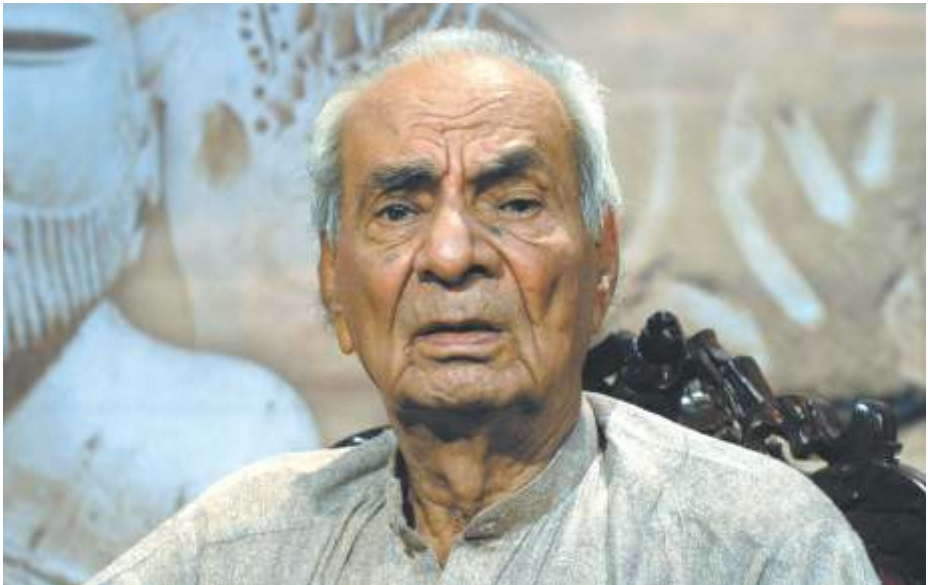


Sobho Gyanchandani

Freedom Fighter



The destructive blows inflicted by history on Sindh, time and again, never let the Sindhis ever remain in peace. Iran, Afghanistan - some dynasty or other invaded and plundered the resources of Sindh. After thousands of years in mid 20th century, India achieved Independence. But even half a century later, Sindhis have not been able to heave a sigh of relief. Some have spent their lifetime in struggle, while others still await the dawn of peace and happiness.

Today, we meet our esteemed guest from the land of Sindh, who had not only taken active part in the independence struggle, but has demonstrated his intense love for motherland Sindh, by not migrating even after Partition. His name is

Comrade Sobho Gyanchandani.

Jawhrani: Sir, We welcome you from the core of our heart. Please tell us about your origins in Sindh.

Sobho: I hail from the village of Bindi, which is situated near the world famous archaeological site of Mohan-jo-Daro. It is a part of taluka Dokri, Dist. Larkana. Dadu canal flows nearby. My ancestors had migrated from the town of Kandyaro to Bindi and established shops. The villagers of Bindi welcomed them as there were no shops till then in the village. A new law was passed by the British in 1901, which enabled Hindus to acquire lands in lieu of loans given, which was earlier not permitted. My ancestors began large scale purchase of land from Ambripotas of the nearby Bagi village, who splurged heavily and were always in heavy debt. I still remember that whenever any officer visited our village, the zamindar had to request for the temporary release of his headgear and trousers, which were invariably pledged with my grandfather. Even a silver bejewelled chair was pledged with us. In a way, you could call my ancestors exploiters. But there were some exceptions. My great-grandfather Gyanchand, and my grandfather Pribhdas, were totally against the taking of interest. I often fought with my grandfather for exploiting farmers and took to communism at the age of twenty one.

Jawhrani: What memories do you have of Mohan-jo-daro?

Sobho: I have seen Mohan-jo-Daro, since I was seven years old. When our school teacher informed us that excavations were in progress at the site of Mohan-jo-Daro, under the supervision of a well known archaeologist, Mr. Banerji. I went to see it. Since then I always put various questions to my elders, about this site. They told me about its importance. They told me, various gold ornaments had been excavated from the site and that it was a big city in ancient times. Ms. Maki, who was the daughter of a European officer associated with the excavation job often came to the site to take photographs and this was my first contact with a European.

