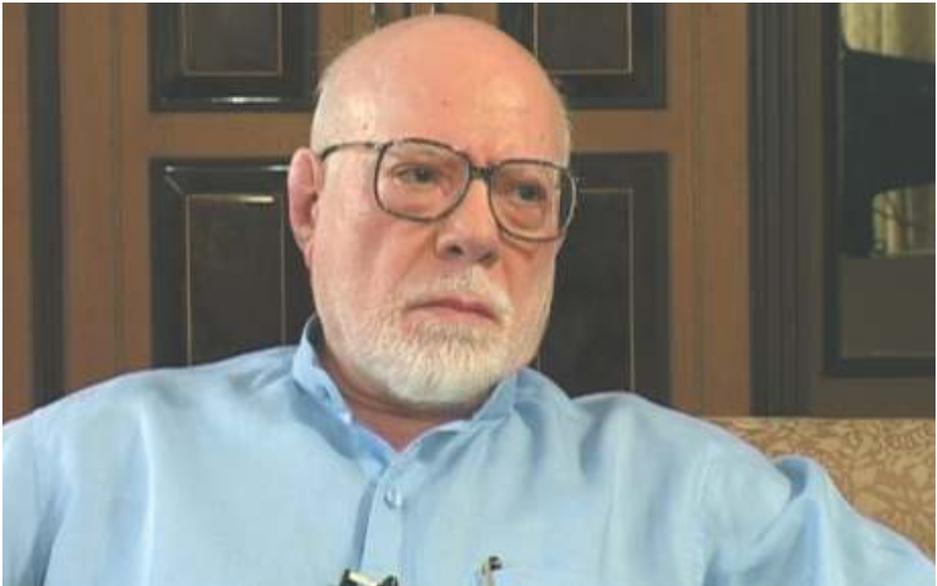


Murli Chanrai

Chairman- 'Kewalram Chainrai Group' - Singapore,
Managing trustee- Jaslok Hospital and Medical Centre, Mumbai.



The glorious past, the turmoil of partition, the uprooting from ancestral land, the settlement throughout the vast expanse of India, and thereafter the contribution towards the reconstruction of modern India, the establishment of schools, colleges, hospitals and other public institutions has been the story of Indian Sindhis, for the last fifty odd years.

One such noble Sindhi stalwart is Mr. Murlī Chanrai. Even at the age of 81, he works with the stamina of a teenager. He is the descendant of the famous Kewalram Ghanshyamdas Chanrai with business interests spread across the globe, established over a century, and we have the pleasure of his gracious presence with us today.

Jawhrani: Chanraiji, we welcome you. You were born in Sindh and bearing in mind your age, you must surely have some cherished memories about our holy motherland Sindh. Can you tell us about your place of birth, family and their business interests?

Murli: We lived in Hyderabad (Sindh) and I was born there. It was a big joint family and we all lived together - uncles, aunts, cousins etc.

Jawhrani: You must have been 20-25 years, at the time of partition, isn't it?

Murli: You are absolutely right, I was exactly twenty-five years old at the time of partition.

Jawhrani: Did your family hail from Hyderabad originally?

Murli: Yes, I studied at the Nav Vidyalaya School, Hyderabad. Then, I moved on to Navalrai Hiranand Academy, Hyderabad, for my matriculation. Even in those days our business was spread worldwide and we had offices in Bombay, Madras, Africa, Gibraltar, Canary Islands, West Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Panama and South America. We, however discontinued our South American business due to logistical reasons.

Jawhrani: That our traders filled up steamers and set sail worldwide is something legendary. Wasn't this almost hundred years back?

Murli: More than a hundred years. Old letterheads of our company mention 'Established in 1860'. We still have in our possession correspondence with our offices abroad, dating back to 1893.

Jawhrani: Was your family as badly hit as the other Sindhi families by the partition?

Murli: As I stated earlier, we had no business interests in Sindh. We had properties - mainly agricultural lands, besides our houses and offices, which we had to forego and were able to get just notional claims as compensation in India.

