

# THE HINDU VILLAGE SHOPKEEPER AND INTEREST

**Autobiography of M.H. Panhwar**  
**(First ten years of my life seventy chapters, 250 pages.)**

My grand father had thirteen children, my father being the eleventh and the first of his sons, twelfth was a baby girl and thirteenth was my uncle. In pre-Sukkur Barrage era, the canals were taking off direct from the river Indus and there was enormous amount of silt clearance for some three months a year. Two out of five crops would normally fail and every farmer was in debit. His daughters could not help him with tasks needing heavy muscles and handled by men, i.e., silt clearance, ploughing, harrowing, clod crushing, threshing and winnowing and within his own limitations he, toiled hard to support the family by cultivating two hand half acres of land under rice and raising buffaloes for milk. In the latter case his daughters could help in cutting grass and fodder and hauling it, milking animals and churning milk it for butter. Under the circumstances he has no saving and had to borrow from a Hindu shopkeeper (Bania) and pay-back at harvest, once a year in December. Being educated in a Mulla Maktab at Taga and yet instead of turning into a Mulla, he earned his living by his own physical labour and therefore he was well respected in the village. Though a Mulla was a necessity for some religious rituals, yet most of them belonging to this class, lacked moral character, were greedy and lived virtually on alms and trickeries and therefore professional Mullas were never respected in rural society of nineteenth and twentieth centuries Sindh and possibly even much earlier, leading to respect for Sufis as early Sindhi literature of the past five centuries shows. Essentially they were a tool of laughter, while genuine religious persons were always respected.

He lived on borrowed money from local Hindu shopkeeper, who sold him goods at rate of twelve and half percent more than those prevailing at Phulji Railway Station only five kilometers away. Of this extra amount six and quarter percent was profit and equal amount as transport, labour for handling etc. He also charged six and half percent interest on the loans. In November 1933 my grand father along with my father was settling account with this shopkeeper in presence of Haji Allah Warayo, the Wadero of our village and my maternal uncle Muhammad Saleh the two to be an umpires, though the former was an ignorant person, specially in arithmetic. The account books were properly kept i.e., they had journals and ledgers and total honesty existed in these accounts. While he was reading item by item from the ledger, my father was writing figures for totalling them, I sat on floor between the two cots laid parallel, they

were sitting on and kept listening to them. At the end, amount of loan in the year came to Rs.380, which figure my father too accepted. Here the Bania asked for interest, which even Wadero could not calculate, and the Hindu gave an arbitrary figure of Rs.50 to be negotiated usually to half, as was being done customarily. All Muslim borrowers usually considered it immoral to pay interest. I got up and whispered to my father that at six and quarter percent, it should be Rs.23.12 annas as I have calculated by scratching on dusty floor with a wooden piece from a branchlet. The Hindu over-heard, looked at me, smiled and told my grand father, I charge you the interest, your innocent grand son says. He is so intelligent and interested in Hisab-Kitab. I will teach him book-keeping from now onwards. He called his assistants to give me some sweets to eat and take them home. I was shy and whispered that this figure too was not correct as interest on some items, was not for all twelve months but for less time and interest on each item had to be worked out separately. Next day my father sent me to his shop, where his son Rupomal taught me Hatki (shop-keeper's script). When I went to high school the same Hindu advanced my father loan for my education and without this I would not have been able to pass even matriculation examination or High School graduation. My education did not frighten him at all.

His father Lilo Mal was partner of my maternal grand father for years. So much was the faith and trust of my maternal grand father in him, that finding that his young bride did not know cooking, asked Lilo Mal to help and he did help her to become the best cook among all neighbouring villages. On my maternal grand father's death in 1919, he left Rs.32,000 cash as loan to the shop. His eldest son Muhammad Nawaz discontinued the partnership after spending all the money. The Hindu shop-keeper had the same two hundred clients and he loaned money to each of them from January to December and recovered it after harvest of rice in December. He would advance money for marriages and other occasions. On Idd he would provide clothes. On Idd Shab-e-barat, he provided items of fireworks for children. In general he was one of the community, but each member performing duties in his or her own manner. His children had not gone to High School. His house about two kilometers away in village called Allahabad was visited by some women of our village and they reported that though his house had brick masonry with girders and T-rons, but yet the standards of living were not very high.

He carried out his total business of Rs.100,000 a year on loaned money but defaulters also accounted for some losses. After Independence he left Sindh for Bombay, where he died and my maternal uncle remarked; "He was better than many of our Musalmans and his acts of piety, generosity and humanitarianism in all his life would bring God's mercy and send him to Paradise."

His shop was replaced by a local Sindhi Muslim, as were shops of all the Hindus of Sindh. There was none to replace his business ethics and commitment to the community they served, irrespective of religion they practised. Almost the whole institution of rural economy collapsed on departure of the Hindus from Sindh. The new comers did not realise the bond that existed between Sindhi Muslims and Hindus, and carried out anti-Hindu propaganda, which Sindhi Muslims did not cherish. Sindhi Muslims then opined, "We have exchanged our jackals for these wolves."

For many years people borrowed money at very high rates after Hindus left Sindh. Soon Pathan Muslims money lenders appeared on the scene and they loaned money at ten percent interest a month. Some fifteen years later came up commercial banks, which paid loans by mortgaging agriculture land as per Government Policy. Our survey in 1985 showed that ninety percent of the total land in Sindh was mortgaged with banks. Every big and small land owner was a borrower. The recoveries were not adequate and to cover the arrears. The banks with active assistance of the Government advanced new loans at higher borrowing limits per acre, i.e., instead of a limit of rupees one thousand and five hundred as production loan per acre, it was increased to rupees three thousands per acre. The land remained mortgaged but loan plus interest was shown to be paid up against new loans advanced on paper only. Bank employees also fleeced the loanee. This practice has been repeated four times in the past fifteen years.

It is true that due to world wide economic depression from 1917-1940, some thirty percent of agriculture land in Sindh was mortgaged with Hindu Bania, but Sindh Assembly had declared that since Banias had made adequate money from the interest, the capital was not payable and land should be de-mortgaged without any compensation. Even the Hindu members of the Assembly supported it on the plea that according to Manu Sutra, interest cannot exceed the capital and therefore extra interest paid was adjustable towards the capital amount loaned. They also stated that if possession of land was handed over by loanee, the returns from the land off-set the capital plus interest.

In my opinion Hindu merchant of Sindh was not a Thug, as depicted by new comers to Sindh or urban elite. He was in general fair and humanitarian. He borrowed money on which he paid interest and supported the local populace. The interest on the loan was his right and his bad unrecoverable debits had to be debitted to the whole community in the form of interest which thus was justifiable even on moral grounds.