Jawhrani: Can you tell us about your education?

Sobho: Since there was no school in Bagi, I studied at A. V. School in Qamber upto 4th standard and then proceeded to Larkana and passed my matriculation from Government High School.

Jawhrani: What was your career plan after education?

Sobho: Initially, I wanted to become a lawyer. But during the 3 months while awaiting the results of my matric exams I did a lot of reading.

Mr. Karamchand Hingorani, a well known educationist was my headmaster and had become extremely fond of me. He used to give me a lot of books on English literature which I used to read avidly. He also had in his possession a lot of books on Vivekanand and Ramakrishna and gifted all of them to me. Besides 'Sunder Sahitya' and 'Ratan Sahitya Mandal' had translated several books into Sindhi - Tagore, Sharad Chandra Chatterjee, Sudarshan and Premchand which were also read by me. My school friend at N.G.V. School - Lekho Tulsiani, seeing my interest, encouraged me to write an essay on Tagore for the school magazine - which was published in 1936. I also read Tagore's 'Tempest' and 'Choker Bali'. All these writings of Tagore influenced me a lot and made me want to become a student of Tagore.

Jawhrani: Were all these books translated into Sindhi?

Sobho: Yes. One of these books is 'Elder Brother, Middle Brother and Younger Brother' and another book is 'Bodo Didi, Mich Didi, Chhotu Didi'. All these characters depict Hindu social life spanning from Karachi to Calcutta. Like the Bengalis, we do not marry our cousins or blood relatives. All cousins, whether paternal or maternal are regarded as brothers and sisters in our community. We do not eat beef. Even pork is shunned by us. We are born Sikhs, we follow the path of Guru Nanak. He was a mystic person, having two disciples, one a Hindu (Balo) and the other a Muslim (Mardano). I used to attend various 'satsangs' in my childhood, and I learnt all these things at those gatherings. The love of books also led me to learn Gurmukhi.

Jawhrani: Was it your interest in Tagore that took you to Shanti Niketan?

Sobho: I wanted to meet Rabindranath Tagore and for that I went to Shanti Niketan. After clearing my intermediate, I went to Shanti Niketan in 1939. I stayed there for 2 years and completed my B.A. (Hons.). It was my good luck that Principal Anilchand was his personal secretary. When Tagore learned from him, that I was from Sindh, he laughed and said that Sindh had given two beautiful things: 'Beautiful Girls from Sindh', who used to come there to learn dancing and 'Sindhi Red Cows', which were also brought there for milching purposes. Two administrators from Shanti Niketan were the Sen Brothers, who later on became chiefs of the World Food Organization, one after the other.

Shanti Niketan was an international campus. It housed students from all parts of the world. There were Indonesians, Ceylonese,

Australians, Chinese, Japanese, etc. Indonesians were more friendly with me, as they were my room-mates. There was a political party 'Masjoomi' in Indonesia, which was waging a freedom war 'a la' Congress of India. At that time, I didn't know much about Indonesia - that it comprised of 1300 islands or that Sukarno was fighting for the freedom of Indonesia.

Jawhrani: Did you take part in the 'Quit India Movement' of the Indian freedom struggle?

Sobho: The first 'Independence Day' in Shanti Niketan was organized by me. I was the warden of the boys' hostel. I requested our Principal, to have a week-long celebration beginning 26th December. He tried to dissuade me saying that Tagore was not in favour.

I replied, "Gurudev or no Gurudev, we will still celebrate Independence Day".

He said, "You will defy Gurudev!"

I requested him to persuade Gurudev. Tagore's argument for not holding Independence Day celebrations was to shield us from the CID. During 'Independence Day' celebrations, everyone addressed the gathering in his mother tongue, and I was the sole speaker, who delivered his address in English. It was highly appreciated by the international audience as they had been unable to comprehend a word of the earlier speakers. There were some lady teachers from Australia who suggested that I rectify my English pronunciation. Those celebrations and my address helped me a lot in having an international outlook.

