

Prem Lalwani

*Chairman Alliance of Sindhi Associations of America INC.
Secretary General Indo-American Political League*



The generation which bore the brunt of partition - the trials and tribulations, and left their homeland destitute and directionless, struggling to survive, and finally triumphed over all misfortunes by dint of hard work, courage and perseverance deserves our salutations.

Not only did they achieve economic success, but also managed to sustain Sindhyat - Sindhi language and culture, by establishing associations and circles in various parts of independent India.

Likewise, tribute should be paid to those who managed to achieve equal success in various parts of the world, inspite of the community being thinly scattered, in those countries.

One such Sindhi brother is Prem Lalwani, who, twelve years ago laid the foundation of the International Sindhi Sammelan in New Jersey, USA, and has been actively involved with hosting sammelans regularly since then.

Jawhrani: First of all can you tell us when did you leave Sindh? Was it during partition or were you already settled in America even before that?

Prem : I left Sindh after the partition. I remember clearly on 16th September, 1947, we left Karachi and on 18th September, we reached Mumbai.

Jawhrani: After reaching Mumbai in 1947, what made you move to the USA?

Prem : I had gone to the USA for higher education. In February, 1964, I left for Chicago on a temporary student visa, and today I am a resident of USA.

Jawhrani: Did you like Chicago so much that you settled there?

Prem : Yes.

Jawhrani: You must be around 70-72 years old.

Prem : That's right.

Jawhrani: So you have spent almost half your life in the Indian sub-continent and the other half in America. Tell us, what is the difference in the cultures of both these nations?

Prem : There is a vast difference in the cultures. When we were in Sindh (Pakistan), Sindh was the whole world for us. Now we have left for a different world altogether, and now that is our Sindh. We took Sindh along with us.

Jawhrani: You have kept the culture of Sindh alive over there. What steps did you take to achieve this?

Prem : When we went to the US, we were all students. When we would get information about other Sindhis, we used to go to meet them and talk to them. In 1965, we were about 15-20. At that time it struck me, why not make a Sindhi Association. There was one gentleman, Kalu Thadani, who had settled there 6 years prior to me. I approached him and put forth the idea of a Sindhi Panchayat, with him as the Chief. Then in October, 1965, we started the Sindhi Association. Ours is the oldest Sindhi association in the USA.

Jawhrani: From where did you get this inspiration? Were your elders also into social service?

Prem : My family had participated in the Independence movement. My

father Dr. Tarachand Lalwani along with Gandhi, Nehru and others was in the Congress. He was imprisoned thrice. On 9th August, 1942, Gandhiji was arrested and on 10th August, my father. A long time has passed, but I still remember it vividly. When my father was in prison, we used to go to meet him, therefore Sindhyat and independence is of great value to me because of our family, and because of this, I was inspired to contribute towards the preservation of our Sindhi culture.

Jawhrani: The seed was sown in your family, which has blossomed today into a lovely plant. Many Sindhis were imprisoned and many participated in the freedom struggle. Did your father hold any important post?

Prem : Yes. My father was managing the union. At the age of 35, he became a member of Karachi Municipal Corporation. He was an M.B.B.S. As he was 17 years, he had to wait for one year to become an adult to join the service. He resigned as the civil surgeon from the Government Hospital in Karachi during the Jalianwala Bagh movement. Thereafter, he involved himself 100% in the freedom struggle. He had also started 'Karachi Daily' an evening newspaper. He was a doctor, politician and also an editor. He was also a part of the labour movement. He had participated in strikes etc. against the government.

Jawhrani: With this inspiration you established the Sindhi Association, but how did 'Alliance of Sindhi Associations of America' and the idea of International Sammelans come to you?

Prem : We Sindhis are spread all over the world. At first, I thought of establishing 'World Sindhi Congress'. Many such thoughts keep occurring, but only when they are put in actual practise that one realizes what is possible. In 1989, when our Sindhi Association was celebrating its 25th anniversary, I called four people. Dr. Bhagwan Shahani, Judge Motilal Butani and there were two more. I put forth my idea before them and asked for their comments. They appreciated the concept and told me to go ahead. But my association objected saying that they would not be able to manage an international Sammelan as it was a huge responsibility. Then I spoke about it with a few others, and even they were of the same opinion. In this way about 2 - 3 years passed. Kalu Thadani was with me. We also used to work in the same hospital and often during lunch we discussed this issue. At last, I decided that if we do not start then no one will get to know about it. Finally, the

association of Washington D.C. agreed, but later after two months they too backed out.

