

Notes

Saluting Sobho Gianchandani: A Symbol of Pride of the Subcontinent*

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'There's nothing dearer than one's country not even one's religion or anything' – Sobho Gianchandani.

In the struggle for India's independence, Sind was not behind other provinces. The anti-imperialist forces fought unitedly to liberate the country from the foreign yoke. However, a section of the patriots sought and struggled not only for political freedom, but also for the establishment of a society free from poverty, hunger and tensions of tomorrow. Although they faced enormous hardships, yet they did not give up the fight even after independence and division of the subcontinent. One amongst them is Sobho Gianchandani, a man of firm conviction and extraordinary courage.

Sobho was born in 1920 in Larkana, Sind. At a very young age he came under the influence of the nationalist ideas. When he was hardly nine years old he started wearing khadi and reading patriotic literature. He read autobiography of Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru's 'Glimpses of the World History' and the biography of a well-known Bengali revolutionary turned communist M.N. Roy. However, the books that set his brain on fire were on socialism, Thomas More's *Utopia* and *Raja Jhanak Jo Sapnoo* [The dream of Raja Jhanak]. He got convinced that socialism

* The article is mainly based on the interview given by Wadhwani, a communist, co-worker of Sobho in the freedom struggle at Karachi and Sobho's own interview given to *Dawn*. Besides some books like Com. Kutty's autobiography, *Sixty Years in Self Exile: No Regrets*, Baldev T. Gajra's *Sind's Role in the Freedom Struggle* (Gajra was a freedom fighter and associated with the Sind Congress), Subrata Banerjee's, *The RIN Strike* [the author was a ratings in the Navy and had participated in the revolt] have been consulted.

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was the only system which could ensure justice, equality and freedom to everyone in the real sense.

His nationalist urge led him to join Shantiniketan of Rabindranath Tagore for higher studies. The atmosphere at Shantiniketan was truly liberal, patriotic and progressive. On 26 January 1940, on Sobho's initiative Indian Independence Day was celebrated on the campus by the students. Sobho also gave an inspiring speech on the occasion. There were total 450 students out of which 250 were girls, 23 from Sind alone. Some of the students had come from foreign countries. They belonged to different races, regions, religions and had different outlook. They had different political inclinations but most of them were attracted by communism. Sobho's room-mate in the hostel was a Muslim communist from Indonesia. On the campus discussions were held on national and international issues, ideologies, and Sobho used to actively participate in them. By the time he had completed his M.A. he had already turned into a communist.

In 1941 he returned to Karachi and joined Law College. By then, a branch of the All India Student Federation [AISF], a student organization of the Communist Party of India [CPI] was already active among the students of Sind. The pioneering role was played by Hashu Kewalramani, a journalist trained at United Kingdom (UK). Hashu remained in UK for seven years and was a close associate of Krishna Menon, a leftist, in India League, who later became a right-hand man of Jawaharlal Nehru. Hashu returned to Karachi in 1936-37. He organized the students and brought them under the banner of All India Student Federation with himself as President and Kishin Motwani and Abhichandani as its general secretaries. Very soon the organization became a powerful movement and spread to all the towns of Sind. At Karachi an office was set up to solve problems of the students and to discuss the political issues. Pritam Tahiliani, Santosh Kumar Dharmani, Rocho Pardasani, Sarla Ahuja, Moti Motwani, Radhakrishnan Wadhwani, Sukhram Virwani, Rijhu Abichandani, Rochi Pardasani, and Hashu's own younger brother were active members of the AISF. Some of them worked as whole-timers. Besides AISF, Student's Congress, which was a part of the All India Congress, was also active under the leadership of Tulsi Tahiliani. But AISF was more powerful, more representative, and had more members and following. Its branches were set up in different parts of Sind. At Sukkur, in 1940, a conference of the Sind Students was organized. C.T. Valecha, a prominent leader of the Congress and member of the Legislative Assembly Sind, wanted Indira Gandhi, daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru to preside. However, all the students with leftist views wanted Muqimuddin Farooqi, a student of

Delhi University, and at that time the General Secretary of the AISF to preside. They succeeded and Farooqi presided over Sukkur Student's Conference.

Despite differences, all the students belonging to different student organizations unitedly opposed the dragging of India into the Second World War and organized demonstrations against the government. The most impressive event in the annals of this organization according to Baldev T. Gajra, a Congress leader in Sind was the holding of an anti-imperialist demonstration on the 1st September 1940 in Karachi. Thousands of students joined the demonstration and shouted anti-British and anti-war slogans. The authorities alarmed at the rise and militancy of the student movement came heavily upon the organizers. They arrested a large number of students including Hashu Kewalramani. President of AISF, Pritam Tahlilramani and Santosh Kumar Dharmani. Hashu Kewalramani was prosecuted and sentenced to 18 months rigorous imprisonment.