Jawhrani: What was your contribution to the freedom struggle, after your return from Shanti Niketan?

Sobho: When I returned to Sindh, a students' movement headed by Hashu Kewalramani was already in existence. He became friendly with me. He took me on a tour of Sindh. He was highly appreciative of me and said that he couldn't get a person like me, even in London. He arranged for my meetings with all the units of 'Sindh Students' Union'. There was a meeting of Students' Union of Communists in Patna, in 1943. I was also one of its members. It was decided there that communists should launch 'People's War', which implied helping the British, as U.K. was helping Soviet Union as an ally in its war against Germany. I accepted it with a condition that provided other members of Students' Union of Sindh have no objection, else I will support the 'Quit India' movement.

Jawhrani: Did these activities ever take you behind bars?

Sobho: Yes, in all for ten years, inclusive of four years of house arrest at my village.

Jawhrani: What was the treatment towards you during detention?

Sobho: I was always granted 'A' class facilities, keeping in view my educational qualifications. All the jail officers used to recommend 'A' class for me, as they feared a rebellion inside jail, if I was given 'C' class.

Jawhrani: How many were involved with you?

Sobho: There were some 3000 students, who took part in the 1942 movement.

Jawhrani: Were you their leader?

Sobho: Yes. They wondered as to how a communist could lead such a movement, but fortunately they supported me wholeheartedly.

Jawhrani: You supported the "Two Nation Theory" and resultant Pakistan, too. Was it right?

Sobho: Actually, communists had supported Lahore Resolution of 1940, which spelt the creation of a separate country of Muslim dominated provinces. However, it was meant to be a federation of different nations and become a democratic country. There was no question of migration. It was supported by the Communist Party and we must own up our mistake. Several comrades try to brush this under the carpet.

Jawhrani: At the time of partition, most of the Sindhi-Hindus headed for India, while you stayed behind. What were the reasons for that?

Sobho: I was in jail at that time. They had put me behind bars in 1948, and I was locked up with six other Hindu comrades. The then government released them one by one. Kirat, Aynshi, Gulab Bhagwanani and Pohnu. A. K. Hangal also belonged to our party. He said that the government was adamant on his migration and he had his wife and kids, so he would have to leave. He was bundled and put on a steamer heading towards Bombay.

There was a friend of mine, Professor Ghanshyam. He was a top rank leader of Congress and his brother was Vishindas Shivdasani, who took care of their family's agricultural lands. That fellow also believed in socialist ideology and he had given me many books in jail to read. One day, he phoned me, that he was leaving for India.

I was wonderstruck and I exhorted him to stay put as he knew no distinction between a Hindu and a Muslim.

Jawhani: Do you think partition could have been avoided or was this a misfortune of destiny?

Sobho: In fact, the English had conceived the concept of partition long back. You must have heard about one student of Oxford, Rahmat Ali, who had put forward the name of Pakistan and the famous poet Alama Iqbal had also propounded the theory for Muslims of India to have a separate land.

Jawhrani: You mean partition was planned before independence?

Sobho: It all came about in the thirties of the twentieth century. Rahmat Ali had proposed the name of Pakistan in 1936. The same Iqbal who had earlier penned a poem 'Sare Jahan Se Achha Hindustan Hamara' had favoured the formation of Pakistan. When evangelistic organizations, like Arya Samaj made the then British rulers' life difficult in India and pressed for complete independence, the British thought of creating a rift between the two main communities of India, namely Hindus and Muslims. The murder of Swami Dayanand Saraswati was arranged and the relations between Hindus and Muslims soured. There was a caste of 'Sanjogis', who were basically Hindus, but the other Hindu castes did not recognize them and called them half Muslims. Sanjogis held a conference at Larkana and when Hindus refused to allow them into their fold, they ultimately converted to Islam. The relations between Hindus and Muslims stooped to such a low level, that 1932 witnessed communal riots, engineered by Mohd. Ayub Khuhro. Actually, whatever happened between 1944 to 1947, could not have been averted as the British had long ago decided to 'Divide & Quit'. The British are masters in the game of 'Divide & Rule' as they had been doing all along between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland, though presently they have abandoned this policy. The wounds inflicted by history leave permanent scars.

