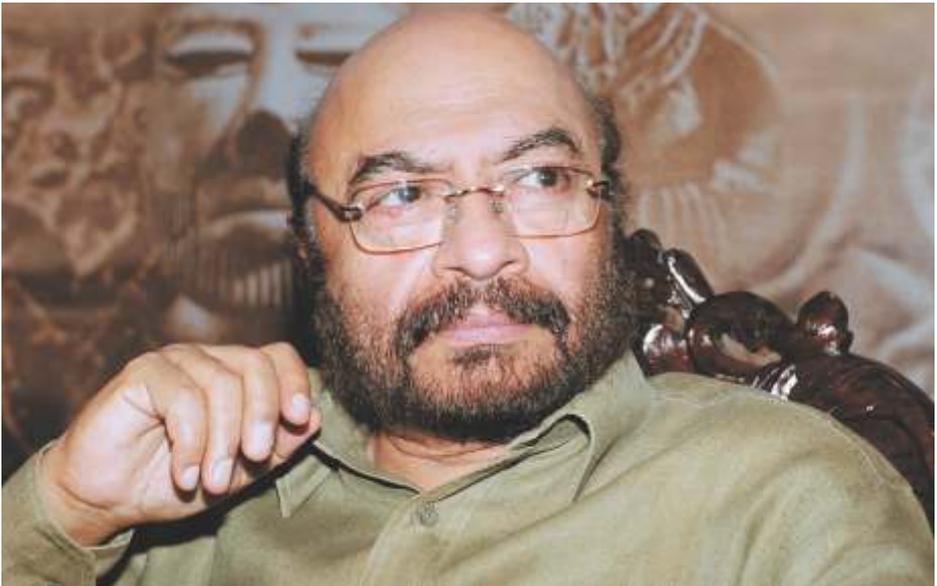


Govind Nihalani

Eminent Film Director,
Recipient of the National Honour “PADMA SHRI”



People, who converse in the language of the greatest poet of all times Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai, are known as Sindhis. With sheer intelligence, education, talent, craft and hard work, they have created a special niche in the comity of nations. We come across tales of such people in the pages of history.

One such illustrious Sindhi who has made a difference, is Mr. Govind Nihalani, a world renowned cinematographer and film director, who has been able to convert art films also into commercial success stories.

Jawhrani: Nihalaniji, can you tell us about your origins in Sindh and the activities of your parents?

Govind: As far as I can remember, we belonged to a little known town of Gambat in Sindh, and my father did business at New Chali, Karachi, where we had a four-storey building of our own.

Jawhrani: Can you recollect some memories of those times?

Govind: Just faint images. I can visualize that building in Karachi and an almond tree outside the courtyard, I was just a child at the time of partition.

Jawhrani: When were you born?

Govind: In December, 1940. I am told so, but there are no records to confirm this. We had a good business at Karachi. Once, as kids we assembled on the terrace of the building and raised slogans 'Inqalab Zindabad'; probably we had heard them in streets, and these echoed in our memories. My uncle tried to stop us from doing so as he was afraid of retaliation from the authorities. There were some British soldiers living adjacent to our building and they frequently offered us toffees.

Jawhrani: Can you recollect any typical Sindhi game like "Thikadi" (pebbles) played by you in childhood?

Govind: I had not played much of this, as this game was generally played by girls. But we liked the game of 'Itee-Dakkar', which is somewhat akin to cricket. I also played 'Kabbadi.' I don't know any other Sindhi games.

Jawhrani: Where did you receive your education and to what extent?

Govind: I obtained my primary education at Udaipur.

Jawhrani: Anything in Sindh?

Govind: No. Not in Sindh, though my father taught me Hindi at home. He himself used to write Hat-Vanki (an ancient language of business and trade). I had also learnt it, but presently I have forgotten it. I think it was some ancient script.

Jawhrani: I think it is like shorthand. Even otherwise, it was difficult for others to decipher.....

Govind: But those days, all the account books were maintained in that script. Presently Persio-Arabic script is used for Sindhi language and the usage of Hat-Vanki is on the decline. I am appalled to see

this, because I think it was our original script, and we have lost it.

Jawhrani: This usually happens. But don't you feel that even Sindhi language, which is our identity, looks like going into oblivion?

Govind: Unfortunately, it is a fact. We Sindhis do not have our own state, which can provide a fertile ground for our language and culture to grow and prosper. Under these circumstances, it becomes our duty to think about it and devise some ways and means to work for the preservation and progress of our language.

Jawhrani: Do you think that being scattered over the whole country is an impediment in this respect?

Govind: Yes. But it doesn't absolve us from our prime duty. At least, we ourselves should speak, read and write in the Sindhi language and introduce it to our children. This cannot be blamed on the community per se; we have to take this responsibility on our own shoulders, individually. Whatever every individual Sindhi does in this regard is more important than what the community is doing in this area.

Jawhrani: So every individual has to contribute?

Govind: Yes, undoubtedly. Community is nothing but a sum total of individuals, families and neighbourhood put together. I think use of the Persio-Arabic script may go out of vogue and it may not survive if we don't get our act together. But whatever script remains, be it Devnagari or even Roman, at least the language should survive and our younger generation be informed about our glorious past.

Jawhrani: Partition inflicted a heavy blow on the whole community. People faced extreme hardships. Did it affect your family too?

Govind: Of course. I can only recollect that it was for the first time, that I saw human blood. There was a sudden commotion in our home one day. The doors and windows were being slammed shut; I couldn't comprehend what was happening. My uncles and aunties were panicky and huddled in a corner. I could only sense that something dangerous had happened. Two of my uncles were not at home. When they returned unharmed, we heaved a sigh of relief.