Jawhrani: It seems no one had the courage to bring together all the institutions of the world on one platform.

Prem : Yes. At that time we began in New Jersey. Only 150 people came forward. But its fragrance soon spread all over the world. That was just the beginning. In the next year we organized the Sammelan in New York which was inaugurated by Dada Jashan Vaswani.

Jawhrani: Is the main aim of this alliance only to organize Sammelans?

Prem : No. Our purpose was to bring together all the Sindhis of the world and then take appropriate steps to promote Sindhyat.

Jawhrani: When was this institution established?

Prem : In 1989.

Jawhrani: Did you start organizing Sammelans since 1989?

Prem : No. The Sammelans started from 1993.

Jawhrani: Where was the first Sammelan organized?

Prem : In New Jersey. Thereafter, it was held in New York, where it was a grand success. At that time about 600 people attended it. In those days there were not many Sindhis, today many have arrived. In those days even if 600 - 700 persons were present, it would be regarded as a 'full house'. Many could not be accommodated. Then we went to Toronto. Our Sammelan was to be organized in July, but in April itself, the registrations were full. Then with a lot of effort we could accommodate 150 more. The participants were very enthusiastic as they had arrived from all over. There were some who were meeting each other after about 25 years, 40 years, some long lost cousins meeting each other after 30 years. Through the sammelans, we got the knowledge of our cousins and relatives all over the globe. The second issue, was that our children started realizing that we are Sindhis. The fourth Sammelan took place in Toronto, fifth in San Francisco, sixth in Orlando and seventh again in Chicago.

Jawhrani: What are the other aims of the Sammelans?

Prem : Our main aim was to acquire power. We should get political power. Prior to Sammelans, we were not quite well known. But these Sammelans have served as an eye opener to everyone. The whole

world got to know that even Sindhis are a power to reckon with and are united. This was the main achievement of the sammelans. For the first time, we were proud to be Sindhis. For the first time other communities like Gujarati, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu etc, got to know that Sindhis are also an entity and that too quite strong.

Jawhrani: How did you get out of the North American continent and reach London two years ago? What was the reason behind that?

Prem : This is because hosting it only in America would have made it a regional affair and most of the people from outside America would not have been able to participate. Also, we felt that we must go where there are people willing to participate. It was not possible that most of the people come to us. Those who were residing there did come and participate, but for the outsiders it was not possible. Everyone could not participate. In London, many participants also came from Europe and India.

Jawhrani: Were people from India not participating in the Sammelans in America?

Prem : Very few. Because this was quite an expensive affair.

Jawhrani: I believe you started the Sammelans with Diwali get-together.

Prem : No, that's not true.

Jawhrani: Do you celebrate Diwali separately?

Prem : Yes. The Diwali Get-together is held every year.

Jawhrani: Which festivals do you celebrate there?

Prem : We meet each other during several festivals, like Cheti Chand, Diwali, Guru Nanaks Birthday etc. This is also good as the people residing in that state feel that we should meet each other. To meet outsiders and others is a different thing and to meet one's own people always gives you a lot of pleasure, where we can converse in Sindhi with each other. Our background is similar. But, we Sindhis are spread all over the globe, therefore our children are attracted towards other faiths and communities. These celebrations help in bringing them back to their community and roots.

Jawhrani: Do you mean on the matrimonial side?

Prem : That's right. Therefore, since the beginning all the Sindhis have this thought and hope that through these Sammelans, some suitable marriage proposals can be considered for their children. At every Sammelan about 8 -10 marriages are fixed.

Jawhrani: Do the children participating at every Sammelan, choose their life partners?

Prem : Yes.

Jawhrani: Kindly let us know about some of the important discussions and decisions taken at these Sammelans during this period of more than 11 years.

Prem : Its not one topic but many. I shall narrate an incident one of the delegates, during the sammelan, got so enthusiastic, that she proudly proclaimed, 'Yes! I am a Sindhi!' It so happened that from her name no one would have known that she was a Sindhi. She was sitting with a group consisting of other communities who were criticizing Sindhis. She sat their quietly so that no one should know that she was a Sindhi. After the sammelan she declared that if any one criticizes our community then I will get up and let everyone know that 'I am a Sindhi and now I shall teach my children to read and write Sindhi.'

When people do inquire what is achieved through these Sammelans, I reply that although there are no visible benefits, like no place or center been set up, we have infused in the minds of people 'What Sindhyat is all about....'

Jawhrani: To sow that seed of Sindhyat, how did you reveal Sindhyat, to all those attending these Sammelans?

