

Ram Jethmalani

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India is inhabited by of various communities following various religions. Different languages are spoken here and various races hail from its soil. This diversity makes it unique among the comity of countries. Every individual of this country has been accorded the same amount of respect through centuries, irrespective of his religion.

History is replete with such instances about Sindh and its residents. When others all over the world covered themselves with leaves and hides, Sindhis dressed themselves in superior cotton. Sindh has unequivocally proved, that its inhabitants lived in well planned houses as far back as 5000 years before Christ. Even in that primitive era, Sindhis could afford the luxury of swimming pools and underground drainage systems.

Today, we have the pleasure of introducing a unique personality from the Sindhi community - a gem of a person who has helped the community at every stage of its struggle besides becoming a living legend in his chosen field, whose achievements and service to the community will leave an indelible stamp in the annals of history.

We have with us today, none other than the topmost legal brain of India - Mr. Ram Jethmalani, erstwhile Union Urban Development Minister and Union Law Minister.

Jawhrani: It is a great privilege to extend our hearty welcome. Sir, you belong to the generation which took birth in our beloved Sindh. Can you share with us memories of your city of birth and ancestral home; your parents and some tender instances of your childhood?

Jethmalani: Much water has flowed through Indus and even I cannot recollect my entire past. Whatever I can recall, I'll share with our viewers. Sindh was once a part of united India and in its northern part lies the beautiful town of Shikarpur. I have been to almost all parts of the world, but no place comes close to Shikarpur.

Shikarpur could boast of many luxuries, which are not available elsewhere. People literally wonder when I tell them about such things. I was admitted to school at the age of five. We had to sit on the floor and paid four annas as tuition fees. Teachers were strict and didn't spare anybody and would even beat us if we did not perform well. But the education we received in that school, is perhaps not available in schools today, even after paying exorbitant fees.

There was a square named 'Lakhi Dar' at Shikarpur having shops full of various articles and available at very competitive and economical prices. One, Moti, was famous for his 'Kulfi' (Ice Candy); perhaps it is still available in the city of Uhasnagar. There were sixteen annas in a rupee and Kulfi costing one anna was so huge that after consuming one, it was impossible to eat anything else. Kulfi of two and half annas could satiate the needs of the entire family. There used to be a variety of delicacies like Naan, Kabab, Mutton Chop, Curries, Chicken and other delicacies, which are simply not available these days. There used to be a canal, named 'Sindh Wah'. It flowed during the warm months of June to September. Well-to-do families of Shikarpur had their own gardens and farm houses, scattered around the city. Frequently, people visited Sindh Wah for picnics, and the ladies were given a royal treatment. They were asked to sit back and watch their spouses prepare a feast for them on the banks of Sindh Wah. The feast comprised of several delicious dishes; daal, chappati prepared on earthen tawa, keema and various non-vegetarian fares. The banks of Sindh Wah were full of trees and we used to walk almost four-five miles upstream. Dry pumpkins were used to swim across. Not only revelers, but even snacks and liquor floated alongside, in the canal. There was ample stock of liquor,

brought from Khairpur. While swimming, singing, eating and drinking, we sailed with the flow of the canal. At times, we would get out of the river and start dancing on its banks. Towards the end of the day, we would return to the spot, from where we had started, and towards one of the farmhouses of some local businessman. There were water elevators, built in wells and run by bulls. These were used to fill up the personal swimming pools, to which were then added fragrant spirits and rose petals before one took a dip.

Jawhrani: Just like kings and princes...

Jethmalani: Yes, you are absolutely right. We could even go down inside the well as there were stairs for that too. On reaching the water level, we would soak our feet in water. Food was brought down inside the well through containers. I have never experienced such luxury anywhere else.

Hindus and Muslims of Shikarpur lived like a family. No communal riots were ever experienced. Isn't it a surprise, that our traditional annual shopping of new clothes was done, not on the occasion of Diwali, but on the eve of Eid. This is called secularism of Shikarpur and secularism of Sindh.

