

SINDHIS AND THE WORLDWIDE WEB OF TRUST

Remarks by Kishore Mahbubani¹ at the 14th International Sindhi Sammelan
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Pyar-ray Bhau-ro an Bainaru, mukay nyahid kushi ah-hey jo adjiu mukay than sah galain lai he moko milio ah-hey, para dukh ji ghal ah-hey tha ma jay kah mah sah sindhi galain do hos, huna sindhi sah ma panjar vichar changai tareh paiche ko na karay sagandas, hina karay mah angrasi mai toh panjah vichar paich kariah

(continue in English)

Dear Friends,

Please let me join President S. R. Nathan in welcoming you to Singapore.

You have already heard many speeches tonight. There is a human limit to how many speeches we can listen to in one sitting. Instead of providing you one more speech, let me tell you some stories instead.

Story-telling is sometimes seen as a childish, even frivolous, business. Actually, story-telling is a very serious activity. All human history is essentially a series of stories. The Anglo-Saxons have a more sophisticated word for stories. They call it narratives. My goal tonight is to find out what a global historian might say about the Sindhi narrative – or Sindhi story. My big message to you – if at all I have any big message – is that the real Sindhi narrative may not have been told yet. Indeed, the real story about the Sindhis is that the big story about Sindhis has not been told. The Sindhis, who have a modest view about themselves and their role in history, may have played a bigger role in moving world history in ways that have not been discovered.

What kind of stories can we tell about the Sindhis? The three most popular stories are the stories of the three “T”s: the story of tragedy, the story of triumph and the story of trade. The story of tragedy is well-known. My mother told me the story of tragedy: how, in 1947, as a result of the bitter conflict, Sindhis had to leave Sind without their property and possessions and settle in all corners of the world. My mother told me that this was why I had first cousins in Suriname and Guyana, Nigeria and Ghana, Japan and Hong Kong. When she told me this story fifty years ago, in the 1950s, it was understandable that the story was all about loss and pain. Fortunately, none of my parents’ family members were killed but we know that many had lost their lives. Hence, this story of tragedy is well-known.

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The story of triumph is the story of the International Sindhi Sammelan. Many populations have suffered tragedies and lost their lives. Many continued to live as poor refugees. The Sindhis, by contrast, have largely succeeded wherever they have gone. Some of these success stories are truly remarkable. My mother's brother, Mr. Jhamat T. Kriplani, arrived in the Dutch speaking colony of Suriname not speaking Dutch and with very little possessions. Today he is one of the most successful businessmen there. There are hundreds of stories like his. The story of how Sindhis triumphed over adversity is truly a remarkable story.

The story of trade is the best known story. There is something in our blood that makes most of us successful traders. The term Sindhi is almost automatically associated with trade. Hence, when I joined the diplomatic service of Singapore, one of my good Chinese Singaporean friends, Albert Hong, would introduce me by saying: "Meet my friend, Kishore. He is the Sindhi who failed. He joined government service." Today, of course, Sindhis have succeeded in many professions but most of our ancestors succeeded initially as traders.

These are the three well-known old stories of Sindhis. Are there new stories that can be told about the Sindhis? I believe that there are three new stories that can be told. These three new stories will indicate that Sindhis may have played a big role in world history that has not been fully recognized.

The first new story is about Globalization. Globalization is the world's biggest story today. It is completely changing our world. It is changing our world so fundamentally that no one really understands what is happening. Believe me, there are no experts in this field. Instead, we are all struggling to understand what is going on. We use different images to describe the changes. Tom Friedman says we are moving into a flat world. I say we are all sailing on the same boat. Before when we lived in different countries, we lived on different boats. Today, after globalization, we all sail on the same boat.

The big question for the future of the world is whether we can cope with this globalization? Will we succeed? Will we fail? The Sindhis may have done the whole world a big favor by proving that we can cope with globalization. In some ways, the Sindhis have been sociological guinea pigs for the world. We are among the first ethnic group to be globalized. We have lived in all corners of the world and we have succeeded as a community. Hence, if historians and social scientists want to understand whether humanity can cope with the challenges of globalization, they should study the Sindhi experience. If the Sindhis can cope, humanity can cope too.

The second new story is about peace. What have Sindhis got to do with peace? Sindhis are not known to be soldiers or warriors. Indeed, Sindhis are not associated with issues of war and peace. This is true. But the world is also beginning to realize that there is a connection between trade and peace. Indeed, a Yale historian, Bruce Russett, has shown that greater trade means less conflict. He says, for example, that "interdependence reduces the likelihood of conflict among the politically relevant dyads in the postwar period and that this effect is more evident using the trade-to-GDP ratio. Way (1997) concludes that economically important trade has reduced conflict throughout the 1850-1990 period."

There is also a larger correlation between trade and peace. Since the end of World War II, sixty-two year ago, there have been wars but there have been no wars between any two major powers. The reasons are very complex. But in the same period, global trade has grown enormously. Total global exports have ballooned from US\$ 58 billion in total global exports in 1948 to US\$ 3.7 trillion in 1993 to US\$ 9 trillion in 2004. ²

In short, in the last sixty years we have seen an explosive growth in world trade and we have seen no world wars. However, the last sixty years has also been the period when Sindhis dispersed across the world and promoted global trade. The Sindhis may have made only a small contribution to global trade but the small contribution may have paved the way for others to follow. In short, when Sindhis promote trade, they are promoting peace.