Jawhrani: Partition dealt a severe blow to our language, culture and tradition. Did you ever feel this pain on alien shores too?

Murli: Let me tell you from my personal experience. After partition, I moved out to Sierra Leone, West Africa. As I wanted my children to inculcate Indian culture and traditions I left them with my parents in Bombay. But they were taught only English and Hindi in convent schools where they were admitted. As a result of this they lost touch with Sindhi and whenever I visited Bombay I observed only English or Hindi being spoken in the household.

Jawhrani: But didn't your father have an immense attachment to his mother tongue Sindhi?

Murli: Indeed, after partition many expressed their desire to my Dad that some steps be taken to preserve the Sindhi language and he very much agreed with them, as he too was worried about its survival.

Jawhrani: It is said that the existence of a community is directly linked to the existence of its language. Do you agree that if the language is annihilated there will be no community?

Murli: Initially, I was mistaken, to the extent that I even told my father that we have to merge into the milieu of the state where we resettled and our children must learn the language of that state, else our kids would be overburdened, having to learn English, Hindi and Marathi. But, I now realize how right my father was at that time and it should have been my duty to assist him in spreading the Sindhi language.

Jawhrani: With the diminishing usage of Sindhi, did our lifestyle and culture also witness a sea-change?

Murli: No, I don't agree with you. The interaction with various nations and communities may have brought minor changes, but basically we have not changed. We still wear the same clothes - kurta pyjama, sari, salwar kameez. Sindhis established temples wherever they settled and even schools where they were in substantial numbers. Even our festivals, food and celebrations remain the same. I would rather say, that Sindhis in Bombay have changed more as compared to Sindhis living abroad. Our children still pay respect to their elders, touch their feet, and guests are always welcome at home.

Jawhrani: A poem by Parasram Zia flashes through my mind:

*'Asul visryo naqul te kani naaz thaa,
Khanee paraavaa par deevaanaa kani parvaaz thaa'*

Which means,

Originality forgotten priding on the fake
Crazy people fly with loaned wings.

It is also observed that our Sindhis have altered their names. Has your family also followed this trend ?

Murli: It doesn't apply to our family.

Jawhrani: But basically was this practice due to compromises, adjustments

or was it just a fashion?

Murli: I think it was a trend. But the main reason was that Sindhi names were difficult to pronounce by the locals. So when children were admitted to school their names got westernized. Murli became Mike and Devidas became David.

Jawhrani: Why is it that in the case of your family this did not happen?

Murli: The training and values imbibed from our elders are responsible for that. I feel sorry to say that many Indians settled in Carribean Islands have even changed their religion, besides changing their names. But by and large Sindhis have been spared these maladies, as they have retained their roots. They visit India on a regular basis so that their children are aware about Indian culture at least, if not the Sindhi language.

Jawhrani: You have established many charitable institutions in India, like Jaslok Hospital. Have you established such institutions outside Mumbai too?

Murli: At the outset, Jaslok Hospital was established by my uncle. His name was Lokumal, while his wife's name was Jasoti; which gave the name 'Jaslok' to the hospital. He had no children and therefore invested everything in charity. Later on, he handed over its charge to us for regular management. Some more cousins are also on the Board of Trustees. So it is not established by my family, but we manage the affairs. Apart from Jaslok, we have helped Vivekananda Education Society in establishing two colleges, which are named after my father and mother. And outside Mumbai there is one hospital in Ulhasnagar and we have supported Jeev Seva Sanstha, Bairagarh, Bhopal, to establish a school and shelters for the needy.

Jawhrani: 'Jaslok' seems to have lost the reputation it enjoyed when it was established in 1973. It was managed entirely by Sindhis then, but later many non-Sindhis became part of the management. Was it because of shortage of time experienced by you or was there any other reason?