Jawhrani: Was it confined to Shikarpur or did it extend to other parts of the country too?

Jethmalani: We experienced more of it in Shikarpur. In fact, Sindh has remained the cradle of Sufism. Zindah Peer and Sadhbelo are living examples. Simply put, Sindhyat is nothing but Sufism. Hindus used to visit the 'Dargahs' of Muslim pirs and Muslims visited Shrines (Samadhi) of Hindu dervishes. There was a unified civilization of both communities. It was identical, barring a few instances.

Jawhrani: Where did you receive your early education?

Jethmalani: My secondary education, upto third standard, was in Shikarpur, which was part of Sukkur district and Sukkur was some 24 miles away from Shikarpur. There was New Model High School in Sukkur, where late Dharamdas Kshatrya used to teach. They later on established a school with the same name in the city of Mumbai too. It is still very much there. Mr. Dharamdas was our Principal. I was promoted from third standard and admitted into standard sixth. The Director of Public Instructions was empowered to do so. However, I had to go through a few tests before I was allowed to do

so. I was just thirteen years old when I cleared my matriculation. I got my degree in law when I was seventeen.

Jawhrani: Where did you study Law?

Jethmalani: I did my Law from S. C. Shahani Law College, Karachi, but I had passed my first year science from Sitaldas Chelaram College, Shikarpur, which was headed by Dr. Nirmal Gurbuxani, in whose memory, Nirmal Nagar is being constructed at Karjat. He was my first Principal and he was highly pious and a straightforward human being. I can still recollect his face vividly. I passed my Inter Science from D. J. Sindh College, Karachi. In those days, our D. J. Sindh Science College was famous throughout India. I wanted to be an advocate, as our whole family belonged to the legal fraternity. My father, grandfather, uncle, cousins, literally every relative of mine was an advocate. Hence, I too longed to be an advocate. I was recognized as a talkative person and I took active part in college debates and elocution competitions. My father didn't like the idea and he insisted that I become an engineer. I was forcibly admitted to a science college. When I was admitted to D. J. Sindh Science College, Karachi, I became highly depressed and was angry with my father.

Jawhrani: But didn't children obey their parents in those days?

Jethmalani: That was the reason behind our meek submission to the wishes of our parents. There was a railway bridge in Karachi, named 'Lovers Bridge'. It got its name due to the many suicides committed by love lorn couples there. I also frequented that Lovers Bridge on a daily basis and prayed for my freedom from that science college.

Jawhrani: So was your centre of attraction Law and nothing else?

Jethmalani: A miracle happened! God answered my prayers. Karachi didn't have its own university and its colleges were affiliated to Bombay University. Suddenly, Bombay University issued an order by which any intermediate pass could get admission to Law College directly, and the tenure of the course was just two years. I defied my father and got admitted into S. C. Shahani Law College, Karachi. Its Principal was Pahlaj Singh Advani and Professor Raymond taught us Roman Law. In those days, Bombay University used to control the educational institutions of Maharashtra, Gujarat, some parts of Karnataka and also Andhra.

Jawhrani: Did the Partition of India have any bearing on you or your family?

Jethmalani: Immensely! I had to begin my career in Karachi, as my father was dead against my decision and I couldn't have joined my father. I worked as an advocate for six years in Karachi, when this unfortunate partition of India took place. No one believed that this experiment of Pakistan would succeed. Everyone hoped that ultimately it would rejoin with India. There were no large scale riots. Sindhi Muslims loved Sindhi Hindus right up to the end.

Jawhrani: But weren't some people killed?

Jethmalani: Those who were killed in the riots were mainly from the Sikh community. Sindhi Hindus were spared but ordered to leave Sindh sans their properties. They were offered every help and even bid farewell at the docks, but were advised not to take any property.

Jawhrani: Wasn't this mass migration a sudden and unexpected tragedy?

