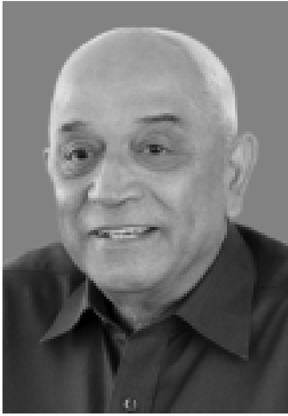

THE 2004 RAMON MAGSAYSAY AWARD FOR PEACE AND INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING

BIOGRAPHY OF LAXMINARAYAN RAMDAS

Sometimes, a seminal event occurs that colors the rest of one's existence. For India's retired navy chief, Laxminarayan Ramdas, that moment arrived in 1947, in the months before his country was carved out of British India along with Muslim Pakistan. Then fourteen, he was queuing to have his family's wheat milled when a Hindu man with a big sword pulled a Muslim man from the line. "He hacked him to death in front of me," Ramdas recalls. In those days in India, he says, "It was hell. People just got absolutely mad and wild."

He witnessed other atrocities during the period. He would hear moans and cries in the lanes of Delhi and come upon someone who had been stabbed. Once, out of curiosity, he boarded a train bound for Pakistan. "We saw nothing but corpses [of Muslims]," Ramdas recalls. "This was the way in which people, human beings, acted on brothers and sisters, just because they belonged to a different religion."

But there were instances of courage. Ramdas's father, C. K. Laxminarayan, sheltered a Muslim colleague and his four children for nearly two months during the communal rampages. "Many outside were just thirsting to get hold of them," says Ramdas. "But my father was a very firm and very brave man. He said, 'You can take them, but you will have to kill me first.' They were not prepared to do that."

The nightmare eventually ended, and Ramdas went on to become a decorated navy officer. But he never forgot the lessons of Partition, even during a decades-long tour of duty that included two wars with Pakistan. When he retired in 1993, Ramdas had become known as a military man who strove for peace in the troubled region. In 1994, he joined the Pakistan-India People's Forum for Peace and Democracy (PIPFPD, or the People's Forum), an independent nongovernmental organization he later headed that worked tirelessly to build trust between the two often-warring countries. The Forum's people-to-people diplomacy has been a key contributor to a slow warming of India-Pakistan relations, exemplified by the recent resumption of bus services across the disputed border in Kashmir.

This matters especially because Kashmir—split into Pakistan and Indian-occupied sectors since Partition—is a flashpoint in the conflict between the two states, a conflict that has become more dangerous in recent decades as both India and Pakistan have developed nuclear weapons. In 2000, Ramdas and his wife Lalita joined India's national movement for nuclear disarmament. "Meeting force with force is not the answer," says the retired admiral.

Laxminarayan Ramdas was born on September 5, 1933, to a clan of Brahmans, the priestly caste at the top of India's traditional caste system. His great grandfather was the priest of the village temple in Chokanathapuram in what is now Kerala. His grandfather broke the tradition of the eldest son taking over as priest, opting to become a postmaster instead. Ramdas's own father, Laxminarayan, the eldest of three brothers, studied medicine, but discovered in his third year that he could not stand dissecting cadavers, and so decided to become an English-language journalist. "He went off to Afghanistan, Iran, and various places as a young man and he had a very exciting life," says his son.

Laxminarayan married Naryani, a fellow Brahman, and moved from Chennai to Mumbai, where Ramdas was born, the youngest of four children. In 1939, when Ramdas was six, the

family settled in Delhi. Laxminarayan eventually left journalism—he was also a sportswriter and an excellent field hockey player—to become a civil servant, rising through the ranks to retire as deputy chief controller of imports and exports. Even though Laxminarayan worked for the British government, Ramdas recalls, “he supported the cause of nationalism, freedom from the British.” He would occasionally discuss his political beliefs with his children, “although I was a little young and we didn’t have too many conversations with fathers in those days.”

It was a simple household with three children—the eldest child had died as a one-year-old. The family lived in a small, government-owned apartment in Delhi’s Bengali Market district, which had two bedrooms, one bathroom, a living room, sitting room, and kitchen. “We did everything on our own,” says Ramdas, who was tasked with taking the wheat for milling in order to make the local bread *chapati*. “I would go and buy vegetables and rice, fetch the laundry, and many other things.” Later, after Laxminarayan joined the civil service, the family spent four months of each year in the hill town of Simla, which served as India’s summer capital.