However, the authorities failed to suppress the revolutionary spirit of the students. Immediately, after the arrest and imprisonment of Hashu Kewalramani, Sobho Gianchandani took over the leadership of the student community of Sind. In 1941, the AISF organized and led a strike against the enhancement of fee in all the colleges of Karachi. Narayan M Wadhwani, Parcho Vidyarthi, and Sital Daryanani were also in the forefront and organized the students in Metharam and Sewa Kunj hostels and brought them in the agitation.¹ The Union succeeded in getting the fee reduced and got installment system introduced.²

Under Sobho's stewardship the AISF became highly popular. To make the students aware of socialism and the achievements of Russian revolution, study classes were organized. Sobho used to deliver lectures and was respected by the entire student community. 'He was extremely handsome, modest and intellectually superior to all' reminisces Wadhwani, a student at D.J. College and Sobho's co-worker. 'In kurta, pyjama, he [Sobho] looked magnificent and had a towering

¹ There were five-six colleges in Karachi, D.J. College, an Engineering-College under the name of a Parsi, Nadirshaw Edalji Dinshaw, a Law College, N.R. College of Commerce, Dow Medical College and B.T. College.

² In 1945 a Madrasa College was also opened. Teachers were held in high esteem by the students. Bhutani was the principal of D.J. College from 1928 to 1945. Once Ayub Khuhro, the Chief Minister of Sindh was called to Sind College. Bhutani was in the chair. Khuhro came and first touched Bhutani's feet. Wadhwani, OHT. Accession No-550.

personality... He would not pose to be a leader. He would mix with them and sit with them even on the floor just as one of them.’ ‘He had a unique position’, Wadhwani states further, ‘Whenever there was a common cause, even the Muslim Student’s Union would cooperate with us’.³ Students were encouraged to work among the workers and peasants and to organize them on class basis, and to bring the masses into the anti-imperialistic struggles.

Quit India

In 1942, the Congress, under the leadership of Gandhi gave a call for Quit India movement. By then Hitler had attacked Russia also. In order to save Russia, the first socialist state in the world, the Communist Party of India decided to support the British in the war efforts and characterized the war as People’s war. To convince the students about the new line, the CPI convened a conference of the AISF at Patna. Sobho along with some other Sindhi comrades went to attend. Mian Iftikharuddin, Farooqi and Sajjad Zaheer addressed the students and asked them to stay away from participating in the Congress led movement. Sobho was not convinced. Although he was the member of CPI yet he not only participated in the Quit India movement against the party line but also encouraged and organized the students to carry on revolutionary activities to force the British to quit India. According to Wadhwani, ‘In the freedom movement we had no differences whether it was led by the Congress or anybody as long as it was for emancipation of India from British imperialism’. The first act of defiance indulged in by them was to picket the colleges and schools as a protest against the arrest of the Congress leaders after the declaration of the movement. The students organized a procession. When it reached the Civil Hospital, police arrived on the scene and resorted to lathi-charge wherein Tulsi Tahiliani was injured and taken to the hospital. Later on he was arrested and detained without trial. Sobho gave a slip to the police and went underground and guided the movement from there. On 8 September 1942, Sobho, Wadhwani and Parcho Vidyarthi and some other students decided to hoist the national flag at the top of Metharam hostel. The authorities came to know about it. Fearing the Indian soldiers might refuse to shoot the students, the Chief Commissioner deployed a contingent of British army personnel. At that time the entire province, except Karachi was under martial law on account of the anti-British activities of the Hurs, a sect of the Muslims of Sind who owed allegiance

³ Baldev T. Gajra, *Sind’s Role in the Freedom Movement* (Bombay: Bhartvasi, 1986).

to Pir Pagaro. The Pir had a following of ten lakhs in Sind alone. In 1942 Lahore Mail was derailed by Hurs in Sind near Uderolal Station. Fearing the alliance of the two, the government took stringent measures to suppress the revolutionary spirit that had engulfed the entire Sind. 'Pir Pagaro was arrested and hanged along with his 4,000 Hurs in the Central Prison Hyderabad in 1943' reminisces Jethanand Raghmal Betab, a Congress leader of Sind who was also in the same jail on account of his role in the Quit India movement. Thousands of students were arrested and put behind the bars. Young Hemu Kalani was hanged for tampering with Railway tracks.⁴