Jethmalani: Yes, indeed it was a great tragedy, which Sindhis never accepted. Sindhis were against the Two Nation Theory and Partition of India. Jinnah could not succeed in getting the resolution passed in favour of Pakistan in the Sindh Assembly, because of Chief Minister Khan Bahadur Allah Bux, who was a nationalist Muslim. He finally paid with his life for this opposition to the partition of India, when he was martyred in a broad day light attack, while he was traveling in a horse carriage in Shikarpur.

Jawhrani: Do you feel this sudden partition inflicted heavy blows on Sindhi language and culture?

Jethmalani: Of course! The reason for that was the scattering of migrant Sindhis over the length and breadth of India. But, it is also a fact that Sindhi Hindus had to worry more about their bread and butter and could not devote much time to their cultural survival. Presently, the Sindhi Muslim is unhappy in Sindh. He wants to be free from the clutches of Pakistan. Whenever I get the opportunity to meet Sindhi Muslims in western cities I am told that they want freedom from Pakistan. Occasionally, they even invite us to take the reins of Sindh. Partition brought helplessness and gloom to the Sindhi Hindus. We thought everything was over.

Jawhrani: Did you initiate any movement?

Jethmalani: We left Sindh and our family moved to India. I personally went

back to Karachi and continued with my advocacy. Unfortunately, the first communal riot was engineered by migrant Muslims in Karachi in the month of January, 1948. Sindhi Muslims were not a part of these rioters. Indian migrants wanted properties of Sindhi Hindus and this was the primary reason for communal riots in Sindh. No killings were reported and the main objective of the rioters was money and other valuables of Sindhi Hindus.

Jawhrani: Having been a top notch advocate, what made you enter the political arena?

Jethmalani: Every educated person should take interest in politics. If educated people shun politics and do not express their opinion, it will weaken the very basis of democracy. Therefore, I used to take interest in politics since the very beginning. My first encounter with politics happened when Acharya Kripalani and Krishna Menon contested elections. I had already established myself in the legal field and Krishna Menon invited me to join politics.

Jawhrani: Did he invite you to join the party?

Jethmalani: In any case, everyone of us was a Congress-man those days, but some of our Sindhi brothers had joined Jana Sangh. It was natural, as many of the Sindhis were aggrieved by the Congress. The election contested by Krishna Menon was held in Bombay, where I canvassed against Acharya Kripalani and I was the only Sindhi who opposed the candidature of Acharya Kripalani.

Acharya Kripalani couldn't forget this for the rest of his life. However, later on, we became close friends.

Jawhrani: We Sindhis are passing through a critical phase, where we have to even remind our children that they are Sindhis and our mother tongue is Sindhi. There is widespread apprehension about the sustainability or even survival of our own language, culture and traditions. What steps do you think should be taken?

Jethmalani: To some extent, it is inevitable. There are many such instances and many groups, communities and languages, which simply get erased from the face of globe. But as far as we, who have experienced the richness of that language and civilization, are concerned, will never be able to reconcile to this fact. It would be a great tragedy, if Sindhis - a rose in the bouquet of India are

eliminated.

Jawhrani: What can we do to avert that situation?

Jethmalani: It is the duty of Sindhi parents to impress upon their children to learn Sindhi language. They should speak Sindhi with their spouses, which could result in its spreading to the children. But nowadays everyone is concerned with one's economic growth.

Jawhrani: But to keep pace with the world isn't English also needed?

Jethmalani: I accept it, but in the field of politics you need to know two Indian languages, too. One of them is Hindi and another is the state language. This makes you a quadri-lingual. I concede that this puts additional burden on children, but for the very existence of our community we have to bear it. It is imperative upon our generation to work in this direction and compel our new generation, not to forget their language and culture.

Jawhrani: There have been a lot of debates and discussions regarding the script - Arabic or Devnagiri, to be adopted for the language. In your opinion which is more appropriate?

