

The Prayer Hall Services and Maintenance Trust

Registration No. E – 31041 (Mumbai) dated 13-03-2015

C/o The WZO Trust Funds,
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File Ref: E-24

**Mr. Arzan J. Ghadially,
Mumbai.**

By E-Mail to: Arzan .JG <arzanjg@gmail.com>

Dear Mr. Arzan Ghadially,

Ref: Your e-mail dated August 01, 2020

Before your questions are responded to, it is essential to address a few basic facts that you may not be aware of which could therefore be at the root cause of your misunderstanding of the correct position:

1. The Prayer Hall is the property of the BMC. Our Prayer Hall Services & Maintenance Trust merely maintains the facility and provides services required by the families of deceased Parsi-Irani Zoroastrians. We cannot in these circumstances charge for use of the Hall.
2. It has been an established and time-tested custom within our community, that the fees charged for prayers performed at any religious location, or even at one's residence, are directly agreed between the Panthaki and the family member requesting the services of priests who are to perform the ceremony. The same principle is applied to funeral ceremonies to be performed at the Prayer Hall.

3. Er. Framroze Mirza is the coordinator appointed by our Trust and also organizes prayers for those families who either do not have a Panthaki or where the family Panthaki does not pray for those who opt for a system of disposal of the dead other than Dokhmenashini. At the same time, he is by no means the only Panthaki entitled to organize prayers for the families of a deceased Zoroastrian. Other Panthakis like Er. Khushroo Madon have over the years also organised prayers and Er. Mirza has merely facilitated funeral arrangements as the Coordinator at the Hall.
4. While the fees actually charged are agreed between the Panthaki and the family, in order to ensure that the rates charged by priests at Doongerwadi and Priests at the Prayer Hall are comparable at all times, our Trustees have, from time to time, put out the maximum fees that Panthakis organizing funeral prayers can charge at the Hall. We are satisfied that the rates put out by our Trust are on the lower side as compared to the rates charged at Doongerwadi. As Er. Mirza would tell you himself, he has often waived or substantially reduced his fees for those who do not have the financial ability to pay the charges indicated.
5. The Prayer Hall Services and Maintenance Trust has very limited funds of our own and we rely entirely on donor support for maintaining the property, cleaning, repairs, security, etc. That is why we hand over a letter soliciting voluntary donations from families after use of the Hall. Our corpus is limited and earnings on sums invested have fallen considerably over the last few months.
6. Finally, and most importantly, it is essential for a community such as ours to nurture and support our priests, who struggle today to eke out a living for themselves and their families. A large percentage of our priests, who are not attached to an Agiary or Atash Behram, are part-time priests and have to supplement their earnings by being employed in commercial establishments. Priests who pray at the Prayer Hall are often prohibited from praying at an Agiary or Atash Behram and have no choice but to seek employment in other establishments or vocations. We are constrained to say therefore that some of the issues you raise such as receipts and taxability of the earnings of priests, show a callous disregard for the well-being of this dwindling number of our Zoroastrian priests. Moreover, this is an issue for the priests to deal with as we are not the recipient of any amounts for the prayers conducted.

Now coming to your specific questions:

1. Is the 4 days ceremony compulsory on a payment of Rs. 48,000/-?

In normal (non-Covid) times there was no such requirement and if you see the maximum indicative fees put out by the Trust, we had specified not only the rates for each ceremony, but also the charges for additional priests praying (say) at Uthamnas.

Today, with the Covid pandemic and specifically with the permission given to Agiaries & Atash Behrams to also conduct 4 days prayers (other than the Geh Sarna) for those who have to be cremated because they have tested Covid Positive, we were faced with a situation where the Geh Sarna is done in the compound of the Worli Crematorium but the relatives chose to have other prayers performed at Agiaries and Atash Behrams.