Murli: Even in those days, Sindhis didn't manage 'Jaslok'. Our first medical director was Dr. Shantilal, and Mathuradas was the Chairman, who was our uncle (husband of my father's sister), whereas we all were its trustees. There were several non-Sindhis in the management. We always encouraged capable Sindhi doctors to join us. Till today, our policy remains the same. We would still

prefer a Sindhi doctor to a non-Sindhi one, talent and capability being equal.

Jawhrani: So you do not feel that the status of Jaslok has deteriorated?

Murli: No, it is still the same. But presently many other equally good hospitals have come up in Mumbai and 'Jaslok' may give the appearance of being old. We still have the best doctors and offer the best facilities. Some of the equipment installed in 'Jaslok' are not available in any other hospital.

Jawhrani: You have instituted some scholarships in Nigeria. Is it for the sake of charity or an attempt to win the hearts of local residents?

Murli: Both. We want to generate love for ourselves among the locals and also seek recognition of the local government; and alongside, we also want to do some charitable work. I must tell you about my cousin Mithoo and his son Jagdish alias Jackie. He has done tremendous work in Nigeria, comparable to none, in the sphere of charity.

Jawhrani: For Nigerians or for Sindhis?

Murli: For Nigerians, as Sindhis in Nigeria are already quite well to do.

Jawhrani: Is it true that you earmarked five percent of your annual earnings for charitable purposes?

Murli: Absolutely right.

Jawhrani: How many crores does that add up to?

Murli: By God's grace it is more than sufficient, but it cannot be quantified. Even our future generations will be able to continue with charitable work.

Jawhrani: What about your children? Have you been able to pass on these values to them?

Murli: They also take interest in our philanthropic activities. They are our shareholders and are willing contributors of five percent. They just want that we elders take the responsibility of looking after it. We are very much united. My eldest brother is Dada Damodardas, next is Girdhardas who passed away in 1998, I am the third and Pitamber is the youngest. We are all absolutely united, as our eldest brother Damodardas, by setting personal examples of sacrifice, encouraged us to continue this tradition.

Jawhrani: Your elders established the business empire since 100 years. Has there been any difference between then and now? Have you been able to maintain it and take it forward?

Murli: We have definitely progressed. But had we not got everything on a platter we might not have been able to achieve so much.

Jawhrani: After partition have you ever been to Sindh?

Murli: Yes, in 1968 and that was for my daughter's marriage. She got married to a Hindu boy from Karachi, from the Mehtani family. The Mehtanis still live there and have not left Sindh till date. They have their business there and are well settled. Later, we used to visit Karachi often, whenever we got the chance to do so. Once in 1972, my son-in-law invited me to visit Hyderabad. By that time, a new highway was built between Karachi and Hyderabad by the Canadians, and we reached Hyderabad within a very short time, but felt sorry for Hyderabad. When we left, it had a population of a hundred thousand which had ballooned to 1.1 million people in 1972. It was overcrowded. We went up to our ancestral home in Uttamchandani locality and requested the occupants for permission to visit. Luckily, it was occupied by Sindhi Muslims who were pleased to see us. They led us in, and even insisted that we have a meal with them but we settled for tea and cold drinks. I enquired about my Muslim friends from those days. After considerable search, one of them was traced. He met me lovingly, hugged me and asked me why we left Pakistan. "We would have been so happy together had you remained. The Punjabi, U. P. and Bihari Muslims have made our life miserable." I replied that it is now past history and we are currently happily settled in India.

Jawhrani: Some of our litterateurs still harbour the desire to go back to Sindh. What do you have to say in this respect?

Murli: This issue can only be resolved by the politicians of Pakistan and India, but I don't think, people would go back, because everyone is happily settled in India. And to go back would amount to another uprooting and another migration.

Jawhrani: But our writers after visiting Sindh eulogize the hospitality, love and affection of Sindhi Muslims for us.

Murli: That apart, but to go back permanently to Sindh is not possible in the present circumstances. I wouldn't even think of moving from Mumbai to Pune.

Jawhrani: Recently, the governments of Pakistan and India have moved closer. Will this benefit us?