We had a huge building and my father had covered its verandah with gunny bags, but anxiety and fear compelled him to frequently peep through its slits to see whether some miscreants would try to sneak in, as we had information that there would be an attack.

Ladies of the family kept chilly powder handy for self-defence. I can still recollect those harrowing experiences of my childhood.

I also recall another such instance. One afternoon on a hot summer day, everything was quiet, authorities had imposed curfew. Suddenly, I heard a scream! I got up and looked from the parapet of our terrace; a Hindu wearing a dhoti was struggling for his life as someone had stabbed him and fled. My mother pulled me inside. It's like a flash photographic memory in my mind.

Jawhrani: I think such macabre scenes have left their indelible mark on young impressionable Govind Nihalani, which gave birth to 'Tamas' and 'Dev'. Isn't it?

Govind: 'Tamas', definitely. These impressions are akin to the strings of the taanpura providing the sur for a classical singer. These memories are like a musical note, which remind us of the violence perpetrated by communities in the name of religion. During the making of 'Tamas', these feelings were very much in my psyche.

From the time I joined the tinsel world, I had been thinking of making a film on the topic of partition. I had gone through many works of fiction on the subject. I can read Sindhi language and had gone through Sindhi books also, but I couldn't find a suitable book on partition in Sindhi. When I read 'Tamas', it clicked, and then I decided to make it for television. Incidentally 'Tamas' was produced by Lalit Bijlani and Freni Veriava of Blaze. 'Dev' is its logical conclusion. The issues raised in 'Dev' have been haunting me for a long time. It has been intriguing me as to how politicians derive undue advantage from the differences created between various communities and religions. How politicians corrupt our constitutional institutions, like police, IAS or other services for their petty gains. Such diabolical actions on the part of politicians create havoc and inflict a heavy price on society; be it ideological, human or financial.

Jawhrani: Even your other films, like 'Ardh Satya' or 'Deham' reflected your foresight and had introduced us to the maladies of society ahead of times, when no one could even think about them. Your depiction of an underworld don in Ardh Satya was unheard of till its release, though presently many have adopted this trend. How could you visualize this, ahead of times?

Govind: Some of my personal experiences created this sensitivity in me. I came into contact with Shyam Benegal. He has the most brilliant

analytical mind, a good sense of history and is a fine intellectual and a finer artist. Another such person who influenced me is Satyadev Dubey. He is from theatre and a very intelligent person. Their company induced a great sensitivity in me. I studied Hindi literature. I was lucky to be in contact with politics and literature since my childhood days. Then came theatre. Mr. V. K. Murli is my Guru in the field of cinema. This environment has created a sense of feeling within me, that no one has an isolated existence in this world. He is a part of society and his country, and he is equally responsible for the things happening around him.

Jawhrani: At present human blood has already become a tradable commodity, and you want to say in 'Deham' that even other parts of the body would also be traded in the coming twenty years.

Govind: Absolutely right! A period of twenty years is not a long period. 'Deham' is based on a play 'HARVEST' written by one of my friends, Manjula Padmanabhan; which she penned in 1997. 'Onasis Foundation for Theatre' had arranged a competition in Athens, on the theme of 'Conditions of Human Beings in the New Millennium'. Around 3000 plays were submitted. 'HARVEST' got the top honours carrying an award of \$ 25000/-.

Jawhrani: You have been the first to expose the dark side of police and politicians, as reflected in the character of Shetty in Ardh Satya. Did you face difficulties from the Censor Board for your choice of such bold themes?

Govind: Luckily, I have never experienced any censor problem. Though I was advised not to mention names of Gujarat or Ayodhya in the case of 'Dev'.

Jawhrani: There are many Sindhi stalwarts in Bollywood, who have contributed immensely, in various fields, like finance, direction, story writing etc. G. P. Sippy gave us India's most successful film 'Sholay' and your name is also counted amongst the most talented directors. Doesn't it put a responsibility on our shoulders to portray our Sindhi values, culture and traditions, in such a way so as to archive them and introduce them to our younger generation - the Sindhi values as described earlier? Do you have any plans to do this?

Govind: Films are made purely for commercial purposes. Such type of films

are driven by profit and unless a project is considered commercially viable, no one invests a single paisa into it. Its theme may be anything, but an audience is needed as a basic premise.

Jawhrani: There are many Sahitya Akademy awardees amongst Sindhi litterateurs, whose creations have been widely appreciated. Would you consider any such story for a film project?

Govind: Why not. We are always in search of good stories. If I can make films on a Punjab-based or Marathi-based story, then why can't I consider a Sindhi story?

Jawhrani: You were born in Sindh, you are very much aware about Sindhi language, Sindhi culture and civilization. Survival of the community is based on survival of the language. How should we work towards the progress and preservation of Sindhi language and culture?

Govind: I had already stated that it is the duty of every Sindhi individual to work in this respect. We have to make our children aware of their identity.

Jawhrani: Do you mean to say 'Sindhyaat' is to be inculcated in every child?

Govind: Just talks won't do. We have to educate our children about our glorious past, introduce them to our history, and a sense of pride needs to be inculcated in them. We can use cinema, but then profits would have to take a backseat. We can take projects of Sindhi history in that connection.

I don't suggest losing anything on that account. We can work on no loss - no profit basis. The effort put in may be regarded as an investment in our future generations. This way, we can save our culture. Language is already on the threshold of extinction, in any case.

Jawhrani: Don't you agree that we have to handover this heritage to our future generation, at any cost?

Govind: Of course. We have to ensure that our culture and identity survive forever.

Jawhrani: We are thankful to you for sharing your experiences with us. It was a pleasure talking with you.

Govind: Thank you.