

[In Search of a Home, The Enterprising Sindhis Thrive](#)

Category : [June 1993](#)

Published by Anonymous on Jun. 01, 1993

## In Search of a Home, The Enterprising Sindhis Thrive

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In India the Babri Mosque, which was built on the site of Lord Rama's birthplace in Ayodhya, is destroyed by Hindus. In a knee-jerk reaction, Muslims in Pakistan go on a rampage and destroy the homes and temples of that silent minority in an Islamic country, the Sindhi Hindus.

History certainly repeats itself. In my family album, there is a yellowing photograph which tells the traumatic story of an entire people. In it, a solitary figure stands grimly in front of his sealed jewelry store in Lahore, Pakistan. The man is my father, the year is 1947. Once a wealthy jeweller from Hyderabad, Sindh, with a flourishing business and real estate, the bloody partition which shattered India turned him into a penniless refugee who had to flee with his family from the carnage.

After the partition, he returned from Bombay to Lahore to try and salvage what he could, but it was as if he had never existed. His shop was sealed; strangers occupied his beautiful home and slept on his bed. With a paltry compensation from the government, he had to support his family of six. Yet by 1955, with typical Sindh drive, he had set up jewelry stores in New Delhi, Simla and Mussoorie with a loyal following who knew that his store motto, "Reputation," was more a credo of living. Decades later, I still meet people who do a double-take: "Girdharilal was your father? He was a man of integrity."

Multiply this story by millions, and you have a people who overcome adversity to become one of the most affluent communities in India, and perhaps the world. Disclosed and traumatized by the partition of India in which their beloved homeland of Sindh was swallowed up in the newly-created Islamic country of

Pakistan, the Hindu Sindhis were turned into world-wandering refugees. They fled with their lives and just a few belongings from the bloodshed and religious persecution. With few resources beyond guts and creativity they sailed to the far corners of the world, to seek their fortunes.

### Making a Business of Survival

One of the most surprising discoveries of the moonwalk by astronaut Neil Armstrong must have been the fact that there was no Sindhi businessman waiting to greet him with his wares! Indeed, the Sindhi community - bold, resourceful and entrepreneurial - has spread to all parts of the globe. In the Far East they are powerful players in the electronics and garments business, as they are in America. In the Middle East they have dealt in every judging the market. Browse through the pages of a telephone directory in any part of the world from Frankfurt to Johannesburg, and you will find Sindhi names. Many of these will be success stories.

Hindu Sindhis, being a nation of refugees, have had to flee, and many are still running to different parts of the globe, but this time for better jobs, economic status and expansion. For many, roots are now forgotten and upward mobility is the name of the game. Yet all Sindhis cling to their mother tongue and their culture. Having fled their land, these were often all they could carry, besides memories. Interestingly enough, though these fleeing refugees abandoned their homes and wealth, they never forsook their religious beliefs and Sindhi culture. C.J. Daswani wrote in the forward to Sadhu T.L. Vaswani's book, *Sind and the Sindhis*, "Having been dispossessed of their motherland, they did not give in to despair. They looked to the larger motherland, this great land of sagas, rishis, mahatmas and people with vision."

### A Home for All

Indeed the Sindhi version of Hinduism, mixed as it is with Sufi mysticism, is Hinduism at its best and most elastic, recognizing that though the paths are many, they all lead to one God. So in ancient days when the Chinese traveller Hsuan Tsang visited Sindh, he found Buddhist stupas and a Buddhist king called "Sindhu Ka," perhaps because his palace was on the bank of the river Indus. A Chinese book

of that time noted that "Sindhis had faith in the law of the Buddha." In later days, the Sindhis have gleaned the best from all faiths and all mystics, be in the bhajans of Mira, the verses of Kabir or the teachings of Guru Nanak. Writes Sadhu T.L. Vaswani of the Sindhi credo: "The teaching for the Brahmin and the non-Brahmin was the same: 'Strive to do good for all.' The 'all' included not only men of diverse races and creeds, but also birds and animals. No creature was to be banned. All life was sacred." Sindh has produced mystics, spiritual teachers, poets and singers whose work has advanced the Sindhi way of life.

In the womb of every Sindhi home is a shrine, makeshift or elaborate, not only to the pantheon of Hindu Gods but also to their special messiah, Jhulelal, or Lord of the Oceans, who preserved them on the many journeys these refugees were compelled to take. An adaptable people, they are examples of Hinduism at its most humanistic level, embodying the principle Vasudev Kuttumban, "The world is one family." A Sindhi family shrine will have portraits of many Hindu Gods and Goddesses, Guru Nanaksahab, Lord Buddha, ancestors who have departed for their heavenly abode yet continue to watch over their offspring - sometimes even Christ. When my daughter was given a picture of Mother Mary in school, my 70-year-old mother-in-law placed it on her worship altar. Every holy picture is holy, regardless of its religion, and will be propped up in the family shrine. Indeed, Sadhu T.L. Vaswani often quoted the weaver-singer Kabir: "O God - whether called Allah or Ram - I live by the holy name."