The revolutionary activities of the underground students constantly kept the authorities on their heels. However, they were unable to foil their plans. Sobho, Parcho and Narayan Wadhwani, Ramchandani and Jethamal Gehani conducted the movement in different ways. Processions were organized, revolutionary material was prepared, posted and distributed. A novel way was invented by Sobho. Under his instructions, explosive material was dropped in the post offices [which sometimes went aflame] to create panic among the authorities. One day both Wadhwani and Parcho were caught when they were going to cut wires near the Lovers Bridge. As the house of the Governor and the Karachi Club was nearby, the authorities tried all means to illicit any information regarding the movement but failed. Many young students were tried and jailed in connection with 'Pinjra-Pole Bomb case, Marriot Road Dacoity case and the Landi Shooting case. Sobho too was arrested in the first week of January 1943 and sent to Sukkur jail where he remained for one and half year.⁵ Ali Mohammed Markani, a trade Union leader was in the same barrack in which Sobho was locked. There were seven whole-timer communists in the jail along with Sobho.

In jail many political prisoners came under the influence of communism. Sobho used to impart communist ideology and held discussions with them. After release they became active in the trade union movement, peasant movement [Hari Haqdar Movement]* and

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.8, 50.

⁵ Wadhwani, OHT, *op.cit.* Also see Jethanand Raghmal Betab, OHT Acc-652. Betab states that in the rail derailment Munnawar, son of Sir Ghulam Hussain also died. After that martial law was imposed in Sind.

* The CPI was also actively engaged in organizing peasants and leading their movements all over Sindh. Most of the peasant leaders were Muslims. Hari Haqdar was a branch of the Kisansabha of the CPI. Its leader was Hyder Bux Jatoti, a young deputy collector, who under the influence of communist ideology resigned his job and dedicated himself to the Hari movement. He purchased a three story building and gave two

students movement. Uttamchandani and Wadhwani, close associates of Sobho, became communists and member of the CPI. They took over the responsibility of the student front. Uttamchandani became the President and Wadhwani the General Secretary of the AISF at Hyderabad.

Along with AISF, Sobho was also active in the trade union movement in Sind. The CPI was quite powerful and popular among the workers and controlled most of the unions. It encouraged the working classes to raise their voice against exploitation and also supported their struggles. In Karachi, a strike occurred in Janki Das and Company, a tailoring company that had a chain of its branches in Delhi, Shimla, Lahore Karachi, Quetta etc. At Karachi, Janki Das had a very big tailoring-department with 70 workers. A.K Hangal, now a veteran Indian cinema artist, was with Janki Das & Company as a master-cutter and was getting Rs. 500 per month.⁶ Politically he was inclined towards the communist ideology. It was he who organized a strike in the tailoring department and contacted communist leaders. Bukhari, Sobho and Muftaba Qazi supported him. Strike was successful but Hangal was sacked. Thereafter he became a whole time worker of the Party. In 1945 Sobho, Wadhwani and Uttamchandani started two labour unions, Bhangi Worker's Union and Glass Factory Union, the former was very powerful particularly in Hyderabad. At Karachi a strike of sweepers was organized by them.⁷

Royal Indian Navy revolt

The naval mutiny started in Bombay on 18 February 1946, had its impact on Karachi ratings also. The ratings in Karachi decided to revolt. But before they actually revolted they went to the CPI office for guidance, support and leadership. As their ship was some distance away from the shore, the revolting ratings had to swim to reach the shore. When they reached the office, they were totally drenched. At that time leader of the

floors to the CPI for its headquarter and himself lived with his family on the third floor. He also wrote a revolutionary poem in Sindhi, running into many pages which was proscribed by the government. He criticized the religious leaders saying that they, in the name of Allah, were misguiding the masses. The mullahs called him a *kafir* and declared a *fatwa* against him in mid-1930s that he should be killed by stoning (*sang-sar*). Other Muslim communist leaders were Vadhera and Karvani, the latter was a lecturer in D.J. Sind College. One of the biggest peasant movement was launched in Hyderabad district.

⁶ *Ibid.* Hangal was from Peshawar. Since childhood, he was of non-conformist nature and was more drawn towards music than studies.

