

# Shyam Rupchand Jethnani

*President- Gandhi Seva Loka, Jakarta*



*The selfless and tireless efforts of the torch bearers of Sindhyat, in pursuit of the preservation and promotion of Sindhi language; their concern for the traditions, culture and heritage of our glorious past, along with the relentless efforts for its' survival on the Indian sub-continent, are verily beyond adequate words of praise and deserve the highest encomiums. The very thought of their steadfast approach towards their objectives, after the turmoil and upheavals endured during the aftermath of Partition, which even today sends a chill down one's spine, makes us raise our hands in salutation.*

*I reserve a slightly higher pedestal for the Sindhis settled outside India, on foreign soil, who have nevertheless, successfully managed to preserve all Sindhi customs and traditions and kept Sindhi culture not only alive but flourishing. Their contribution is of truly historical dimensions. Today, we are privileged to meet one such person who has kept Sindhyat alive in Jakarta,*  
*Mr Shyam R Jethnani*  
*President Gandhi Seva Lokha in Jakarta.*

*Jawhrani:* Shyamji, at the outset, tell us in which province or town of Sindh, did your forefathers reside?

*Shyam:* My father is from Khandu. He came to Indonesia in 1940. My mother hails from Hyderabad. She was already here, with her family, when my parents got married in 1949.

*Jawhrani:* Did your father come to Indonesia for business?

*Shyam:* Yes, for business purpose, he was already here at the time of partition.

*Jawhrani:* So you were born here.

*Shyam:* Yes, I was born in this country in 1951.

*Jawhrani:* What about the rest of your family?

*Shyam:* We are in all, 6 brothers and 3 sisters. One of my sisters is in Mumbai, one is no more, and the third is here in Jakarta. All my brothers are settled here in Jakarta.

*Jawhrani:* Under the circumstances, your awareness about Sindh must be minimal.

*Shyam:* That's true. But at the same time I am very keen to know more about Sindh, my homeland.

*Jawhrani:* I will arrange to send you books to enhance your knowledge about Sindh, its history and culture. But what makes me wonder is your fondness for Sindh, considering you were born and brought up here. Normally, attachment develops for one's country of birth and not that of one's forefathers? Who inculcated this love for Sindh, in you?

*Shyam:* My grandfather. He came here after partition and was not at all happy at having left Sindh. He related to me how he missed the fields, the mango trees back home. He told me a great deal about the culture, tradition and customs; and all this ignited my desire to know more.

At the same time my father's involvement in social service during the last 20-30 years of his life, till his passing away in 2003 at the age of 85, has inspired me a lot. He has been President of the Indian Association in Malang a small town in East Java, about 100 kms from Surabaya. When I saw his active involvement in solving problems of the 30-40 Indian families settled there; witnessed the patient hearing he gave to their problems and his motivated efforts to solve them, I was convinced that the culture and traditions he

grew up in must have been of the highest standards, and that is what got me interested to know more about our culture and pass it on to the coming generation. In fact, we observe all Sindhi traditions and customs and even speak Sindhi at home. I can say my love is equal for Indonesia and Sindh.

*Jawhrani:* So this love runs in the blood. But tell me what was your father's occupation after coming to Indonesia?

*Shyam:* When he came here in 1940, he initially worked under the 'Dutch' for sometime. Later, he worked for a Japanese. Thereafter, he returned to Sindh for a short while, but returned to work for the Dutch till 1945, when Indonesia acquired Independence. Then around 1947-48, he went back to Sindh, got married in Bombay in 1949, and subsequently came here for good.

*Jawhrani:* Tell me something about your early years, education etc.

*Shyam:* During the early years, our financial condition was not so stable and after attending local school I had to join my father. I regret my inability to obtain higher education but want to ensure that my children are not deprived of the best education available.

*Jawhrani:* Probably for this very reason you have established 6 schools in Indonesia where you provide education to thousands of students. How did you go about achieving this?

*Shyam:* Initially, there was only 1 small school you will recall that earlier the teaching profession was not appropriately respected. What spurred the development was the Government Regulation, ordering the closure of all foreign schools in Indonesia, after the communist coup in 1965. However, because of the close ties with India, 3 Indian schools viz. Gandhi International School in Jakarta, Vidya Bhavan in Surabaya and Nehru School in Bandung, were granted exemption. Indians are loved and highly respected here.

*Jawhrani:* Isn't there some connection between Jakarta and our Hindu Epic Ramayana?

*Shyam:* Bali is entirely a Hindu state. It's about 2 hours flying time from Jakarta. Kathas of Ramayan are regularly conducted. They pursue Hindu culture and traditions passionately and in totality. I would say they are truly Hindus, even more so than us, here. The ambience there is very similar to the temple towns of South India.

*Jawhrani:* Coming back to education, the schools must have been

established after achieving financial stability, isn't it?