Jethmalani: Sindhi literature, of the last fifteen decades has been produced in the Arabic script. Gems like 'Shah jo Rasalo,' 'Sachal's Kalams' and Sami's Sholkas' are all written in the Arabic script. How can we discard this script? Besides, the Arabic script is used by our Sindhi brethren in Sindh and adopting another script will to a great extent undermine, if not sever our links, with this vast majority of Sindhis and deprive us of the Sindhi literature being currently produced there by serious writers of prose and poetry. In my opinion, maintaining the Arabic Script, will go a long way towards maintaining and strengthening the bonds between Sindhis across the border.

Jawhrani: Besides the language issue, what are the other problems and unfulfilled expectations that the Sindhi community is experiencing today?

Jethmalani: When the partition of India took place in 1947, the maximum injustice was done to the Sindhi community. Every other community had their own land, where they settled and built their homes. But Sindhis got distributed all over India. Sindhis cannot get political power, it is just impossible. It is very difficult for Sindhi leaders to establish their leadership all over India. But

there is one grievance amongst the Sindhis, that at least they should be provided with some help to keep their Sindhi identity, their Sindhi persona alive. We are not receiving funds from the government for the development of Sindhi language, and if funds are received they are not being utilized. The Sindhis are demanding a 24 hour Sindhi channel on television so that our Sindhi art, artistry and culture can be displayed. The other Indians should also realize that even we are a flower in the Indian bouquet. This is our major complaint, which has still not been addressed. We are not demanding some special treatment, but treatment on par with others, as equality of treatment is mentioned in our Constitution. They have this dream that at least their Sindhi identity, culture, traditions, and heritage should remain alive. Sindhis are inheritors of that culture where Hindus and Muslims were united. Sindh is the cradle of Sufism and Sufism is the synthesis of Hinduism and Islam.

Jawhrani : Moving on to your professional life, what are your views on the fact that even after 60 years of Independence we still see that justice is always delayed. Isn't it rightly said 'Justice delayed is justice denied'?

Jethmalani : One of the reasons for that is corruption. Corrupt litigants don't want their cases to be tried. So they keep delaying the case and corrupt judges and magistrates help them. But there are also other reasons for arrears that have taken place in the courts and the resulting congestion. Two law commissions have recommended that we need to increase the strength of judges five fold. But this has not been done. The Babri Masjid case has been going on in the civil courts for fifty years. Why no judgment has been given? Even the Muslims have said that they will agree if the court decides, that this was the birth place of Lord Ram. We can call this a massive system failure.

Jawhrani : There has been criticism that you have defended a lot of gangsters and protected anti social elements who should not have had the benefit of your defence. What is your reaction?

Jethmalani : That's not correct. I have defended alleged gangsters. Nobody can be dubbed a gangster without considering evidence, without understanding the law. The press has no right to decide, politicians have no right to decide and my enemies have no right to decide. Courts have to decide. The BJP asked me to leave the party when I

agreed to defend Balbir Singh. He was the person who had been sentenced to death but was let off by the Supreme Court on the ground that the case against him was false. BJP should have apologized to me, isn't it? Instead of that, I went out of the BJP and I have not joined any political party till date.

I am the voice of conscience. Mahatma Gandhi had said that when India becomes independent, India will be the conscience of the world. We are not the conscience of the world because we have not made ourselves so.

Jawhrani : How about your relation with L. K. Advani, considering the fact that BJP sought your resignation from the party?

Jethmalani : I do have political differences with him. But I believe that he is one of the most honest persons in this country, and I also believe that unlike many, he is also secular minded. Secularism is like an obsession with me. It is my religion, if you ask me. I have no other religion except secularism. I firmly believe that Advani's name has been deliberately tarnished. Advani is secular and the minorities of India have been unnecessarily terrified and a fear psychosis has been implanted in their minds that this is a party which is against Muslims. That's not correct. By the process of elimination, I have answered your question.

Jawhrani: Thank you, Dada. You graced us, and narrated the golden memories of Sindh from the experiences of your life. We thank you from the core of our heart.

Jethmalani: Thanks.