This is also why we should stop running down traders. In Western literature, soldiers are considered honorable and traders are considered dishonorable. Shakespeare captured this spirit by portraying Shylock, a merchant, as someone who always wanted his pound of flesh.

This Shakespearean view of merchants and traders needs to be changed. Traders should not be seen as greedy, money-grubbing people. Instead, they should be seen as agents of peace. They promote peace in many ways. First, when soldiers enter any situation, they go for win-lose outcomes. Traders always go for win-win outcomes. A famous British diplomat Sir Harold Nicolson has recognized this. He says: “..It is not religion which has been the main formative influence in diplomatic theory: it is common sense. And it was through trade and commerce that people first learnt to apply common sense in their dealings with each other.”³ He further adds, “As opposed to this warrior conception of diplomacy, there stands the commercial, the mercantile or the shop-keeper conception. This civilian theory of negotiation is based upon the assumption that a compromise between rivalries is generally more profitable than the complete destruction of the rival. That negotiation is not a mere phase in a death-struggle, but an attempt by mutual concession to reach some durable understanding.”⁴ Secondly, traders succeed in business when they are able to establish trust between each other. Hence, the more trade there is in the world, the more trust there is. Globally, Sindhis are successful in trade because they have built global networks of trust.

The third new story that can be told about Sindhis is the story of tolerance. I want to end with this new story of tolerance to balance the old story of tragedy. After partition, the stories about Hindus and Muslims are one about divisions. Before partition, the story was a more complex one. In preparing for this lecture I decided to do some research into the history of Sind.

In so doing, I discovered many surprises. The first surprise I discovered was that the best single book written on the Sindhis is by a Frenchman living in Paris. He is Claude Markovits and the book is *The Global World of Indian Merchants, 1750-1947*. I recommend this book to all of you. After reading this book, I realized that the relationship between Hindus and Muslims in Sind was very complex. As he says, “Why in a region which was under Muslim rule since the

² Opening remarks by H.E. Nitya Pibulsonggram, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Thailand at the International Conference, “Foreign Ministries: Adaptation to a Changing World”, 14 June 2007

³ Harold Nicolson, *Diplomacy* (Washington DC: Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, 1963), p. 24

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 26

twelfth century, and in which the majority of the population was converted to Islam at some point between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, trade and finance were largely dominated by Hindus is a question that has often been debated....”⁵ In short, Hindus and Muslims have lived together in Sind for over eight hundred years and they often lived together in peace.

From Markovits’ book, I also learnt that Sadhu T. L. Vaswani, who was the main spiritual guide of Sindhi Hindus in the 20th century, mentions that “Hindus in Sind participated in the Muharram, the festival of the Muslims. They considered the tabut to be so very holy that they brought their own new-born babies to it to be blessed. They also covered the tabut with their kerchieves as a mark of respect and reverence.”⁶

Markovits’ book also hints that the Hindu-Muslim differences may have been promoted by the British in Sind as part of their divide-and-rule policy. Indeed, one of the most famous stories of British perfidy is connected with Sind. In 1843, the British signed a treaty with the Emirs of Sind in which they promised not to invade or occupy Sind. A few months later, Sir Charles Napier, who was assigned to the Sind command, subordinate to Edward Law, governor-general of India (1841-44), received an order from London to occupy Sind. He did so and after doing so, he sent to London one of the most famous telegrams in military history. His telegram contained one word: “Peccavi.” Peccavi is Latin for “I have sinned.”

The British colonial rulers had clearly sinned in Sind. That happened almost exactly 150 years ago. The question for us is whether we are going to allow the tragic effects of the British divide-and-rule policy to continue or whether we should go back to the older traditions in Sind of Hindus and Muslims living in peace and tolerance with each other?

One of my uncles told me a surprising story recently. I was under the impression that few Hindu-Sindhis had gone back to Sind after partition of 1947. He told me that he had gone back in 1953 to see his old house in Hyderabad. He also met his old friends and his barber. All of them received him warmly and said: “Please come back and visit us. This division is so sad.”

I was so inspired by this story that I have decided to visit Sind, a place I have never been to. The Pakistan High Commissioner, H. E. Mr. Sajjad Ashraf, has invited me to go to Pakistan as a “state guest”. Using his Sherlock Holmes skills, he has also found the home where my mother grew up in Hyderabad. I will be going to see it for the first time in September this year.

I also look forward to reconnecting with my old cultural roots and heritage. I hope that you will also do so and in due course replace the old stories of tragedy, triumph and trade with new stories of globalization, peace and tolerance.

With you, let me wish you all the best for the 14th International Sindhi Sammelan.

⁵ Claude Markovits, *The Global World of Indian Merchants, 1750-1947: Traders of Sind from Bukhara to Panama* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), p, 36

⁶ Ibid, p 49