*Shyam:* That's true. Initially there was only one school, and we had been given land by the Governor for one more school. But we had no funds at all. Over a period of time the community prospered. I established an office in Singapore in 1980 and was there till 1986. Again from 1991 to 1996, I was in Singapore and my business grew. In the meanwhile, I was elected Vice-President of the Association and I am proud to say that we now have six schools, entirely owned by us.

*Jawhrani:* Are these schools run on profit basis?

*Shyam:* It is only the International School in Jakarta, attended by students from 42 countries, that is profitable. There is no profit in the other schools that have Sindhis and other Indian students. But overall we remain profitable.

*Jawhrani:* Is your association also involved in social service?

*Shyam:* At the time of partition in 1947 the Indian traders established 'Bombay Merchants Association' in Indonesia, which is now known as 'Gandhi Seva Loka'. I am proud to state that I am its present Chairman. We are actively engaged in providing all type of aid medical, education, financial, to the underprivileged.

*Jawhrani:* Do you also organize hand social gatherings for the Sindhis in Indonesia?

*Shyam:* We have several in a year. We celebrate Diwali, where Indians from all communities are welcome Punjabis, Tamilians etc. But specifically for the Sindhis, we hold "Cheti Chand" celebrations and also once every two months a gathering for senior citizens, called "Vadan jo Melo".

*Jawhrani:* Are there common gatherings for the youth and elders?

*Shyam:* We primarily concentrate on the 60+, who feel lonely, as their children are busy with their own lives their work and children. They do not have alternate avenues for entertainment or amusement or opportunities to meet others of their age.

*Jawhrani:* But I must remark on the fact that the youth here have not forsaken their tradition and culture. I observed most youngsters greeting the elders by touching their feet.

*Shyam:* Yes, they respect their elders. The youth is also quite active in their school activities Balvikas, Satsangs and cultural activities.

*Jawhrani:* At the mention of satsang I am told you have 22 satsang organizations in Jakarta. Is that a fact?

*Shyam:* Yes. We have various, such as Sadhu Vaswani Mission, Radhasoami, Satnam Sakhi, Narankari, Teoram Ashram and so on. Besides, we have 6-7 'Devi Mata' temples and 5 gurudwaras.

*Jawhrani:* Have these Gurudwaras been established by Sindhis?

*Shyam:* I am told that the first and largest Gurudwara was funded by Sindhis. The need for another Gurudwara for Sindhis specifically has never been felt. We do have our own temple in "Sindhi House".

*Jawhrani:* Do you also have 'Granth Saheb' in that temple?

*Shyam:* No, we have idols of Shiva and there is regular rendering of 'Satya Narain Katha'.

*Jawhrani:* Isn't it amazing that you have 20-25 temples for approximately 6000 Sindhis?

*Shyam:* I wish to clarify that the 20-25 temples are for all Indian communities and there is only 1 i.e. the Shiva Temple and a large number on Sindhis visit this temple.

*Jawhrani:* Coming to matrimonial, are alliances sought locally, in the Far East or India; and what is the trend-arranged or love marriages?

*Shyam:* Firstly, most of us prefer to finalize alliances within the community. As regards arranged or love, giving my personal example, on spotting a suitable match I would tell my son "This girl is good, would you be interested". The children then interact with each other, you know this is the age of internet and e-mails and the final call is theirs. So in a way marriages can be termed partially arranged.

*Jawhrani:* I believe some Sindhis have also got married with local populace?

*Shyam:* Yes, that's true.

*Jawhrani:* What percentage would that be?

*Shyam:* Not more than 10%; I would say approximately 5%.

*Jawhrani:* And are there also inter-community marriages amongst other Indians like Punjabis, Tamilians etc. settled here? If yes what is the percentage?

*Shyam:* Yes, to the same extent around 5%. This would include both, those

within the Indian communities and with native Indonesians.

*Jawhrani:* Do you have 'Maharajs' here for solemnising marriages?

*Shyam:* Yes. There are three maharajs in Jakarta

*Jawhrani:* How are the feelings for Sindhis settled in India, amongst the Sindhis settled here?

*Shyam:* I observe a lot of difference in the financial status. In 1990, I was travelling with my wife by train from Delhi to Ajmer, and at Ajmer Station, a coolie, overhearing our conversation in Sindhi, came up and stated. "I too, am a Sindhi". I always had the notion that the entire Sindhi community was financially very comfortable but this incident shook me up and I realized that there is still poverty and deprivation amongst members of the Sindhi community.

*Jawhrani:* What do you think should be done by NRI Sindhis for their brethren in India?

*Shyam:* Poverty amongst Sindhis is prevalent not only in India, but all over the world. To alleviate this, stalwarts from the community, from all over the world, must get together and institute a fund to address the financial needs of Sindhis all over the world.

*Jawhrani:* It is held that NRI's have considerable reach and influence with the Government of India. It is also a fact that promises made to the Sindhis, who migrated to India post partition, have not been fulfilled, as far as political and other rights are concerned. Can't the NRI's get together and intercede on their behalf with the Indian Government?

