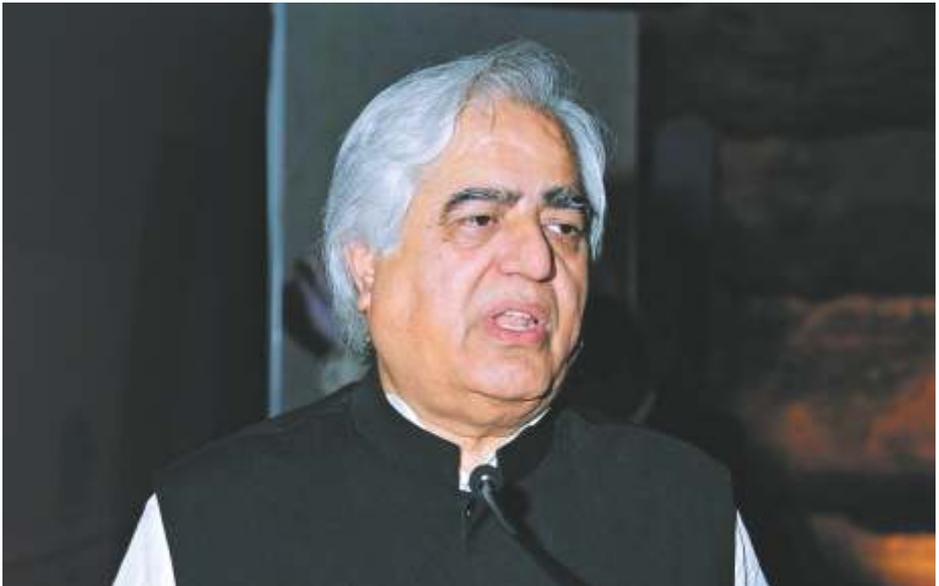


Suresh Keswani

Former Vice Chairman- 'National Council for Promotion of Sindhi Language'
Former Vice Chairman- 'Sindhi Sahitya Akademy' - Delhi.



History has driven Sindhis in India to a point where the very survival of their language and culture is clouded in doubt and seems to be in jeopardy.

The Sindhi community is engaged in a valiant struggle, to preserve their culture and heritage amidst apprehensions of their identity being erased from history .

In such a depressing scenario, it is the responsibility of our intellectuals, litterateurs and educationists to utilize their foresight and take adequate measures to rectify the situation in times to come.

Today, we interact with Mr. Suresh Keswani, a man of vision and totally dedicated to the Sindhi community. He presently holds the post of Vice-Chairman, National Council for Promotion of Sindhi Language (NCPSSL), established by Ministry of HRD, Government. of India.

Jawhrani: Keswaniji, we welcome you. Tell us where in Sindh did you take birth?

Keswani: I was born in Larkana and my father was an advocate there. During the freedom struggle, my father Atal Rai Keswani had worked along with Ram Panjwani and the father of Justice Indersen Israni, under the guidance of Mahatma Gandhi. Khadi was the main apparel at home and I began my education from Larkana, in the Sindhi medium.

Jawhrani: When did you migrate to India from Sindh?

Keswani: My father was posted as a Judge at Tando Mohammad Khan, Hyderabad and so we moved to Tando Mohammad Khan, for 6 - 8 months, and I did my schooling there. I feel the bomb blast of January 1948, in Karachi, which was the first such incident, vitiated the communal harmony and peaceful atmosphere of Sindh. The frightful tales of atrocities on Punjabi, Hindus and Sikhs, had created a scare among Sindhi Hindus too. Vested interests were at work to create a divide between Sindhi Muslims and Hindus. The establishment engineered communal riots in Karachi to create a fear psychosis among Sindhi Hindus. Though Sindhi Muslims tried their best to assuage our feelings, the die for large scale migration of Hindus was unfortunately cast. The influx of Indian Muslims, popularly known as Mohajirs also created a lot of tension between both the communities. Hindus thought it better to call it a day and proceed towards India to save their lives, religion and above all their honour. We also decided to migrate. In March 1948, we crossed Pakistan border from Tharparkar on camel backs and reached the Indian city of Jaisalmer. My grandfather had come a month or two earlier and settled in Ajmer, so we initially came to Ajmer.

Jawhrani: On hindsight do you consider that the decision to migrate was right?

Keswani: The environment then was such, that there was lot of fear behind the decision making process, and fear played a motivating factor. Fear pushes you into taking decisions and it is difficult to judge them later. Reality is far from fear, and it would be wrong on my part to judge it under present circumstances. But it was certainly an appropriate decision at that time.