Prem : Previously, during our Sammelans, in the cultural programmes, music, dance and songs used to be in Hindi. But in Orlando, Vimla Tiwari, who was the programme director, said that the other communities propagate their own languages and our presenting cultural programmes in some other language, is not appropriate. Thereafter, all the programmes are organized in Sindhi only. We also took artists from India, who taught the artists overseas.

Jawhrani: In this manner new artists were born.

Prem : Yes.

Jawhrani: Other than these what other decisions were finalized?

Prem : To consolidate our community, we shall move throughout the globe. This year we came to Mumbai, next year we shall be proceeding to Singapore. Because everyone cannot go to all the places.

Jawhrani: Should we conclude that in these 12 years we weren't successful

enough in bringing about an awakening so as to enlighten the people about the importance of these Sammelans?

Prem : I think so, because still the number of people participating is low.

Jawhrani: Which venue attracted the maximum participation, other than Mumbai?

Prem : Previously, approximately 75% participants were seniors and now almost 50% is youth participation. The young participants have formed their own groups.

Jawhrani: But coming back to my question, where was the maximum participation?

Prem : In San Francisco, there were 2000 participants, in Las Vegas 1200 and in Chicago 1500. It varies from venue to venue.

Jawhrani: If you have a participation of about 1500 to 2000, then it is quite good. This shows that Sindhis from all over the world are attending these Sammelans. Do you have participants from India also?

Prem : Quite a few! But only those who can afford. There are many who would like to attend but can't afford.

Jawhrani: Few of them have suggested that the delegation fees be waived. Many have this image of NRIs as being very affluent. Couldn't you get the event sponsored so as to provide a free entry?

Prem : In 1996, I met the Indian ambassador Mr. S. S. Ray in America. While talking to him, he mentioned that if you Sindhis pool in your resources, then you will be bigger than India also. I shall quote Mr. Gopaldas Mehboobani which will be an apt reply to your question. During the 50th Anniversary of Jai Hind College, he had mentioned, we Sindhis are very rich and have lots of money. But to extract money from Sindhis is a tough task!

Jawhrani: Do you face the same difficulty of obtaining money from the rich over there, just as we do here in India?

Prem : Yes. This difficulty is everywhere. We have been everywhere and this problem exists everywhere. Till now, we are unable to understand why it is so. We will have to explore this. The other communities quickly remove cash for their Sammelans, but why our Sindhis don't do so? Sindhis are quite well off. They have achieved quite a lot in the world. There are a few families who can change the fate of the entire community. But they seldom come

forward. Such drawbacks discourage you a bit. But as it is said in the Geeta, 'Do your duty and don't worry about the reward.' After every Sammelan whether it is organized there or here, it is debated whether it was successful or not. Its just like the more sugar you add to milk, the sweeter it shall be. If one has to only come and stand and not spend, then the strength is reduced. Nothing can happen without money. The London Sammelan was successful, but still there were complaints that it lagged behind in few aspects regarding services. To make all the facilities and services available, funds are required. There are many millionaires in London, even there we were unable to get cash. There was one Mr. Mirchandani, who without asking any questions gave us £10,000/- But such people are quite few, who can be counted on your fingertips. When Dada Ram Jethmalani had attended the Sammelan for the very first time in Orlando, he had given a very good speech. He was so impressed that he told me, "Prem! Whether you invite me or not, I shall definitely participate in this Sammelan." Now a person of Ram Jethmalani's stature making such a statement, is the proof of our success.

Jawhrani: Mr. Jethmalani is a farsighted person. He must have surely observed something unique that he agreed to participate again. Now you had organized the 12th Sammelan in Mumbai. How did this thought occur to you and how did you plan for this?

Prem : Actually this plan was made in 2000, during the Chicago Sammelan. Professor Nanik Shivdasani, principal of Jai Hind College had said that the next Sammelan should be held in Mumbai.

Jawhrani: So this was proposed in 2000?

Prem : Yes. At that time I had initially said that it would be very difficult in Mumbai. But he insisted a lot. These talks went on for quite some time and at last we reached here. From 2000 to 2004's London Sammelan, the issue was still undecided. Thereafter, Sahyog Foundation and Sindhi Shaan got together and organized this Sammelan in Mumbai. And that too it was decided at the last moment when just 3 months were left. It took place on 28th, 29th and 30th December 2005.

Jawhrani: What was the difference between Mumbai Sammelan and other Sammelans?

Prem : See, if you have five children, each will be having a different personality. It is very difficult to make comparisons.

Jawhrani: All five children are dear to us.

Prem : That's right, all are dear to us. Each Sammelan has its own spirit, its own soul. The critics will always keep criticizing.

