

# The Punjabi Silk following in the Tradition of Nehru and Gandhi

## ■ Rani Singh

**J**o Sidhu QC was born in Southall and attended local state schools. He graduated from the University of Oxford in Philosophy, Politics and Economics and obtained a Masters in the Politics of the World Economy at the London School of Economics. Before becoming a barrister he was a BBC senior researcher, a local authority policy advisor, a caseworker for Southall Monitoring Group and a Councillor with the London Borough of Ealing. He has served as the Chair of his primary school governing body for 18 years. Called to the Bar in 1993, he took silk in 2012. He is a leading specialist in criminal law with expertise in terrorism cases, homicides, and conspiracies involving frauds, robberies and drugs trafficking. He is the elected President of the Society of Asian Lawyers, Vice Chair of the Equality & Diversity Committee of the Bar Council, and a member of the Criminal Bar Association. He practises law from chambers at 25 Bedford Row, London.

He arrived promptly for our interview in a week when he was defending in a weighty murder trial.

I asked him about his Presidency of the Society of Asian Lawyers.

"The Society of Asian Lawyers is the UK's largest minority lawyers' organisation, with 3,000 members including solicitors, barristers and Judges. Our key challenge today is to save hundreds of Asian solicitor firms from decimation following unprecedented cuts in the legal aid budget. Asian barristers who often depend on them for work will also find it harder to practise."

It's rare to get barristers to open up much about serious court work, but Jo spoke freely.

"The clients I defend on a murder trial could be from any background, but are often Asian or black teenagers caught up in gang violence. They may be as young as 16 and are invariably poorly educated. But I have found that my own upbringing in a community like Southall enables them to relate to me more easily. These days murder trials are incredibly complex and involve a great deal of forensic evidence. Apart from DNA and fingerprints, CCTV and telecommunications evidence form a big part of police investigations. A conviction

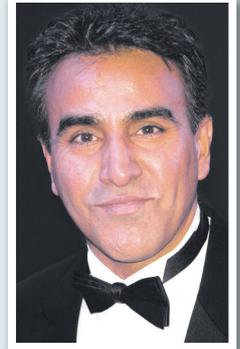
can mean over 25 years in prison, so the pressure in court is intense. Barristers frequently work seven days a week, very long hours, and sometimes through the night. You cannot arrive at court without being fully prepared. So what tends to get sacrificed is sleep, recreation and family time."

Despite his high intensity working life, Jo has enjoyed his last 21 years as a barrister. "Particularly since I became a QC, I deal with the most serious criminal trials on a daily basis. The work can be hugely demanding but I also derive enormous professional satisfaction from it. I feel it is the best vocation I could have chosen. Our English lawyers and legal system are rightly regarded as the finest in the world. No doubt, it's a tough and seriously competitive environment to work in but I feel that I am continuing a great Asian tradition. The Sub-Continent's founding fathers; Nehru, Gandhi and Jinnah, all trained here at the Bar.

As a barrister, I am exposed to the best and the worst of our community. Lawyers from my background have been instrumental in protecting our people from injustice and discrimination. And it fills me with pride to see Asian police officers and others serving the public."

But Jo has also observed a worrying trend in criminal behaviour, particularly among some Asian youngsters.

"There is a troubling increase in the number of Asian defendants appearing in our courts. What was once the most law abiding community in the UK is now supplying a growing number of our prison inmates. Their offences range from petty crime to murder and terrorism. My worry is that poorer Asian families in ghettoised areas are finding it harder to supervise their children or invest time in encouraging them with their education. Some youth are losing any sense of responsibility to their families and communities, preferring loyalty to their peers rather than their parents. They don't feel restrained to behave well in the same way as the older generation. Embarrassment and shame are now rare emotions. So I feel we need to reinforce the value of a sense of obligation to our community and not just to ourselves as individuals. This is a ticking time bomb and maybe it's time our community had a serious conversation with itself."



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