My father became a Public Prosecutor at Kota, and we didn't face any economic hardships. My father later became a Judge at Bombay, and being a government servant, took our family to

various parts of India because of his transfers and therefore my education which had begun in Sindhi medium in Larkana, switched to Hindi medium in Kota, Marathi medium in Maharashtra; and again to Gujarati when my father was transferred to Gujarat. Thus, I became fluent in 4 different languages.

Jawhrani: Children from educated families generally opt for service. How is it that you chose business?

Keswani: Its true that I come from a highly educated family. I did my MA in Economics and like my father completed Law and became a lecturer of Economics in S. P. College, Poona in 1967. I wanted to work in Jai Hind College, Bombay, and for that I left Poona college. But before I could join Jai Hind College, there was a lecturer's strike that shut down all colleges. I suddenly found myself jobless and unemployment led me to business. I had to survive and by the grace of God I succeeded in my efforts.

Jawhrani: You have also been associated with various government and non-government organizations. Can you tell us something about these?

Keswani: I think my first major assignment was as the Chairman of CIDCO, in 1980. We had to plan the completely modern city of New Bombay. Later, I was associated with various corporations and once I was Vice-Chairman of Reorganization Committee of Sales Tax, where I had to work under noted lawyer and Minister, Ramarao Adik. Then, I joined MELTRON as its Chairman. I was also on the Board of Air India and Indian Airlines, while Mr. Modi was the Chairman. But when we had some differences between ourselves a managing committee was constituted to run Air India and Indian Airlines, which was headed by me as its Chairman. Again, the government nominated me as a Director on the Board of Air Mauritius, and I had to travel to Mauritius, once every month. The Indian government had a sizeable share in Air Mauritius and likewise our government was instrumental in the establishment of Singapore Airlines too. India wanted to help all the smaller nations, in the neighbourhood, like an elder brother and presently, all those small nations have become tigers whereas India has lagged behind.

Jawhrani: You had played a pivotal role in the planning and progress of New Bombay. Can you give us some details?

Keswani: The land sold by CIDCO at that time, during my tenure was at seventy rupees a square meter and I used to advise my friends to

invest in plots, as I could visualize that it would prove to be a wise and lucrative investment and the day would come, when New Bombay would be considered a mega city. Some of my friends paid through cheques, but let those cheques bounce at the banks. They had a ready excuse for that, - they considered it to be a dead investment. They invariably said, "Keswani Sir, we couldn't say no to you and so sent you cheques, but were really not interested to relocate so far?" People couldn't foresee the bright future of New Bombay. They couldn't imagine, that the population of Bombay would increase upto that extent and that the satellite towns would acquire that much importance of their own. Specifically New Bombay, which was considered too far from the main city. I could visualize it, as I had toured the world and seen many such satellite towns turning into developed cities. Besides, we Indians believe in joint family system which also hampered the growth of those far flung areas.

Jawhrani: Being so involved with various government organizations, how could you think of establishing Sindhi Council of India?

Keswani: When I became member of Rajya Sabha in 1996, I noticed one interesting aspect in the upper house. All the new members were administered oath in the Rajya Sabha and everyone took it in his own mother tongue. Highly educated people from Tamil Nadu took the oath in Tamil and in the same way members from other states took the oath in their mother tongues. I too took oath in Sindhi demonstrating my solidarity towards the preservation and progress of Sindhi language. This was the genesis of Sindhi Council of India.

Jawhrani: The present scenario doesn't look promising. Sindhi schools are being shut one after another, and the colleges which used to offer Sindhi subject in their courses are slowly and gradually withdrawing it. Even our Sindhi families prefer conversing in other languages instead of Sindhi. Under these circumstances, how do you expect to save our language, literature, culture and tradition?

Keswani: When I came out of the Rajya Sabha after taking an oath in Sindhi, everyone told me that the mere taking of an oath in Sindhi was not going to reverse the fate of Sindhi language, and for that I would have to take some concrete steps. How could we awaken our sleeping community? I wanted to put forth the problems of our community before Shri Deve Gowda, the then Prime Minister of India and for that I constituted a group of 200

Sindhis, but Deve Gowda at first was reluctant to meet a delegation of two hundred people, but I managed to convince him. I presented a few demands of our community before him which included the revamping of National Council for Promotion of Sindhi Language (NCPSL), which was at that time limited to the state of Gujarat.

