there will be military win or the Tamil movement will become so weak that ultimately whatever conditions that the Sri Lankan Government give for political solution, there will be no other option for the Tamil movement but to accept them. Under these circumstances, I would like to know from the Minister whether the Government is thinking of giving recognition to the Tamil Liberation Movement or TULF in line with SWAPO or PLO ?

SHRI B.R. BHAGAT : No, Sir. It is because, right from the beginning we have maintained this position—This is the Government of India's position—that this is an internal matter of Sri Lanka, although we have spoken very strongly. The House is aware of this about the killings going on there or even the attempts to impose a military solution, we have warned the Sri Lankan Government that this was political question which they had to solve. We have said so that it was our belief and it is our policy that this question could be solved politically through discussions, peaceful negotiation among the parties concerned, within the overall framework of the unity and integrity of Sri Lanka. Therefore, while we are for a peaceful solution, we are for the