

Ashok Khemani

Chairman- Khemani Group, India.



Witnessing the depressing post-partition scenario, History, moist eyed, perhaps apprehensive that the final chapter of the Sindhi Community was being recorded.

The very community that had shown the entire world the path to progress and prosperity; and gave it knowledge and awareness about culture was gasping for its last breaths. Was this the last sunset for this glorious community?

Not yet; as Sindhis re-wrote their destiny with the firm belief that if the Almighty has given one mouth to be fed he has also provided two hands to work; and through sheer determination and hardwork they transformed the darkness of misfortune into the glorious sunshine of success.

And now, the same moist-eyed History is recording along with the misfortune of yesterday, the success story of Sindhis today with the illustrious chapter of fortune and further progress tomorrow, yet to be recorded.

No doubt injustice was done to this community that was uprooted from its roots, but the Almighty balanced this by presenting them with an opportunity, which was not to be restricted to the province of Sindh alone, for the entire world was to become their oyster. Sindhis have left their indelible mark in every sector and established themselves in every nook & corner of the world. They, who came empty handed, have now contributed enormously towards the progress and welfare of the entire society and the nation, wherever they settled.

The generation that left Sindh in their youth were able to scale great heights by the sheer dint of their hard work, determination and integrity. Their hard work and success was a source encouragement to their children to scale even greater heights, and today the Sindhi community is creating history and the apprehensions about the community's demise have been banished forever.

Today, we meet one such individual who has carried on the tradition and with his innovative ideas and concepts created a niche for himself in the Indian business scenario Mr. Ashok Khemani.

Jawhrani: To begin with, please tell us from which part of Sindh does your family hail?

Ashok: My family hails from Karachi.

Jawhrani: And what was their occupation there?

Ashok: They were landlords. And during the partition, they left everything and came bare-handed. They came with empty pockets and empty hands.

Jawhrani: Were you born here?

Ashok: Yes, I was born in Bombay.

Jawhrani: That means you have no personal experience about the trauma of the Partition since you were born here, but are you aware of what transpired during those days, maybe from your elders or from historical knowledge in school?

Ashok: We had heard from our father that although we lived like royals in Pakistan, we had to leave everything and start from scratch in Bombay. In short, as refugees you can say a transformation to paupers from royals.

Jawhrani: After you learnt about this exodus, have you ever felt that grave injustice has been done to the Sindhi Community?

Ashok: Yes, we can say that. And it was purely on account of self-reliance and without any support from the authorities we began our life afresh. We had to work hard and start everything from scratch and it was very tough. But today, by the grace of God and hard work, we have reached this level.

Jawhrani: People have achieved success after toiling hard for many years, while in your case you have achieved it in such a short time. Is this because you are a workaholic or were you obsessed with being successful in business?

Ashok: As a matter of fact it has taken us 45 years to reach where we are today. My father came to Daman before its liberation from the Portuguese rule. It got liberated in 1961. From that time, we have been dealing in all types of merchandise and were pioneers in the liquor business. We used to import liquor from all over the world. Later, we started distribution of liquor made all over India. When I was in the third standard, I joined my father in business as he was not keeping good health. And when I was in the eighth standard, I

took over the entire business and we became distributors for the main liquor brands in India.

Jawhrani: What were your goals or aspirations after taking over the business?

Ashok: It was my ambition to have our own distillery one day. In 1981, I got the license for a distillery and in 1983; I started production and went on adding capacity. That is how we have reached where we are today. We began with a very small distillery and in the first year itself we were able to sell whatever we could produce. We were running short of capacity. Those days, there were a lot of government restrictions, but slowly, we managed to obtain whatever permissions were required by the government. In 1995, I thought of putting-up a huge unit, ten times bigger than what I had put up initially.

Jawhrani: Do you have any international tie-ups?

Ashok: Yes, by the grace of God, we secured a tie-up with UDI, subsidiary of UDV, manufacturer of Johnny Walker Black Label. They were the first to come to India and they tied up with us for manufacturing. Undoubtedly, we were also the best at that time. In 2000, there was one brewery in Daman which became sick and was under BIFR. We took that over and since have increased its capacity multifold. Today, it is one of the best breweries in the country. The best facilities and manufacturing practices have been adopted as well as the latest equipments installed, some of which are the first of their kind in India.

Jawhrani: It is said 'Business without morals and wealth without work is sin.' What has been the philosophy of your group?

Ashok: Khemanis are known for their hard work, perseverance and hallmark of quality. And it is because of quality, which is our prime objective in all our endeavours, that we have reached this stage. For us work is worship.

Jawhrani: Did you face any difficulties on the way to achieving this success? Did you ever feel that because of your business interests your family life was affected in any way?

Ashok: No. Luckily, I have been blessed with a wonderful family and staff. They are very understanding. They have always supported me. At times, I used to work 20 hours a day also, but they always stood by me. Because of this support we have reached a stage where

Khemani Group has a turnover of Rs. 400 crores a year. It is a great achievement for the Khemani Group and as the Chairman of the Group; I am happy and proud of this fact.

Jawhrani: Are you satisfied at this stage or do you have further ambitions?

Ashok: I am a dreamer and I have visions of growing much larger. There are many other projects in the pipeline.

Jawhrani: Are your children also participating in the business?