To safeguard the interests of the priests who pray at the Prayer Hall, it was decided that we would agree to their charging a flat fee of Rs. 48,000/- during this period and thereby ensure that all other ceremonies after the Geh Sarna are also performed at the Prayer Hall, even if the family prefers for any reason to have these performed at an Agiary or Atash Behram of their choice.

May that we add that we have found from our records of 2017 & 2018 that you have used the Hall in those years and have paid the Panthaki a fee not significantly different to the maximum amount indicated by us today without any resistance or fan-fare.

2. Can the prayers be performed by a priest not designated by the Trust?

Yes, certainly. In fact, we would encourage family Panthakis to perform the ceremonies of those who wish to be cremated, and Er. Mirza has been told to first ask the family of the deceased if they would like to appoint a Panthaki of their choice to do the prayers.

3. If a person cannot afford to pay Rs. 48,000, will he be allowed to use the Prayer Hall?

Since commencement we have had only 2 instances where this has been done and where the families have willingly paid the Coordinator Rs. 6,000/- for covering the incidental costs for use of the hall. Relatives of a non-Covid

deceased can therefore use the Prayer Hall without any obligation to have the prayers at the Hall. It is however, recommended that Rs.6,000 be paid to the Coordinator for covering the incidental expenses.

Family members of a Covid infected deceased person who do not wish to have the four days ceremonies performed at the Prayer Hall are free to have the Geh Sarna done by their own Panthaki / Priests, as in any event the ceremony is performed in the Car Park with the cadaver in a body-bag and directly taken thereafter from the ambulance to the furnaces whereby there is no need for use of the Prayer Hall.

4. An amount of half a lakh collected with no receipt is an offence. Do you agree?

As explained, this is something to be agreed between the Panthaki and the family. We, as the Prayer Hall Services & Maintenance Trust do not come into the picture at all. However please do bear in mind that the Rs. 48,000 is distributed amongst several priests although it may be collected by a single person. Please also bear in mind the practice followed at Doongerwadi, which is apparently no different. It is also to be stressed that none of the money collected by the Ervads is received by the Trust.

5. Can the Trust stop cash payments and allow payments by cheque if no receipts are issued?

Again, as explained above this is something to be agreed between the Panthaki and the family and the Prayer Hall Services & Maintenance Trust does not come into the picture. If it is your opinion that our priests today overcharge and exploit people who use their services, then please take up this issue with them generally but do not place this problem at our door.

6. Kindly provide breakup of the Rs 6000 charged towards incidental charges. As per Faramroz Mirza he had informed me that these have to paid to BMC staff. If I am asked to pay Rs 6000 compulsory I have a right to know in whose pocket this Rs 6000 amount is sitting. I will personally visit the BMC and sort it out. This amount is requested to be discontinued. Let the Trust bear such cost.

Again, as explained earlier, the Trust is by no means flush with funds and we rely on donor support in order to maintain the hall and provide this service

which we render as an unmet need for Parsis wanting a choice other than Dokhmenashini for their departed loved ones. We have letters expressing the gratitude of users of the Hall.

It is common practice to pay gratuities to staff who are helpful and it is invariably done even at Doongerwadi after utilising their services. Although Er. Mirza may have said that these gratuities are meant for BMC staff, the amount collected is actually also distributed amongst our Security Guards, the cleaners employed at the hall and those who help with documentation and other formalities.

Though already mentioned above, it is again reiterated that none of the money collected by the Ervads is received by the Trust.

Please understand that the average utilisation of the Hall has been 6-7 times in a full month and this amount therefore is not a significant receipt in the hands of the recipient worker. Gratuities should be given with grace and dignity.

To sum up, I am sure you agree that based on the explanations provided above, your concerns were misplaced and you will desist from your attempted vilification of our Trust.

As most of the concerns addressed by you pertain to Er. Framroze Mirza, a copy of this communication is being addressed to him.

Also, in view of your having circulated WA messages in the public domain, we are constrained to share this communication in public domain as well as, uploading the same on our website.

Very Sincerely,

Dinshaw K. Tamboly.
Chairman.

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