⁷ *Ibid.*

CPI Jamaluddin Bukhari, popularly known as J. Bukhari was away to Bombay to attend the Central Committee meeting. Sobho was next to him.⁸ He told the ratings: 'I will help you, but guidance is a different story altogether since Bukhari is not here and there is no call by the Central Party. Hence I do not know what part I should play.' Sobho assured them of moral support. But on the very next day, it was announced over the All India Radio that P.C. Joshi, General Secretary of the CPI, had announced the support of the party for the revolt. That strengthened Sobho's hands and he played a significant part in the guidance of the revolt. As no other party was willing to support the revolt, Sobho along with other comrades approached the students among whom he was immensely popular in Karachi. The students belonging to Student's Congress and the Muslim Student's Federation came out openly ignoring the party line of their respective parties to support the striking ratings. They took out processions led by Sobho carrying Communist Party, Congress and Muslim League flags on the roads of Karachi. The revolt lasted for three days. There was a lot of turmoil in the city. According to Wadhwani, almost all the unions in Karachi at that time were controlled by the communists. The workers and students, on the call of the party, joined the protest- marches and meetings in large number. In that connection CPI arranged a meeting in the evening at Idgah maidan. Thousands of people came for the meeting. Majority of them were from working class. The leaders of the revolt came there too. They addressed the public along with Sobho, Hangal, who was then the secretary of the Karachi unit of the CPI and Qazi Maztaba, a trade union leader.⁹ Here the call was given for general strike on the following day. It was also announced that the demonstration would culminate in a mass rally at Idgah Maidan. Despite warning the Communist Party did not call off the meeting planned for next day. On 23 February, there was a complete *hartal* in Karachi. According to official reports, there were a number of attacks on government buildings, including two police outposts, Grindlay's Bank, post offices and revenue department building. Some vehicles belonging to police and army were also stoned. The report further stated that majority of the crowd consisted of students both Hindu and Muslim. They refused to listen anybody. When the Muslim leader Ghulam Hussain tried to pacify them, they stoned his car. By 11 in the morning over 30,000 people, Hindus and Muslims, gathered at Idgah.

⁸ Bukhari belonged to UP. He had been sent to Sindh to organize the communist movement. He married a Hindu Gujarati girl, a trade union worker, named Shanta.

⁹ Wadhwani, OHT, *op.cit.*

The District Magistrate hurriedly promulgated Section 144 and three communist leaders were arrested on the spot. Heavy police guards were rushed in but the people refused to move. Police opened fire in which eight people were killed and 26 wounded.¹⁰

Post partition

Sobho was a Marxist and remained a Marxist. After partition he stayed in Pakistan and worked for building the communist movement. Immediately, after the creation of Pakistan Sobho was arrested and kept in jail for 45 days. When Sobho was in jail, Habibur Rehman, Minister for Jails in Pakistan Government met Sobho in jail and told him to sign a paper by which he would be sent to India. He said 'All Hindus have gone, you are a Hindu, why don't you go to India? I will release you just now, issue the orders and send you by plane.' Sobho replied to him in a very sarcastic way: 'You are an Indian, you have migrated from India. I am a Pakistani. I am born here. This is my native land. It is better you go back to India and I will stay here.' Hearing this Habibur Rehman was enraged and ordered to put him in 1000 watt electric bulbs lighted room. It was a sort of torture which continued for a number of days which ultimately damaged Sobho's eye-sight.¹¹ The working class, however, honoured him by choosing him as the Vice-President of the All Pakistan Trade Union for 1948-49 and later as Secretary of All Pakistan Trade Union Sind.

At the Calcutta Congress of the Communist Party India, held in 1948, it was decided to form a separate Communist Party for Pakistan. Delegates from Pakistan were also present. Sajjad Zaheer, a communist from United Provinces [India] was chosen as the general secretary of Communist Party of Pakistan. A Central Committee was also elected. Sobho represented Sind in the Committee.¹² In 1952-53, a conference of Communist Party was held in Lahore. Sobho, Jamaluddin Bukahari and Pohumal attended the conference. However, before the movement could become a force, the government took a stern action by launching a conspiracy case, known as Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case against the communists. All the communist leaders were arrested, and in 1954 Communist Party and its affiliated organizations were banned. Sajjad Zaheer had to return to India.¹³

¹⁰ Subrata Banerjee, *The RIN Strike*, PPH ND 1954, p.131. Also see Nicholas Menserg, *Transfer of Power*, V-VI, p.1072.

¹¹ Wadhwani, OHT, *op.cit.*

¹² B.M. Kutty, *op.cit.*, p.142.

¹³ *Ibid.*

Sobho spent ten years of his life in jail and many years in house-arrest and remaining underground. Sufferings did not dampen his spirit and he kept on criticizing the system and exposing the authorities for ignoring the deprived sections of the society.¹⁴ Through 'Naeen Sind' a Sindhi newspaper started by G.M. Syed in 1958, Sobho as its editor, highlighted the grievances of the Sindhi people and spread progressive ideas.

