

Plans take shape for museum at Roerich estate

Bangalore, Asha Krishnaswamy, July 14, 2013, DHNS:

Budget push may hasten work on grandiose project



The Roerich estate on Kanakapura Road can no more be called a wasteland. The government has begun the work on planning an art complex at the estate to showcase the works of Russian artist Svetoslav Roerich and the life as well as times of yesteryear actress Devika Rani Roerich.

The government, which took possession of the 470-acre estate in 2011, did nothing so far to conserve the same or throw it open to the public, despite the Russian embassy repeatedly saying it should be developed as a museum.

It took not less than 17 years for the government to legally win control over the Tataguni estate.

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, in the budget presented on Friday, announced that Rs 25 crore would be set aside for constructing a museum of international standards at the estate. An amount of Rs three crore is going to be released over the next eight months.

This is the first time that the government has allocated funds for taking up a project here. All these years only a few lakhs of rupees were given to meet the salary expenses of a handful of employees of the Roerich and Devika Rani Roerich Estate Board.

The chief secretary is the chairman of the Board and a retired bureaucrat is the chief executive officer. Officials from the departments of forest, horticulture, Kannada and Culture and Heritage authority, members of Lalitha Kala Academy and Chitrakala Parishat are on a panel which is going to advise the board on activities to be taken up.

The government can take up works, including building construction, only on 25 acres of the sprawling estate.

Officials privy to the first meeting held by the board recently said that a museum showcasing the paintings of Roerich and the household belongings of the Roerich couple would come up. In addition, the small house at the estate in which the couple lived for many years would be renovated to preserve it as a heritage building.

An auditorium with a capacity of 250 to 300 seats will be constructed so that films on the Roerich couple's rich legacy as well as movies of Devika Rani, who is billed as Dragon Lady of Indian cinema, could be screened. An exhibition hall, studios for visiting artists, dormitories and guest rooms for those who attend short-term workshops would be constructed.

200 paintings

Nearly 200 paintings of Roerich are now preserved at Venkatappa Art Gallery. The same will be displayed here once the exhibition hall is ready at the estate. The government has asked its principal chief architect K Uday to draw a blueprint for the structures that will come up here.

The major work that needs to be taken up here is the fencing of the property. But the expenditure would be in crores of rupees, to fence this huge forest land which is part of an elephant corridor. Hence, for the present, only the boundary will be marked by stones, sources said.

The Board has no plans to allow any commercial activities or partner with any individual or company to raise funds as this would go against the Supreme Court order.

Heritage Commissioner P S Vastrad said, "In the first meeting, we decided to seek the opinion of subject experts. The building will have to reflect Indo-Russian culture. We have plans to provide a gallery to artists to exhibit their works. We have to take engineers' estimate to find out which of the properties come under the 25 acres. We have to see whether the lake and the defunct linoleum oil extraction plant which was run by the couple too come under us. Protecting the boundary is very important."

Asked how long it would take to complete the work, the commissioner said though the government intends to do it quickly, it may take not less than a couple of years to throw it open to the public as a lot of work has to be done.

To a question whether the funds allocated in the budget would be sufficient for the grandiose plans of the Board, Vastrad said money would not be a constraint as Rs three crore would be available over the next eight months.