Jawhrani: That is their job. But as you said one should always perform one's duty.

Prem : During the Mumbai Sammelan, we met many who had never attended the previous Sammelans. Here, we had participants from India as well as Pakistan. Not only from metros, but from every nook and corner of India the populace arrived for the Mumbai Sammelan. Every participant, whether from Burhanpur, Indore, Chhatisgarh, Jabalpur, Satna, Katni, Nasik, Dhuliya was full of enthusiasm. We even had about 250 -300 delegates from overseas. The difference observed was that we could meet people coming from every nook and corner and get to know them and get their ideas and opinions, and in turn they got a chance to understand our ideas. I was shocked, when I came to know for the first time, that even now there are so many of our Sindhi brothers who drive rikshaws (three wheelers) in villages and some are even in shoddier conditions, because I always had the understanding that we Sindhis are very rich and quite prosperous. Afterwards, I even went to Ulhasnagar and saw the conditions of our Sindhis. When their homes were demolished they were sitting outside on the floor. The 'Global Sindhi Council' that has been formed is the outcome of the Mumbai Sammelan.

Jawhrani: The same 'Global Sindhi Council' which Mr. Ram Jethmalani has got registered as a Trust?

Prem : This is the consolidated achievement of our 12 years of Sammelans.

Jawhrani: So you think, the Sammelan that took place in India was not only for the rich?

Prem : Correct. Because the true aim and objective of the Sammelan is to move along with all the Sindhis who were uprooted from their lands and came here and tried to earn a livelihood with their own efforts. To bring together all such Sindhis and show them glimpses of our culture and civilization, to enlighten them about what is going on in the world etc. This was a nice thing to have occurred. For the first time, we Sindhis realized that even now there are many of our brothers who are not so prosperous as us. Now, we have to move to the next step and help the downtrodden Sindhis.

I used to get calls in America from Ujhasnagar, that we are in dire conditions. There are girls aged 19 - 20, who do not have a house or a door to their house, it is raining and the situation is quite awful.

Jawhrani: You get such calls because they look at you NRI's with hope in their eyes. Have you done something for them?

Prem : I was just coming to that point. I have told them to approach 'Global Sindhi Council'. They will help you out. This is the objective of the Council. The issue of settlements for the poor has also been taken up by Global Sindhi Council. Also monetary assistance has been given to 3 - 4 families. This is the biggest achievement of 12 years.

Jawhrani: What is your reaction to the general feeling that all sammelans are alike?

Prem : Yes, people feel that all Sammelans are alike, so why should one participate every year? Now tell me one thing aren't we celebrating Dussera since the past 3000 years?

Jawhrani: To remind us that we have to put an end to Ravana's evilness.

Prem : Exactly! If we are participating in the Sammelans, it is to strengthen the Sammelans. If our Sammelans are strong then our community will be strong. Therefore, it is our duty to participate in these Sammelans whenever possible.

Jawhrani: And put forth our thoughts and ideas. And also the difficulties faced by the community.

Prem : When computer engineers became very successful, at that time in Chicago about 15 dot com companies came to us and showed us how they had succeeded. The others got an opportunity to learn from their experience. In our Sammelans, we specially invite Sindhi VIPs and successful Sindhis, so that the youth can take inspiration from them.

Jawhrani: They will also get the knowledge about the struggles they had to go through and how they achieved success. Were your aspirations about Sammelans fulfilled at the Mumbai Sammelan?

Prem : Yes, for the first time we got a glimpse of Mohan-jo-Daro and that too on the stage. There are so many Sindhis who don't know about it. They don't even know whether it is Mohan-jo-Daro or the tomb of the dead. Some even pronounce it differently. Our culture and civilization started from there. The Sindhu river was shown,

Sant Kanwar Ram Chowk and Jhulelal Mandir. Here this was the uniqueness. Therefore, as I said earlier that each Sammelan has its own spirit, its own soul. Here Sindhyat was also in abundance and the message of Sindhyat was conveyed appropriately.

Jawhrani: You undertook a tour of Sindh after the Sammelan. Tell us about your experiences.

Prem : After the Sammelan, 25 of us went on a tour of Sindh. We had presumed that we might hardly meet any Hindu Sindhis. But we saw that over there they were quite prosperous. And have a dignified status in society.

Jawhrani: Are the Sindhis happy in Sindh?

Prem : Muslims and Hindus both. There is a lot of brotherhood between Sindhis Hindus and Muslims, inspite of the fact that nowadays there are many refugees in Sindh and the population of Sindhis has also considerably reduced. There are many outsiders in Karachi and Hyderabad. The Sindhis over there have great passion for their community.