Jawhrani: What was the reason behind this limitation to Gujarat?

Keswani: Because its headquarters were in Baroda, which gave it a local flavour and placed limitations on its influence upto the state of Gujarat only. Deve Gowda asked me whether Sindhis lived in Kolkatta, Bangalore, Madras or Hyderabad and in what numbers. I presumed there was only minimal awareness in the government, regarding the population of Sindhis in various states.

Jawhrani: What is the population of Sindhis in India?

Keswani: According to the last census done in 1991 about two and half million, which may have grown upto four million. But my personal information, following my visits to various places and from directories of Sindhi Panchayats I can safely assume a figure of about 7 - 8 millions, presuming 5 members of a family for every name in the directory.

Jawhrani: And how many Sindhis are there outside India?

Keswani: The province of Sindh in Pakistan has got around one million Sindhi Hindus and Sindhi Hindus settled in other countries should be around two millions. The number of Sindhi Muslims is quite high, which must be around 20 million. In a way, you can assume that there are two crore Sindhi Muslims and one crore Sindhi Hindus, worldwide, three crores in all.

I informed Prime Minister Deve Gowda that there were around ninety-six Sindhi settlements in India, which faced problems similar to what Ulhasnagar was facing at present. Their development has been haphazard, they lack proper sanitation, water supply, drainage system, roads and healthy environment. Whatever we pay as taxes to the government, comes back to the states as grants, to the extent of 80%. Unfortunately, the states do not spend even 8% of the 80% contributed by Sindhis on Sindhis.

Jawhrani: Did your efforts bear any fruit?

Keswani: Unfortunately, his prime ministership didn't last long. Then came I. K. Gujral. When I put forth the problems of Sindhis before him

he advised me to have common leadership as till then every Sindhi would voice a different tune. Without any unity, no one was going to pay any heed to our pleas. He told me that there were many Sindhi organizations which only existed on letterheads and it would be better to have a single organization to represent all the Sindhis of India.

I told him that there was Akhil Bharat Central Panchayat, headed by Nari Gursahani, but he differed with me and said that it was not a representative organization of all the Sindhis. In fact, all the Sindhi Panchayats are not associated with it. He advised me to have a single representative organization of all the Indian Sindhis, and told me to work on these lines, to put forth the demands of Sindhis in one common voice.

Jawhrani: Was that the objective of 'Sindhi Council of India'?

Keswani: I want to make it clear that it was not I who established it. In fact, it was the brainchild of our southern cities. They have got Southern Federation of Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra, Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry and they advised us to have one such Indian federation, on the lines of Southern Federation. In October 1998, Southern Federation called for a convention of Sindhi Council at Hyderabad. Everyone present there put forth his own suggestion and they came to this conclusion that 'Sindhi Council of India' be established and they elected me as its first head. Then, we prepared its constitution. Its second convention was held at Nagpur, which was hosted by Mr. N. Kumar. Mr. Suresh Kewalramani hosted the third convention at Gandhidham, where we adopted its constitution and got our organization registered.

Jawhrani: Since when have you been associated with the Sindhi Academy of Delhi?

Keswani: With the change in government in 1999, I was nominated to head the Sindhi Academy, Delhi to promote Sindhi language and literature and encourage Sindhi writers and artists.

Jawhrani: Since how many terms have you been associated with it?

Keswani: I have completed two terms.

Jawhrani: What have been your main achievements at Sindhi Academy?

Keswani: When I joined it, its budget was barely a million rupees which has been enhanced to Rs. One Crore at present. The government of Delhi has also allotted a plot of ten thousand square feet for the

construction of Sindhology Museum.

Jawhrani: Have you got possession of the land?

Keswani: Not the land, but we have got the office area. Presently, its office is being renovated. We have also got a theatre there. We can hold Sindhi dramas, shows and training programmes at our theatre. I had to really work hard and lobby for it, and I would give complete credit to Mrs. Sheela Dixit, the Chief Minister of Delhi, who has never turned down any of our legitimate demands. I have tried to contribute my bit by not drawing any fiscal emoluments, such as sitting fee of Rs. 2500 per meeting, or traveling allowances, etc. You can say, it is my contribution towards 'Sindhyat'.

Jawhrani: Can't your clout with the government be utilized for the establishment of more Sindhi academies in various states, each having a handsome budget like in the case of Delhi?