The immediate cause for the Resolution of Pakistan was provided by the then Viceroy, Lord Atlee. He had decided, in principle, to quit India after experiencing the naval rebellion. We also contributed to it, by having supported them actively. When we came to know about it in Karachi, we called for a general strike and for once Hindus and Muslims jointly protested against the government and eleven people were killed to quell those

demonstrations. I hold Suharwardi and Jawaharlal Nehru solely responsible for the creation of Pakistan. Mohd. Ali Jinnah had called for 'Direct Action Day', in August 1946 and as a result, Suharwardi engineered widespread riots against Hindus in Calcutta, which were retaliated by Hindus subsequently. Later on, Jawaharlal Nehru declared in Bombay that there would be a constituent assembly, comprising Pakistan and India. That assembly would have power to amend the rules by majority decision. Jinnah was irked by these proposals and he insisted on Pakistan - nothing less than independent Pakistan.

Jawhrani: Who then bore the brunt of mayhem and riots, Hindus or Muslims?

Sobho: It is difficult to say, and there were differences of opinion even in the Communist Party. There was one Mr. Karwani, a teacher at D. J. Sindh College, Karachi, and also associated with the communist party, who blamed the communists for taking sides with Muslims and said that Hindus were the target of Muslim aggression. I won't argue against that, because killing anyone, be it a Hindu or a Muslim, is a crime against humanity.

We tried our best to save our union at least, but the situation had become out of control. I was the President of M.A.S. Union. Once the Secretary of our Union and myself received a communiqué that Sikhs in Punjab have been pushed out of their homes and directed to leave for India, on threat of being killed.

I'll tell you one thing. Even now, there is an ongoing case against me for having stated that Pakistan was created for Punjabis. At the end of the Second World War, about 2.5 million Punjabi soldiers were demobilised. There were in all about three million Muslims in the Indian army out of which 2.5 million were Punjabi Muslims. They had to be provided agricultural lands and homes for their settlement and therefore mass-scale riots were engineered, so that the property left behind by Hindus and Sikhs of Punjab could be used for the rehabilitation of the Punjabi Junta. But the riots in western Punjab had a retaliation in eastern Punjab. We cannot blame any single community, Muslims or Hindus for that. The British had their own agenda. Churchill or General Butcher, who was G.O.C. of Eastern Command, became Commander-in-Chief of Pakistan Army. When he was asked, "How many lives will be required to reconquer India?" He had replied, "The last drop of the British military will not save India". The riots and bad blood created between both the communities had brought the country to

the brink. Lahore became a killing field. Saadat Hassan Manto and Krishin Chander had written a lot about it which is history by itself. The Sikhs of Punjab who were hardworking people and who had ploughed and fertilized the land of Do-Aab, were pushed towards India. This turned out to be to India's benefit. The same thing happened in Sindh too. Its educated class of Hindus was compelled to leave Sindh, which also proved beneficial to India. Partition hurt Pakistan the most. It faced famine in 1953, as hardworking Sikh farmers had left Pakistan for India.

Jawhrani: But didn't Sindhi Hindus come to India, empty handed?

Sobho: True, but in spite of that Sindhis worked hard in India and created a niche for themselves. Likewise, Sikhs have also worked hard in East Punjab.

Jawhrani: What is the situation in Sindh at present? Is there harmony or hatred between Hindus and Muslims?

Sobho: The Sindhi Muslims had no hand in the killing of Hindu Sindhis. The riots were engineered by the Mohajirs - the Muslims who migrated from India. Presently, Sindhi Muslims love Hindus, because they are apprehensive of Mohajirs and Punjabi Muslims.

Jawhrani: Is it because of fear that the Muslims now have a greater regard for Sindhi Hindus?

Sobho: Intelligent and educated Sindhi Muslims have realized that Hindus are closer and more reliable than Mohajirs and Punjabi Muslims. Mohajirs have allied with Punjabis to rule over Sindh and the Sindhis.