Ashok: My two sons have graduated from business school in USA and UK and are both working with me.

Jawhrani: Have you bagged any awards?

Ashok: Several a long list. Even my sons have received 13 International awards; the most coveted being the Presidents' Award of USA. Both my sons are married and are doing well.

Jawhrani: Were these awards conferred on you for business or for some other achievements?

Ashok: I have received awards for my business, social and philanthropic activities.

Jawhrani: What are your major achievements in the social sector?

Ashok: I have established the Home for the Aged, Bal Bhavan and Red Cross, at Daman. I was Chairman of the AID's Awareness Programme and President of the Foot Ball Association, Daman. I am also President of the Distillery Association, Daman and Dui. I was on the Western Railway Zonal Advisory Committee. When I took over as member of the committee, I told them that I didn't want to be a rubber stamp. For 25 years, nothing was done for our territory of Daman, Dui and Silvassa. I made sure that all the trains halted at Vapi. Unbelievable, but it is true that except Delhi Rajdhani there is not a single train that doesn't halt at Vapi, be it Shatabdi or any other train.

Jawhrani: At every function of the Sindhi Community, we hear that now a days Sindhi is not spoken with children at homes and its usage is drastically declining. You speak very good Sindhi, but do you also speak with your children in Sindhi?

Ashok: Yes we speak in Sindhi with our children, however; honestly speaking, English and Hindi take precedence.

- Jawhrani:* Are you a willing contributor towards promotion of Sindhyat?
- Ashok:* Of course. And whenever the Sindhi community needs our help anywhere, it will be our pleasure to come forward.
- Jawhrani:* There is also a debate regarding the Sindhi script whether it should be Arabic, Devanagri or Roman. What are your views on this?
- Ashok:* Unfortunately, we didn't learn to read or write Sindhi, because we came here after Partition. According to me, Devanagri script is the best.
- Jawhrani:* How much do you believe in the Sindhi rituals and traditions which are being followed since the time we were in Sindh, which, I am sure; you must have seen being followed by your elders during marriages and other functions?
- Ashok :* I firmly believe in the Sindhi traditions and culture. It is a good thing that we have our own identity.
- Jawhrani:* Which is the best attribute about the Sindhi community and which is the biggest flaw of the Sindhi community?
- Ashok:* Sindhis are honest, sincere, dedicated and hardworking, which has led to their overwhelming success in every field. However, we have seen that several Sindhis are still poor and we should try and help them. Our only weakness is disunity. The International Sindhi Sammelan that was organized two years ago at Bandra-Kurla Complex in Bombay was the best and went a long way to address this problem and we should organize it every year. And for that if any one single thing is needed, then that is that all Sindhis should get united and come forward and organize it every year. That was the largest Sindhi gathering, I have seen in my life. I really appreciate it.
- Jawhrani:* That, Sindhis are not united, is a fact. What are your further suggestions for the development of the Sindhi Community because you have that power in you, considering all that you have done for the development in Daman and Dui?
- Ashok:* I have only one prayer before God that all the Sindhis who are successful in life, leave aside their egos and come together. Then, we can do wonders. We have so many well educated and learned scholars in each and every field, and if we are united, we can do much better and be the best.

Jawhrani: In our Community, nowadays the system of inter-caste marriages is also prevalent. What is your opinion regarding inter-caste marriages?

Ashok: Inter-caste marriages are prevalent in all communities, but I feel Sindhis should give first preference to Sindhis in matrimonial alliances or else we should leave it upto the children. After all it is their life.

Jawhrani: There is one more aspect of the Sindhis that wherever there is a temple or Gurudwara, we bow our heads. Can this be construed as a weakness on our part, love and reverence towards the Almighty or is it the fear of God that makes us bow our heads?

Ashok: You can call this a matter of faith. Sufism runs in our blood and because of this we have respect and faith for all manifestations of the Supreme.

Jawhrani: We also have various panths leading to the Almighty God, so on what basis does one select the panth? Is it based on the individual's nature?

Ashok: It is because of the faith one has that he chooses a particular panth.

Jawhrani: How is that faith created in him? Which panth do you follow?

Ashok: We follow the panth of Radha Soami.

Jawhrani: Does this faith arise after witnessing any miracle or is it aroused by visiting those places repeatedly?

Ashok: My parents were believers of Radha Soami teachings. By reading books on the Panth, attending Satsangs and interaction with the Satsangis, I too was convinced that this was the panth for me.

Jawhrani: Exactly what I was trying to say, that it is the nature of the individual. For example, an individual might be a miser and hence prefer that panth where there are no donation boxes as he may feel that this panth is good because they are not expecting any donations from us. While another individual may prefer the panth where there are no restrictions on eating non-vegetarian food. What are your views?

Ashok: You are right. The philosophy of Radha Soami was in tune with my nature. There they have no expectations of any kind of cash from the people. In that system there is no place for garlands, incense sticks or ringing of bells, etc. God can be realized within and not

outside. You should work with the feeling of love in your heart and keep in mind the name of the Lord. Ultimately, there is only one God and these are just the different ways to reach the same God.

Jawhrani: Thank you Mr. Ashok. I am sure the equilibrium that you have maintained in your life, your business, your family, your social life and your spiritual path, doing equal justice to all, will be an exemplary source of inspiration and motivation to the youth of our community.

Ashok: Thank you.