*Shyam:* We are absolutely willing to participate in any such forum to make representation to the Indian Government for Sindhis in India. We have no homeland. We should endeavour to get land for stateless Sindhis in India. Some well-known and respected stalwarts from the community should take the lead and form a group which can be supported by all NRI Sindhis and work towards making this approach, and attempt to influence the Indian Government.

*Jawhrani:* If a representation for a Union territory for Sindhis in India is proposed will the Sindhis from Indonesia support this cause and come forward to aid development?

*Shyam:* Undoubtedly, and without any hesitation.

- Jawhrani:* Are there Sindhis in the political scenario in Indonesia?
- Shyam:* Sindhis in Indonesia are in minority and mainly businessmen, some are professionals. Politics is a fulltime involvement and generally Sindhis have maintained a distance from politics. There was one MP of Indian Origin sometime back, but he was a Punjabi, not Sindhi.
- Jawhrani:* Which is the ruling party at the moment?
- Shyam:* Democrat party is the ruling party at the moment.
- Jawhrani:* Are the Sindhis here, large hearted and generous in nature? Do Sindhis or other Indian contribute readily towards social causes or projects?
- Shyam:* Our Association generally does not approach anyone for donation. However, when we do need funds for a specific cause we manage the same through our own network of friends. If, for a cause, it is difficult for the Association to get involved directly, I just call my friends and say "We need x amount, how much can I count on you?" In this fashion, in no time, the job is done.
- Jawhrani:* In the olden days in Sindh, a certain percentage of income was earmarked by every Sindhi for charity. Is that tradition prevalent here?
- Shyam:* Not as general rule. But at the same time Sindhis are generous with charity and getting funds for a cause is not at all difficult.
- Jawhrani:* Are Indian films exhibited here?
- Shyam:* The locals are very fond of Indian films.
- Jawhrani:* Are cassettes, DVD's of Sindhi music available in Indonesia?
- Shyam:* Yes.
- Jawhrani:* Any Sindhi films?
- Shyam:* Yes, 2-3 films were shown.
- Jawhrani:* Since how many years have you been inviting Sindhi artists from India to participate in your programmes here?
- Shyam:* We started celebrating 'Cheti Chand' since 1990. But it is since the last 5-6 years that we have been inviting artists from India.
- Jawhrani:* Are the artists happy and keen to visit Indonesia?
- Shyam:* Extremely so. As you are aware, we look after them extremely well

and compensate them more than adequately. Anila Sunder who came last year was extremely happy with her visit and so were our senior citizens, as her programme rekindled fond memories of Sindh.

*Jawhrani:* Do you get any Sindhi periodicals?

*Shyam:* Yes, Hindvasi is received by our Association.

*Jawhrani:* Shyamlal, finally a message for the worldwide Sindhi Community.

*Shyam:* We had only 1 homeland once Sindh; now Sindhis have made an impact worldwide. We must unite and look after the interests of the worldwide Sindhi community.

*Jawhrani:* I am given to understand that in 2010, the "International Sindhi Sammelan, an occasion when all the stalwarts and decision makers of the community assemble together on 1 platform, is to be hosted in Jakarta by your Association. Is this true?

*Shyam:* We want to demonstrate that here in Indonesia, in Asia, we can do wonders, of course under the guidance of stalwarts like you who have hosted such Sammelans in the past. We intend to discuss and take decisions on several key issues concerning the community, an activity, which was unfortunately missing or ignored, during the 2-3 Sammelans I have attended.

*Jawhrani:* What has been the outcome of these Sammelans in the past? 'Sindhyat' was not perceived at Singapore or Barbados. The International Sindhi Sammelan is known in several circles now as "International Sindhi Get Together".

*Shyam:* True, it's a pity. We will attempt to focus on core issues instead of discos or fashion shows, which have become the focal activity.

*Jawhrani:* How will you conduct the Sammelan? Will there be discos, fashion shows?

*Shyam:* May be one disco program for the youth. We have to cater to their interests too, as they may not get entirely involved in the serious discussions we plan to hold. But the prime objective will be addressing core issues, not just ladas, dancing, wining and dining and the outcome NIL.

*Jawhrani:* As an outcome of 2005 Sammelan Global Sindhi Council, under the presidentship of Ram Jethmalani was established as an

umbrella body to address all issues affecting Sindhis worldwide.  
Would you be interested in joining this council?

*Shyam:* Certainly, but you must involve representatives from all over the world in this apex body, collect funds, create a corpus, and address all issues pertaining to the community.

*Jawhrani:* Sometime back the concept of a separate 'Asian Sindhi Sammelan' was mooted what are your views?

*Shyam:* The idea originated from Malaysia, frankly speaking some Sindhi there felt left out and ignored at International Sindhi Sammelan held in the past. Sindhis from Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, Bangkok, Malaysia, may be even Australia, would be glad to form such an Alliance with India and of course the first 'Asian Sindhi Sammelan' should be held in India.

*Jawhrani:* Thank you Shyamji I shall always cherish this rendezvous with you.