While Laxminarayan was the disciplinarian, Naryani exerted a gentler influence. “She was a delightful person,” says her son. “She studied . . . up to Class 4 or Class 5, but when she was fifty or sixty, she started learning English on her own. She was a magnificent lady with a brilliant, clear head of what is right and wrong. And she was a very courageous woman, way ahead of her time, especially in breaking the rule of caste and community.” Lalita, Ramdas’s wife, is not a Brahman, but Naryani did not object to the marriage. “She was the biggest big-hearted person to welcome her,” says Ramdas of his mother.

Later, when Lalita’s brother decided to marry a Muslim woman, it was Naryani who extended moral support. Lalita’s mother had been worried about what Naryani, as a traditional Brahman lady, would say. “In fact, she gave encouragement and courage to my mother-in-law,” says Ramdas. ‘“Isn’t she a nice girl?’ Naryani asked. ‘So what are you worried about? Just bring her in and welcome her.’” It was a great relief for Lalita’s mother that even a Brahman mother approved. “She was a woman who basically believed in the good in humanity and in treating people as equals . . . which in those days was something unheard of,” says Ramdas.

Still, Naryani respected the traditions of her caste. “There were innuendos,” concedes Ramdas. “You never would address domestic helpers by their names. She or he invariably came from a lower caste; there were some special expressions for addressing that sort of person.” When a person of a lower caste, say a barber, came in physical contact with a Brahman, the Brahman became polluted and needed to bathe in order to purify himself. A Namboodri Brahman, the highest in the caste hierarchy, walked behind someone ringing a bell whenever he went to the temple. Just the shadow of a non-caste person falling on him required that he return home and purify himself.

Ramdas underwent the Brahman thread ceremony, a ritual for bachelors involving the wearing of a sacred thread. The wearer is supposed to perform special morning and evening *pujas* (prayers). When he was accepted to the armed forces at fifteen, however, Ramdas took off his thread, telling his mother that, in the military, “I’m no longer a Brahman . . . I’m more like a Khatriya, a soldier, a warrior.” He would eventually repudiate not Brahmanism itself but the idea that one person is inherently superior or inferior to another person because of the circumstances of birth. “That myth has to be debunked,” Ramdas says. Your opportunities in life should “have nothing to do with the place or date [of your birth] or the family to which you are born.”

As a child in Mumbai, Ramdas loved the sea. “I used to love wandering off to the beaches from Matunga, just a kilometer and a half from the waterfront,” he recalls. “I just enjoyed being at sea or looking at the sea.” Going out on the water meant riding a small

motorboat with friends to visit nearby islands. "We were still very young," says Ramdas. "When I look back, it was crazy that I was allowed to do all that I did."

Later, living in Delhi, the growing boy did not forget the ocean. When India won independence from the British on August 15, 1947, fourteen-year-old Ramdas ran from Bengali market to the India Gate to witness the flag ceremony. There he saw a sight that crystallized his career goals: Lord Mountbatten, in full admiral's dress, bringing down the Union Jack and raising the Indian flag in its place. "I saw this very handsome man in a stunningly good-looking uniform," recalls Ramdas. When the new nation decided in 1948 to open a new all-service military academy in Dehradun, with naval cadets to be sent for further training in England, Ramdas was among the first to apply.

For a time, the horrific events surrounding India's independence appear to have traumatized him. "My mother mentioned a couple of times that I would wake up in my sleep, screaming and saying, 'Stop it!' Obviously, these things were working in my subconscious." But for Ramdas, images of horror were balanced by images of courage—of his father risking all to protect a Muslim colleague, for example, and of Jawaharlal Nehru himself, India's first prime minister, abandoning the safety of his car to chase away looters and arsonists. "These times are not forgotten easily," he says today.

A military career was not unheard of in Ramdas's family. At the time of Partition, his older brother, L. K. Murti, was in his final year at the army academy. Commissioned a second lieutenant, he served in the armed forces for several decades and retired as a major general. In aspiring to enter India's new military academy, Ramdas faced tough competition. The new school at Dehradun brought together candidate officers for all the services, whereas previously, under the British, each service had operated its own academy. There were only about 180 slots, and more than forty thousand young men from all over India applied. Of those 180 vacancies, twenty-five were meant for the navy.

Ramdas counts himself incredibly lucky to have been chosen. "Otherwise I would have joined the university," he says. He had, in fact, enrolled in Ramjas College, part of the University of Delhi, and begun studying chemistry and botany. "I stayed there for a few months at the end of the year [1948]," he says. "In January 1949, I got the call and joined the navy." He was fifteen.