Murli: I always pray for cordial relations between both the countries. Whether it would benefit or not, I can't say. One thing is certain, the enmity between both the nations makes them spend heavily on defence and this expense can easily be pruned and the funds diverted to benefit the poor of both the countries.

Jawhrani: Have you been able to pass on our cultural values to your children living abroad?

Murli: To a great extent. Our children make it a point to visit India regularly, which gives them ample chance to imbibe our basic values.

Jawhrani: Mostly Sindhis settled overseas have matrimonial alliances with Sindhis in India and send their earnings to India on a regular basis, which is a clear indication of their love for India. . . .

Murli: I don't want to boast, but non-resident Indians have been doing a lot for India. It was a non-resident Sindhi, who had built "Owner's Court", on 'A' Road in Bombay on ownership basis, which has been replicated by others as well. Sindhis also established Jai Hind College, K. C. College, National College and many more.

Jawhrani: Has the government's response towards Sindhis matched the contribution made by Sindhis?

Murli: I don't think so. A few years back I had been to Bhopal, where a family had deserted a Haveli and migrated to Pakistan. It was subsequently inhabited by Sindhi Hindus. Suddenly, these Muslims came back and threw these Sindhi residents out. No one from the government came to their rescue. However, we did help these families a little bit. This is just one example.

Jawhrani: Non-Resident Sindhis send considerable foreign exchange to India. Can't this be leveraged to force the Indian government to provide some facilities to Sindhis of India?

Murli: The initiative should come from Indian Sindhis. They can make a charter of demands and then seek non-resident Sindhis' help and put those demands before the government of India. L. K. Advani is a Sindhi politician and he can certainly help us in this respect.

Jawhrani: Do you interact with Sindhi Muslims, settled abroad?

Murli: I have not seen any Sindhi Muslim settled abroad, but yes there are

many Sindhi Muslims working for others. When I was Chairman of Indian Merchants Chamber in Singapore, the head of the Pakistan mission was a Sindhi Muslim. He expressed his desire to meet me. When we met, he conversed in Sindhi, which was a pleasant surprise for me. The then Prime Minister of Pakistan, Mrs. Benazir Bhutto had also visited Singapore and she was accompanied by her husband Asif Ali Zardari. At a function, she sat alongside the President of Singapore but her husband sat with us. I talked to him in Sindhi, which was also a pleasant experience for me.

Jawhrani: American Sindhis have "Alliance of Sindhi Associations of America". Are you aware of such associations elsewhere?

Murli: Sindhi associations are everywhere outside India. In Singapore, Indonesia, Philippine and Lagos, where a lot of Sindhis have settled.

Jawhrani: Have you achieved everything that you wanted to, in your life?

Murli: Yes.

Jawhrani: Any unfulfilled ambition?

Murli: No, Nothing. I have retired from active business and take care of Jaslok Hospital, in Mumbai. My elder brother is 88 years old. He too comes daily to the hospital as he is the Chairman of the trust.

Jawhrani: Would you like to give any message to the Sindhi community based on your experiences?

Murli: It is very difficult. To teach others is the job of wise men. Our father taught us, that honesty is the best policy. We should deal honestly with our customer, supplier, partner and employees. We should never deceive anybody. We should always keep our accounts updated and in order. If I ask you for a pair of shoes, you must debit it to my account, for if you pay from your own pocket, I would hesitate to ask again. Likewise, if you take anything from me, I would debit it to your account. We should always account for every transaction.

Jawhrani: Finally, one last question, how can we improve the situation regarding our language and literature?

Murli: I am myself not good at Sindhi language, though I would love to know more about our literature. I want my children to learn Sindhi language, only then can they delve into the vast treasure of

Sindhi literature and not miss out the way I did.

Jawhrani: May God enable you to live many more years. But in which community would you wish to take your next birth, Sindhi or some other?

Murli: Certainly, a Sindhi.

Jawhrani: Murliji, we are very much thankful to you for sparing some precious moments for us. Your services to the Sindhi community are legendary and we shall never forget them.

Murli: Thank you.