Keswani: The present HRD Minister, Mr. Arjun Singh liked our hard work and dedication demonstrated in the working of Delhi Sindhi Academy, and he put another responsibility on my shoulders of heading National Council for Promotion of Sindhi Language (NCPSL). Its Chairman is Shri Arjun Singh himself, while I look after it as Vice-Chairman.

Jawhrani: Fortunately, hasn't NCPSL too got a good allotment of funds?

Keswani: I won't term it as a handsome allocation, because presently it hovers around four to five million rupees. But we are working in this direction and hopeful of getting the budget increased.

Jawhrani: Isn't the budget for Urdu 9 crores?

Keswani: Yes, it gets around ninety million rupees.

Jawhrani: Why does the government differentiate so much?

Keswani: I have put my demand before the government. Someone argues that Muslims are around 10% of Indian population and the budget for National Council for Promotion of Urdu Language (NCPUL) is fixed, keeping in mind their population. This is totally wrong and unfortunate as all the Indian Muslims do not have Urdu as their mother tongue. Maharashtra Muslims speak Marathi and likewise every state's Muslim speaks the state language. I asked the President about it. I wanted to know, whether he himself spoke Urdu, to which his response was in the negative. He speaks Tamil. While we Sindhis speak Sindhi, even if we live in various states of India. Urdu is the mother tongue of only some Muslims who live

in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. We Sindhis should be provided resources in proportion to our population. The allocation should be justifiable. Mr. Arjun Singh agreed to this argument and asked us what we needed. I have sought a plot to construct a building of our own like NCPUL. The headquarter of NCPUL should be shifted from Baroda, a corner in Gujarat, to the Central area of Delhi, so that people from all corners of India and even abroad can come and see the work done by NCPUL.

Jawhrani: According to you which script (Alphabet) should be adopted for the Sindhi language?

Keswani: Better this issue be left untouched, as the most critical and urgent issue to be addressed by Sindhis presently is that more and more of the Sindhi populace be convinced to converse in Sindhi. The sale of Sindhi books has plummeted so low, that publishing a Sindhi book is simply a losing proposition. When people don't speak Sindhi language, how could you expect them to purchase Sindhi books for reading? We try our best to compensate the writers by purchasing their books in bulk and then distributing these books to the libraries of various cities. The moot question is whether anyone is going to read these books or they will lie untouched in some corner of the library, forever. Under these circumstances, I propose the encouragement of visual media, more variety shows be held and dramas be staged. I want to take vocal culture to the electronic media. First of all, our children should hear the Sindhi language. The question of script can be tackled at a later stage. Our children write their letters to us from America in Sindhi in the Roman script. When the late president Giani Zail Singh addressed in English, he used to get it written in the Gurmukhi script and no one was the wiser of the fact that he couldn't read English. I want to emphasize, that the primary question is to speak Sindhi language and the issue of script be decided afterwards.

After creation of Israel, Jews from various countries migrated to Israel. They spoke different languages but in order to join them in a single stream the Israeli government proposed the use of Hebrew by all, which had been long abandoned. At present, Hebrew is widely spoken as well as written in Israel.

Jawhrani: When did you enter the political arena?

Keswani: From the moment I became Chairman of CIDCO, I have been associated with the Congress party. I entered Rajya Sabha too from the Congress platform. When we held the fourth convention of

the Sindhi Council of India, I requested Mrs. Sonia Gandhi that Sindhis wanted to hear her and that she had to contribute towards framing of Indian policy. When we held our fifth convention at Jaipur, which was hosted by Israni, we got Sonia Gandhi as our Chief Guest. She attended it in the packed hall. Sindhis had come from every nook and corner of India.

Jawhrani: What is your opinion about present day politics?

Keswani: I want to say two things. The politician who only thinks about elections is only a politician, but whoever thinks about the coming generation is a statesman. We have stopped giving birth to statesmen. Statesmen are not encouraged by the politicians, because in politics you have to fight elections and that needs money. So, whoever has money becomes powerful and he creates a vote bank or a political base. In democracy, we need elections which bring powerful men and money, so we cannot just erase them once they enter the main political stream through elections. People expect politicians to be starched white, whereas we know that elections need a lot of money. This vicious circle keeps the relation of politics and corruption alive. There are many other means to eradicate corruption, but that needs firm determination and harsh steps. The country of Singapore was a sleepy town before independence. Corruption existed there too, but their honesty and hard work have brought it to a manageable level. Same was the case with Dubai, where harsh punishments have brought it down. You have to take the people along, from the lowest level, on the way to progress. Only transparency can bring down corruption, but it will take time. We cannot simply wish it away over night.