Ramdas studied for two years in Dehradun, where he forged ties with fellow cadets. Two of his friends later became chiefs of the army and the air force, with Ramdas himself becoming admiral of the navy. "All three of us were buddies at the age of fifteen. . . . We had great friendships from childhood, so when we were leading sister services we were not laying into each other's throats. We liked to work as a team." Jack Gibson, a Briton who spent most of his life in India and who had served in the Royal Indian Naval Reserve during World War II, was principal at Dehradun. "We three made it a point to go with our wives to meet old Jack when he retired," says Ramdas. "By that time, we had all become chiefs."

The first batch of navy cadets was sent to Britain in 1951. It was an exciting time for the seventeen-year-old Ramdas, who sailed for twenty-one days from Mumbai to London. "We stayed in a small hotel called the Bernard Baron Club in South Kensington for about ten days to go to the tailors and do our uniforms," he remembers. "Then we went to Dartmouth." There the Indian cadets trained with others mainly from Commonwealth countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. The training cruiser was the HMS *Devonshire,* commanded by Captain Richard Onslow (later an admiral and a knight), three of whose ships were sunk by the enemy during World War II.

"He was a man of great integrity," says Ramdas of Onslow. "His son, known as Spit, was a fellow cadet on board. One might have thought that because his dad was the captain, he would get special treatment. But Cadet "Spit" Onslow just managed to pass

out [graduate] bringing up the rear. Obviously the old man had let the process take its own course." Onslow taught his cadets another lesson. When the training ship docked in Bermuda, a local club invited its white officers and cadets to become honorary members. Onslow returned the invitation, saying that either the club invited everyone aboard or no one would come. "That did leave a very deep impression in my mind," says Ramdas. "Discrimination on color is not acceptable. I am driven by that to this day."

On the Mediterranean part of the training cruise, Ramdas was seriously injured. Docked off Sorrento in the Bay of Naples, the ship decided to participate in a local festival by setting off fireworks at midnight. Ramdas was one of seven or eight cadets assigned to fire the rockets. Unbeknown to them, however, an inexperienced gunner had stacked some three hundred fireworks directly behind them. After the first set of rockets whizzed off, the young men, dressed in jerseys and shorts, set off a second salvo. Three of the rockets failed to launch, however; great trails of fire spewed across the deck, setting alight the stored fireworks. "I was enveloped in a huge red flame," says Ramdas. He recalls that the deck was slippery from burning cordite, but somehow he and the others managed to slip away alive.

Ramdas was badly burned. He spent eight weeks in a navy hospital in Malta, where an experienced burn specialist was stationed. "We were well looked after by very pretty nurses," Ramdas quips. "That was the sunny side of being a casualty." The dark side was that, when he was discharged from the hospital, there were only four weeks left until examinations and graduation to the second term. The training commander would not allow him to take the final tests in seamanship, navigation, engineering, and mechanics because he had missed so much time. "I was very unhappy about that," says Ramdas. "So I put in a request. I said, 'OK, I'll have a bash of it. If I don't make it, I will drop a term.'"

Ramdas remembers with gratitude the nurses and doctors and officers who shepherded him through this crisis. "There were two officers on board who . . . gave me special instruction and helped me to catch up." Captain Onslow was also supportive. In the end, he passed the exams and came fourth or fifth in the order of merit. "I was shocked myself," he says.

Ramdas was commissioned as a lieutenant in 1955 and assigned to the Indian fleet's flagship, the INS *Delhi*. He later served in four other vessels, including the destroyer *Rajput*, where he was communications officer. In 1961, he was called to New Delhi to become flag lieutenant to Vice Admiral Ram Dass Katari, the first Indian to become an admiral and chief of the naval staff after the British. Katari was also the father of Lalita Katari, whom Ramdas later wed. "There was some kind of chemistry," he says of his first meeting with Lalita. "She was foolish enough to fall madly in love with me, and me with her, and it all happened very fast," he says. When the admiral discovered the growing attraction between his daughter and his flag lieutenant, however, he immediately had Ramdas ordered back to sea.

