

Salam's face blackened

Pervez Hoodbhoy

Pull Quote: The world rightly ignores complaints of Islamophobia from a country that legally mistreats its religious minorities.

When our prime minister lectures Europe about Islamophobia, the world snickers. Forced conversions? Lynching by enraged mobs? Having to curse another religion's founder prior to applying for a Pakistani passport? Discrimination is built into our laws: Pakistan's Constitution explicitly excludes non-Muslims from full citizenship. For multiple reasons every human rights listing puts Pakistan close to the bottom.

Very recently a group of abuse-yelling young men in Gujranwala chose to video-record themselves while spraying black paint onto a poster of Professor Abdus Salam. An Ahmadi and Pakistan's sole science Nobel Prize winner who died 25 years ago, Salam is the only Pakistani who has seriously impacted the world of science. That the posted video went viral with tens of thousands of views – and that it received high approval – speaks of raw medieval hatreds boiling over from time to time with or without an excuse.

The video is that of ordinary people – at least those in Punjab – and was not officially ordered. But what of governments? Do national leaders acknowledge that scientific merit must be disentangled from matters of faith? And how has the military establishment seen things? These questions are important not just because of some particular individual but because government, industry and academia function properly only if there are layered meritocracies built upon recognition of individual ability and competence. Salam's case is a litmus test.

General Ayub Khan could not have cared less about Salam being an Ahmadi and appointed him as scientific adviser; Zulfikar Ali Bhutto thought similarly even as he surrendered his principles for political gain in 1974; Zia-ul-Haq was ideologically charged and very wary of Ahmadis but was also politically savvy and so awarded Salam the Nishan-e-Imtiaz in 1980.

Then things started changing. Benazir Bhutto stayed totally clear of Salam and so did Mian Nawaz Sharif. During his first tenure as prime minister, while speaking at Government College Lahore in 1992, Nawaz Sharif read out a long list of distinguished alumni and faculty but conspicuously omitted Salam's name.

Quite miraculously, Nawaz Sharif eventually recognized Salam's importance as a scientist. While touring CERN (European Nuclear Research Centre) in 2016 to cement the Pak-CERN collaboration, one hears he was much impressed to learn that major parts of CERN's research – including the successful search for the Higgs boson – revolved around certain discoveries of Abdus Salam and Steven Weinberg. He was also taken for a drive on Rue de Salam, a road in Geneva named after Salam.

It was but natural that someone should then have asked Pakistan's prime minister a basic question: why did Salam's home country have no significant institution named after him? The natural candidate was the National Center for Physics (NCP) located on the campus of Quaid-e-Azam University, a public university. NCP was conceived in the 1980's jointly by Salam and his former PhD student Riazuddin (1930-2013), a respected theoretical physicist who also became NCP's founding director. Though hopelessly underfunded, it started off in 1999 on borrowed premises on the QAU campus.

NCP's original goal was to become a mini ICTP (International Centre for Theoretical Physics). Founded by Salam in the Italian city of Trieste, the ICTP (now renamed Abdus Salam-ICTP), has hosted thousands of researchers from around the world to work in a cordial and intellectually vibrant atmosphere on cutting-edge scientific problems. It is an established model for international cooperation and the openness of scientific inquiry.

Days after Salam's 20th death anniversary, the-then PM Nawaz Sharif moved to change NCP's name. He failed. To remind readers of how that happened, I will repeat some details from my Dawn article of 2018.

On 29-12-2016 the President of Pakistan, on the summary advice of the Prime Minister of Pakistan, put his signature upon a document titled, "Proposal to Rename NCP at QAU as Professor Abdus Salam Centre for Physics". Earlier,

the summary had been vetted on 26-12-2016 by the minister of state for education and professional training. It was then sent to QAU for necessary action as per proper procedure.

The official order for renaming NCP – duly signed by the Pakistani state’s highest executives, both the president and the prime minister – was received at QAU and conveyed onward to NCP. It was ignored. For a modern state to have subordinate officials deliberately and openly defying lawful authority is rare but this is precisely what happened. Direct orders from the sitting prime minister and president went into the wastebasket and NCP’s name remained unchanged. Religious prejudice was just too deep.

I think what the political leadership did not fully understand was how much the character of NCP had changed. Now funded by the Strategic Plans Division of the Pakistan Army, NCP is a parking lot for retired officers from high security institutions. Living the good life in plush residences at the foot of the Margalla Hills, they are answerable only to themselves and not to any government. In a fortress bristling with barbed wire and armed guards, no high-thinking physicist pondering on the nature of the universe is likely to be found there.

Once again Salam had been cheated of the respect he deserves for his scientific work. He may be the starkest example but is not alone. Pakistan does not own any son of the soil who happens to be a non-Muslim. Har Gobind Khorana (1922-2011) was born in Multan, earned his MSc degree from Government College Lahore in 1946 and went on to earn the Nobel Prize in Physiology in 1968 for his work in protein synthesis via nucleotides. In 1983 another Lahori, Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar (1910-1995), became a Nobel Laureate in Physics after his definitive work on the death of stars. NASA’s satellite, named Chandra, is presently searching the skies for Black Holes and other astronomical objects.

Prejudice poisons the well of knowledge, making its water too toxic for science and inquiry to grow. As with Salam, nothing in Lahore acknowledges the existence of either Khorana or Chandrasekhar. Nevertheless they must still be considered fortunate. At least they have been spared the abuse and vilification that the long-dead Salam must continue to endure.

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