Jawhrani: Now the eagerness for unity has begun.

Prem : All these facts we witnessed which were not known to us before.

Jawhrani: So now after India are you planning to arrange a Sammelan in Sindh also?

Prem : The talks are going on. Sant Sadhram had suggested this to us. We had been to his Ashram and were thoroughly impressed. But this would take some years, as the political situation is such.

Jawhrani: Is the political situation not stable yet?

Prem : If about 1000 to 2000 participants arrive then the matter of their security arises.

Jawhrani: After this where are you planning to organize the Sammelan?

Prem : Just 2 days back I have returned from Singapore. We have already booked the venue and I'm sure the Singapore Sammelan will be quite good. There are 8000 Sindhis in Singapore. You mustn't be aware of the fact that the Sindhi association over there has been established since 1921. There they have a Ashram and a Sindhu Centre. On the second floor they have the temple. The dining and conference rooms are on the first floor. One or the other programme is always taking place over there. This is the specialty

of the Sindhis, that wherever they reside, even just two to four thousand, they establish their schools, colleges and community centres. Countries like Hong Kong, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia etc. are quite close to Singapore. There are many Sindhis in these countries, who have their own associations and even they can participate.

Jawhrani: We used to receive emails to organize some entertainment programmes for the youngsters at the Mumbai Sammelan. Now what are the expectations of youngsters over there?

Prem : The youth all over have the same expectations. And now we are laying more emphasis on the youngsters.

Jawhrani: It was said that they have to be introduced to our ancient culture and Sindhyat. You will recollect that we had organized a debate during our Sammelan 'What is that thing called Sindhyat?' We were told to arrange something different for the youngsters like a disco programme. What do you think about it? Is it appropriate?

Prem : See, we are now growing in small steps. If we only talk to them about Sindhyat, they won't be interested and won't participate. It is said that we must deliver the service which is required, don't deliver what is not accepted. But, an appropriate combination has to be arrived at.

Jawhrani: If we have to deliver that is acceptable, then isn't the objective of the Sammelan defeated?

Prem : No. Its not like that. If they do not attend at all then what can be done. First of all, at least let them come for the Sammelans. Whatever we have done till now, we have been getting inputs from it. Now, mostly the youth participants come to choose their life partners.

Jawhrani: That is a different issue. But more stress is being given to discos. I am talking about our Indian culture. If we take our children to discos and party with them, then that won't be befitting our culture. Has this happened at other Sammelans also?

Prem : Yes. You have a valid point here, which is correct. Therefore, I repeat, that wherever we go there is some uniqueness. Even we would not stress that at every venue we should have everything the same. We try to adjust as per the situation. You must have observed that starting from the first Sammelan, we have gradually

progressed through the second, third and fourth.

Jawhrani: You get to learn quite a few new things.

Prem : When the young participants came here, they said that we have abided by you. Now even you should do something for us. It is quite common over there and we do arrange disco for them. In the Sammelans we have to have discos and other music and dance, even for the seniors. It is very difficult to provide for everything but we try to accommodate everyone's requests.

Jawhrani: Its like giving a sugar coated pill.

Prem : Now you should understand this clearly. In the last ten years, a number of matrimonial knots have been tied through us, and now those couples who have their own children aged 10 years, are concerned about them. They feel that it is their moral right to bring their children to participate in these Sammelans.

Jawhrani: This problem of matrimony is prevalent in all communities. And if this is being solved through Sammelans then it is a good thing. But when our aim and motive is to pass on our culture and traditions to the young generation, then we felt that discos or such type of other programme are not fit for these Sammelans.

Prem : Now look, wherever we go, every place has its own uniqueness. The committee that is formed there has its own personality. They try to exhibit their own personality, like you had demonstrated yours. Wherever you go, the locals only will be handy to you. They propose that if we do a certain thing then we can attract more delegates. Then that thing is provided for. Now we should not be rigid, but flexible.

Jawhrani: We have to be considerate towards the present era and move along with it. Those who don't adapt themselves as per the changing times have to face difficulties. Like you said, as compared to the other Sammelans, during the Mumbai Sammelan our dreams were realized. The biggest achievement was the formation of 'Global Sindhi Council' to bring together the entire Sindhi community, whose managing trustee is Shri Ram Jethmalani. He is also its President. That is indeed a great achievement. This matter will go on still further. I feel that the Singapore Sammelan will be more successful. With this hope, we take your leave.

Prem : Thank you for inviting me.