But love conquers all, and Ramdas and Lalita—Lolly to her fond husband—were married in 1961. Their eldest daughter, Kavita, was soon born, followed in quick succession by two other daughters, Sagari and Mallika. "We were a fast production machine," jests Ramdas. The joke in the family was that every time Ramdas spoke to Lalita over the telephone, she would become pregnant. "Poor Lolly, I felt bad for her," says Ramdas. "At an early stage, we already had three children. Luckily, we had very fine domestic help. That is how we all survived and retained our sanity."

Lalita, says Ramdas, had been brought up in the naval environment throughout her life—first as a navy daughter and second as a navy wife. But Lalita became no ordinary

mother and housewife. Instead, she became a social activist who focused on issues of dowry, rape, and other forms of violence against women in Indian society. Ramdas supported her. "Everyone has a right to his or her space . . . and conscience," he says.

Lalita's involvement in feminist and other causes elicited some controversy in the military community. "It was perhaps not the done thing in the navy. There were snide remarks we heard either directly or tangentially," says Ramdas. "I always told her that you must do whatever you think is right, because, while I may be subject to naval discipline, I don't believe you are. You have a right to your freedom of expression." Ramdas admits that, secretly, he dreaded a call from the police saying Lalita had been arrested; fortunately, this never happened!

In 1971, India sided with pro-independence forces in East Pakistan fighting to form what is now Bangladesh. The Indian Navy was ordered to blockade the waters around East Pakistan. "We had some close encounters," recalls Ramdas, who was then in command of the frigate *Beas*. "Once or twice I had to fire, not at a ship, but a warning shot. We apprehended large numbers. Any ship trying to violate the blockade, we would just say 'Please be our guest' and escort them to Kolkata [Calcutta]." The *Beas* also saw action against a submarine. "We believe we damaged her, but I have never been able to know what actually happened."

At one point during the short war, Ramdas thought he might have to face off with the Americans. "I got a message from my Fleet commander that a US squadron led by the USS *Enterprise* was entering the Bay of Bengal from the east, and that I might want to go south and investigate," he recounts. "If your commander says you might like to go, it means you go, so I went down south a good 200 to 300 miles." Sure enough, the *Beas* picked up a fair amount of communication traffic between US planes and the aircraft control on the carrier. He thought, rather foolishly in hindsight, that his frigate's presence might deter the Americans. They did pull back, but probably because the fighting in East Pakistan was winding down, he says. Russia also sent nuclear submarines to the Indian Ocean. But neither superpower wanted to internationalize the conflict.

Honored with the Vir Chakra Award for Gallantry "of a very high order" in 1972, Ramdas rose steadily in the ranks, becoming commodore in 1979, rear admiral in 1981, vice admiral in 1985, flag officer commander in chief of the Southern Naval Command in 1987 and of the Eastern Naval Command in 1989, and finally admiral, chief of the naval staff, in 1990.

Ramdas's elevation to the top post was controversial for personal reasons. Years earlier, his eldest daughter Kavita had met and fallen in love with Zuli, a Pakistani student, when they were both at university in the United States. Lalita broke the news to him during one of her visits to the Fleet. Ramdas recalls the scene: "She was unusually sweet that evening, asking me, 'Can I get you a drink?' I smelled a rat. So I asked, 'Come on, what is it?' And she said, 'You know, our Kay has fallen in love with a young man. I've met him, he's very nice.' I said, 'What's wrong with that? That's good news.' She said, 'You know, he's a Muslim.' And I said, 'Okay, you know and I know that we both don't have any problem with that.' She said, 'Yeah, well, you know, he's a Pakistani.' When she said that, my initial reaction was, I must say, 'Oh, of all the 180 countries in the world, she had to fall in love with a Pakistani.' But it was only for a moment. Then I said, 'All right, we'll have to handle this.'"

Kavita and Zuli waited for years before getting married. "They tried to be very considerate so that my career would not be affected," says Ramdas. "Unfortunately for them, I kept rising in the service." Finally, in 1990, the couple decided it was time to settle down—just as the powers-that-be were starting to consider who the next navy chief

would be. "I must obviously have been in the panel because I was number two in seniority," says Ramdas. Learning of the wedding plans and warmly giving his approval, he phoned Minister of State for Defense Raja Ramanna. "He was the 'father' of our first peaceful nuclear explosion, a great scientist and also a great pianist and musician," Ramdas says. "He said, 'So what? If she wants to marry, so be it. How does it concern you?' And so that was that."