Jawhrani: Did the migration of the literate Hindu Sindhis play a detrimental role in Sindhi literature?

Sobho: That's true. 'Naeen Dunya' from India had inspired us a lot, to the extent that the well read magazine 'Mehran' edited by Mohd. Ibrahim Joyo is the only error free magazine in Sindh today.

Jawhrani: What are the feelings of the present generation of Sindhis towards their mother tongue?

Sobho: They are quite well versed in Sindhi.

Jawhrani: But we have noticed many young Sindhis pronouncing Sindhi incorrectly on KTN TV channel.

Sobho: They may have been influenced by Urdu or they may also have

been doing it to impress viewers, but the articles written in 'Kawish' - a KTN publication are in perfect Sindhi.

Jawhrani: What about Sindhi writers? Have they experienced a renaissance of sorts?

Sobho: Sindhi litterateurs have played their part aptly to create a sense of Sindhi nationalism. They have sacrificed a lot, have gone behind bars. G. M. Syed played a large role to arouse Sindhi nationalism, but his followers have gone astray after Zulifqar Ali Bhutto was sent to the gallows.

Jawhrani: Is it true that whenever there is a conflict or war between India and Pakistan, Sindhi Hindus are put behind bars in Sindh?

Sobho: I was myself arrested during the 1965 Indo-Pak war. For the first time, I was considered a Hindu. Earlier, they accused me of being the brain behind the Communist Party. This was the handiwork of an illiterate Superintendent of Police.

Jawhrani: Does the Pakistan government place any restriction on the people's freedom of expression?

Sobho: We have only to be careful about the usage of language during expression, otherwise there are no restrictions. The current regime of Pervez Musharraf is quite liberal in this matter.

Jawhrani: How can we unite Sindhis of India and Pakistan on a single platform?

Sobho: I think, a series of people to people contacts, and visits of intellectual class of either country to the other, will certainly have a positive effect. Sindhi writers from Sindh were accorded a warm welcome in India and likewise Indian Sindhi writers were treated with utmost love in Sindh. The Indian delegation had come to Larkana and was put up at a local hotel. I sincerely wished and hoped they would visit my home. Sunder Agnani told me that I would have to come to the hotel to meet the delegation from India, as the authorities had imposed some restrictions. At that time, my arm was fractured and bandaged. In spite of that, I went to the hotel and met the members of the delegation. We had so much to talk about but time for interaction with friends from across the border is always in short supply, and they also had many places to visit to revive their memories.

Jawhrani: How is the present law and order situation in Sindh? Are kidnappings still prevalent?

Sobho: Very much. Recently, a functionary of Larkana Dist. Panchayat and a zamindar, Santosh Kumar was kidnapped, and he was released after payment of a hefty ransom of about six to seven lakhs. I myself stayed back in the village upto 1997. People were nice to us till then, though moffusil areas were literally controlled by dacoits. My elder brother was a powerful zamindar. He had provided arms and ammunitions to the village folk. My niece, who lived in the village, complained to me about the attacks from dacoits. This had created an environment of fear. My younger brother used to look after our agricultural lands and sensing a dangerous environment prevalent in the countryside, we brought him and his family to the city of Larkana. Presently, no one from our family is prepared to go to the village and recently dacoits had kidnapped the children of our cousin, too.

Jawhrani: Under these conditions don't you wish to migrate to India?

Sobho: At present, it is very difficult to create a base in India. The prices of properties have shot up and one needs a lot of money to start life afresh in India. Some of us may receive help from our Indian relatives, but on the whole it is very difficult.

Jawhrani: You have so many of your near and dear ones in India, who had fought for India's freedom along with you. What message would you like to convey to them?

Sobho: Stick to the Sindhi language, and give us your love and support. The Sindhis of Pakistan, whether Hindu or Muslim, want to have close relations with our Indian brethren. The steps taken by both the governments can best be termed as flirtations, because still everything is uncertain.

Jawhrani: We are indeed very grateful to you for sharing your views on the history of freedom movement.

Sobho: Thank you.