### At Home Without a Homeland

The survival of this refugee people has depended on their quick thinking and their ability to adapt to life in new lands across the world. Fish in water and fowl on land, they have adapted to their new homeland with gusto. So you may find Sindhis to be Westernized in their thinking, in their clothing and many of their habits. Many may even celebrate Christmas, set up a tree and give their children presents. But this is all cosmetic, and although there is respect for all religions, this Christian festival is never celebrated on a religious level, only on the commercial level.

A people fiercely in love with their ethnic music and customs, they hold on to these during the ceremonies of birth, marriage and death. They may eat and enjoy international cuisines with flair, but they relish the many ancient dishes of Sindhi cuisine. Sindhis, even in far-off lands, celebrate their special religious and cultural festivals with great fervor.

Exiled forever from their sweet homeland of Sindh, the older people carry the memories of the beauty and grace of that place. The Sindhi language is a remnant of the ancient Mohenjodaro civilization in the Indus Valley and many words on the ancient ruins are in the Sindhi language even today.

## Remembering Those Left Behind

Yet sometimes one wonders, do they remember their Hindu brethren who stubbornly chose to stay in their homeland of Sindh? A small voiceless minority in an Islamic country, they recently suffered the consequences of the destruction of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya. In retaliation, their temples and homes were destroyed in Pakistan by angry mobs. Clinging to their ancient land, these forgotten Hindus have not changed much, nor have they prospered like other Sindhis around the world. Where Peacocks Dance is a powerful film by a Pakistani woman filmmaker, Sabiha Sumar, about an endangered Sindhi culture which is systematically being rooted out by the Islamic fundamentalist regime of Pakistan. The images are shocking. Mohenjodaro, the cradle of the world's oldest civilization, lies neglected, abandoned to rot by the ravages of nature. The Government of Pakistan seems to want to root out all record of that which is not Islamic so that Pakistan's history begins only with its Muslim rulers. We visit a Hindu priest still clinging to a Siva Temple, although many Hindu families have fled in the last mass exodus to India in January 1992.

Of greater concern is the suppression of the Sindhi culture by the present regime. The Sindhi culture is rooted in secular beliefs, where Hindus and Muslims are part of a common Sindhi culture, and this is what the Islamic government of Pakistan is trying to wipe out.

It is imperative that Sindhis everywhere give moral support to the Sindhis - both Hindu and Muslim - who are holding on to their endangered culture in Pakistan. Perhaps their case can be taken up by the many successful Sindhis who have established major business concerns and have shown a real interest in philanthropy. Some of these families are the Hindujas who are based in London but have major interests in all parts of the world, the Harilelas of Hong Kong and the Watumulls of Hawaii. All of them have established foundations to help the needy, and have set up hospitals and colleges in India.

The new challenge for the Sindhis is the survival of their culture and their language, as the reality of an Islamic government closes in around Sindh. Many children born on foreign shores cannot speak Sindhi, and they certainly cannot write it. Is this beautiful old language in danger of dying out? Organizations like the Sadhu Vaswani Mission try to ensure that this cultural heritage is kept alive by instructing the younger generation in the Sindhi language and culture. Indeed, values inculcated in youth tend to remain. Monday (Lord Shiva's special day) is observed as a meatless day in most Sindhi households, no matter how westernized, and many Sindhi women observe a fast on that day to please Lord Shiva into granting longevity and prosperity to their husbands. It is not uncommon to see Sindhi men, urbanized and western, refrain from meat on Mondays and from beef altogether.

In every part of the world, Sindhis - though thinking of themselves as Indians - do keep their Sindhi culture alive through organizations. In America, the Sindhu Sangam, a New York-based association created by Daulat Sajani, publishes a monthly newsletter called Indus Vani, hosts musicians and singers and presents Sindhi cultural program and lectures by Sindhi and Hindu sages. Sindhis, no matter where they go, still get stirred by the devotional song "Jhulelal." Motilal Bhutani, a 78-year-old retired judge from Bombay who now lives in the U.S., writes: "'Jhulelal Bera Par.' This is our slogan, catchword, pithy phrase and guiding principle." Jhulelal, worshiped also as Uderolal, taught Sindhis the spirit of religious toleration, and his wisdom is celebrated on the special festival of Cheti Chand. Says Bhutani, "Our prayers and pujas on the bank of the Sindhu River near Thatta brought the great Lord on earth to save our ancient Hindu religion." "Jhulelal!" is the clarion call of the land they lost and which they still carry in their psyche.

The links between that 5,000-year-old culture and Sindhis approaching the 21st century is awe-inspiring. Certain words which have been decoded in the inscriptions at Mohenjodaro are even today in the Sindhi language. If the disintegration of Mohenjodaro is not arrested, a chunk of the world's collective history will be lost forever. If Mohenjodaro vanishes, all humankind will be a little poorer. After all, the very word Hindu is derived from the word "Sindhu," and it was on the banks of the Sindhu River that the rishis composed the Vedas.

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