Jawhrani: Former Chief of Naval Staff, R. H. Tahiliani, who is presently heading the Indian chapter of Transparency International, had told us that India is way ahead in corruption as compared to other countries, in every walk of life - health, education or politics. There is rampant corruption everywhere. How can we rectify this?

Keswani: I think the main problem lies with growth and economic justice. We cannot lecture people when they don't get two square meals. Our salaries are at rock bottom. If you pay peanuts, you can only get monkeys. We are continuing with the basic structure provided by our erstwhile colonizers, we have to frame a new structure. Presently, our country is headed by Manmohan Singh, and no one can raise a finger at his integrity. We have got Chidambaram as our

Finance Minister and he cannot be termed as a corrupt person. Our President and Home Minister are other examples of honest people, so when our leadership is honest, we can hope for a bright future and this will definitely have a trickle down effect. Presently, our country is notching around 8% GDP rate and the economy is booming. We just have to ensure that we do not forget the poor people of our country, and then we can expect our country and people to achieve the status of a developed country.

Jawhrani: Recently you were in Sindh where you met Sindhi writers, and arranged for them to visit India, Can you tell us more about your visit?

Keswani: People have been skeptical and they used to criticize our steps and pronounce that the Sindhi language was a dying language, like the other regional languages, and all our efforts would go in vain. But a simple look at Sindh can disprove their doomsday projections, because along with us Indian Sindhis there exist some twenty million Sindhi Muslims, too. We belong to a 5000 years old culture and civilization. India has derived its name from Sindh, the Vedas were written on the banks of River Indus. So differences of religion or other problems can never annihilate our 5000 year old language. Bhagwan Gidwani says in his book 'Return of the Aryans' that the Aryans had gone out of Sindh thousands of years back and then again they came back to their roots. This only proves that the 'Sindhi' has re-invented himself in every era, and shall never disappear. I have firm belief that even Indian Sindhis will never forget our language. But, to renew our interest in our mother tongue, we should have regular interaction with our Sindhi Muslim brethren. Around two years back, I arranged for a visit of a Pakistani delegation to Delhi, which provided an opportunity to the litterateurs of both the countries to sit together and devise various measures for the preservation and progress of Sindhi language. This enthused me a lot and a new ray of hope dawned on us. The future of Sindhi language is bright; we just have to work hard in this direction. We must learn our language. Our community is basically a trading community, with commercial interests. Wherever I have been, I have seen Sindhis conversing in Sindhi language with one another, because it is incomprehensible to their European or American customers. In India, a Sindhi family provides employment to roughly ten non-Sindhi families. We never adopt a confrontational approach towards anyone, we rather work for the betterment of locals.

Jawhrani: Is our merger with the local population is good?

Keswani: Our civilization will last forever. When we could bear the atrocities of Muslim rulers in Sindh and came out unscathed, this is not going to affect us in any way. After Lord Jhulelal's incarnation in Sindh, the atmosphere there had remained by and large peaceful. There was no Hindu Muslim incident. From the 10th to 20th century there was never a problem. Though there had been some kings, who had committed atrocities on Sindhi Hindu populace, Kings like Ranjeet Singh provided protection to Hindus by issuing a decree that whoever had Guru Granth in his home, would be provided state protection. So our belief in Guru Granth Sahib grew due to similarity in philosophy. I had been to Sindh recently where I saw Hindus and Muslims praying at common Pirs and Dargahs. Sindhis' philosophy is Sufism, but our identity is Lord Jhulelal. We must lay greater emphasis on Jhulelal. We should have insignia of Lord Jhulelal on our letterheads. Sindhis belong to the mainstream of India. Indus valley civilization is the civilization of India. Vedas and Puranas are the basis of our country. Geeta is derived from the study of Vedas. All musical notes are taken from Vedas. It has been the contribution of the Sindhis to India. Therefore, we can safely say that 'Sindhyaat' is the mainstream of India. The word 'Hindu' is a misspelt word of 'Sindhu'. We are the earning members of the family, called India. We should be accorded that much love and respect, which at present we receive on individual basis, when in fact the whole community should be given the same love and respect.

What we do lack is unity amongst us. But it is never too late to be united. We can disagree with each other, but it should never split us and we must stand united at the end of the day.

Jawhrani: Thank you for taking out time and providing us with your valuable comments.

Keswani: Thank you.