In 1959 general elections were to be held for the Pakistan Parliament. In Sind communists like Sobho, G.M. Syed, Jatoi and others were held in high esteem by the masses. Till then Mian Iftikharuddin of Lahore was the only but most vocal communist member of the parliament. He had two influential papers at his command, *The Pakistan Times* in English and *The Imroz* in Urdu edited by Faiz Ahmed Faiz. The papers carried on pro-communist and anti-capitalist propaganda and gave laudatory account of the progress being achieved by communist regimes in Russia and China. It was expected that the new Parliament would have at least 30 communist members. According to Sobho that was worrisome for America and the reason for the imposition of the army rule in Pakistan on 8 October 1958. Even at that time G.M Syed advised Sobho to go to India, a safer place for him but for Sobho, the love of his motherland was greater than his own life. He refused. Sobho was put under house arrest in his village from 1959 to 1964. In 1971 he was jailed again for opposing military sponsored genocide in Bangladesh. He was forbidden to travel abroad until late 1980.¹⁵ To reach the masses he wrote a number of stories that advanced his socialist ideas, including *Pardesi Pretam*, *Rahima* and the well-known *Inqilaab ki Maut* [The Death of the Revolution].

Bhutto was enamored of him. B.M. Kutty, a renowned name in leftist politics, himself, has written in his autobiography, which in fact, is saga of his struggles for the creation of a truly democratic and prosperous Pakistan, about Sobho's unrelenting resolve. Sobho's days of harassment in Pakistan, however, were unending. He was like a thorn in the eyes of the authorities, feudals and reactionaries. He was sent messages that if he did not stop spreading his ideas of socialism in villages, he would be kidnapped. He was asked to tell his brother to sell the little land he had and leave. Ignoring the threats, Sobho and his

¹⁴ He regarded Jinnah secular but was critical of his move of imposition of Urdu on East Bengal where majority of the people spoke Bengali language.

¹⁵ Sobho's interview, published in *The Express Tribune*, 4 May 2011.

brother managed to build three schools in the area, which exist even today.¹⁶

Along with political torture at the hands of the authorities, Sobho and his family faced financial hardships so much so that once he even sold his books to the Shah Nawaz Bhutto Library when during one of the darkest hour in his life he needed money to treat his severely ill son. Unfortunately, his son died. Despite that he did not deviate from the path he had chosen. Kutty recalls that during the 70s, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto urged Sobho Gianchandani to join the Pakistan People's Party, but despite repeated offers, Sobho refused. When Bhutto came to power, he gave him so many options but Sobho preferred to be a part-time professor at Law College at Larkana. Simultaneously, he also started practicing at High Court and fought cases of poor landless labourers.

In 1988, Sobho contested and won on a reserved seat for the National Assembly. Both Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif asked him to join their party but he refused saying he would sit in opposition and work for the poorest sections of the society. Unfortunately he could not enter the Assembly. ISI according to him blocked his way by using unfair means in the re-counting of votes.

Swimming against the current, Sobho kept on his efforts to build a new Pakistan, to provide justice to the deprived sections. He attacked religious obscurantism and opposed discrimination against women in the name of religion. He openly declared that so called *mujahideen* in Afghanistan were reactionaries and were not fighting for Islam. He boldly stated that religious extremists in Pakistan had turned the country into a hell. In the name of Islam, they were killing innocent children and closing the doors for women. He warned the people of Pakistan that if such elements were not taken with iron hands they would ruin the country. Though, he did not recognize Musharraf's legitimacy as head of state yet he appreciated his courage and dare to suppress the extremists. Sobho endorsed his actions to wipe out handful reactionaries who were spreading like a plague making threat for the stability and integrity of Pakistan. He asked the people not to submit but to fight and wipe out such forces.¹⁷

In 2004, during Musharraf's regime, it was decided to bestow an Award of Excellence [Kamal-e-Fun] on Sobho, in recognition of his literary contribution to Sindhi literature. It was expected that Sobho would go to Islamabad to receive the award at the hands of Musharraf. Sobho refused to go to Islamabad saying: 'It is against my principles to

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

receive the award from a dictator'. Then it was decided to arrange a special ceremony in Karachi wherein the Governor of Sind would give him the award. Sobho did not go and sent his daughter and son-in-law to receive the award on his behalf. A man of integrity and commitment, Sobho has contributed each and every ounce of his energy in the service of the country which according to him is above everything.

In the present scenario, of the world and Pakistan, the task of creating a better world has become very difficult. However, despite the world-wide rise and consolidation of the rightist forces and the weakening of the left, Sobho's hope of success of socialism in future has not diminished. Even after decades of his work, 'Sobho Thindo' [The day shall Dawn] he is still striving for its realization. We salute his conviction and courage.