But when it was announced that Ramdas was going to be the next chief of the navy, there was a huge backlash. "All kinds of rubbish was written," says Ramdas. "They tried to take it out on me, my family, my folks." The daughter of a top Indian military officer should not marry a Pakistani, some declared in the press; Ramdas will be a security risk. And so on. "I was unperturbed. In the worst-case scenario, I could just say thank you very much and go. I had nothing to lose." To its credit, the government of Prime Minister V. P. Singh took no notice of the brouhaha and went ahead with his appointment.

However, the Singh government fell in November and Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar came to office. The "vested interests," as Ramdas calls the people who opposed him, urged the new administration to cancel his appointment. But the country's president, R. Venkataraman, would have none of it. Just seven months later, Chandra Shekhar lost the premiership and P. V. Narasimha Rao became prime minister, a post he held for five years. Rao was an ally of the assassinated prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, whom Ramdas had come to know during his time as flag officer commanding in chief. Ramdas served as chief of the naval staff until his retirement in 1993 at the age of sixty.

The controversy over his appointment caused "considerable harm" to the service, he says. Well aware of this, Ramdas embarked on a tour of naval bases as soon as he became chief. "My primary concern was morale," he says. "It was very important to steady the ship." Avoiding reprisals against "anti-Ramdas" officers, he set a tone of fairness and quickly calmed the internal feuding. New programs devoted to the professional development of his men soon made him a respected and popular chief.

One of his key concerns was to reduce the potential for conflict in the Indian Ocean. "By then, we'd already had two rounds of war with Pakistan," says Ramdas. "I said, 'How can we change this?'" Seminars and workshops provided one answer. In 1992, he asked the Navy Foundation in Delhi to hold a seminar on the topic "Challenges and Opportunities in the Indian Ocean for the Next Millennium." The defense minister gave the keynote address that perfectly mirrored Ramdas's views: "that we need to look at things in a more balanced fashion—the neighboring countries of the Indian Ocean should come closer together."

Ramdas concedes that he may have moved too fast and too early in some areas. He suggested, for example, that India's ships and chiefs of staff exchange visits with their counterparts in Pakistan and China. The idea never got off the ground on his watch. "But now, a good ten to eleven years down the road, we have pretty good, open relations with China," he says. Ramdas entertains similar hopes with regard to Pakistan. "I'm sure it will all happen; it's just a matter of time."

How did a military officer trained for war become a peace advocate instead? Ramdas points to many factors in the evolution of his views. His wife and three daughters exerted some influence. "With four very fiery women, we would discuss defense budgets, bread and cakes, aid and food, and all that," he says. "Sometimes when you listen to some kind of music all the time, after a while you think you know all about it and you begin to like it—or not like it." His habit of being open to all kinds of people was also a factor. "That's one thing I never stopped doing in my career—meeting people of all descriptions. . . . That helps the process of understanding human nature."

As a young captain in the 1970s, Ramdas witnessed the reality of a divided nation when he was posted to Bonn in Germany as a naval attaché. The Berlin Wall divided the

country into the capitalist West and the communist East. He remembers the sign on the western side: “Careful, this is the boundary, but the other side is also the fatherland.” Says Ramdas: “I saw the pangs of Germany.” He was also struck by the parallels to India and Pakistan, such as the fact that if you went from West to East Germany, people still spoke German. “We in India and Pakistan speak the same language, many of us do,” says Ramdas. “We eat the same kinds of food. Just because somebody suddenly chose to draw a line, that does not divide us. In Germany one really saw it.”

This realization had a human face. Ramdas and his family were in Germany for three years, and for part of that time, Indian officials were forbidden from meeting or having any social connections with their counterparts from Pakistan. The Ramdas's children bonded with the children of the Pakistani military attaché, Brigadier Rauf, went to the same school locally, and became good friends. They have managed to keep this friendship going all these years. Brigadier Rauf later retired from the Pakistani army as a major general. The two men would get together whenever the politics of the day allowed. “His children and our children were in the same school, and children being children, they would meet,” recalls Ramdas. “Even to this day, one of my middle daughter's closest friends is one of Rauf's daughters.”

Ramdas also drew inspiration from the Bhagavad Gita, a sacred text among Hindus. “I have a great belief in the Gita,” he says of the epic, which tells the story of the warrior Arjuna asking questions of Lord Krishna. “The Great Battle of Mahabharata is talked about there, the battle between first cousins.” According to the Gita, “you can fight a battle amongst first cousins and still be considered as doing your duty. But . . . I say, ‘Look, we are actually fighting our own brothers. Do you think it is really necessary?’ We must question that.”

He notes that Hindus do not worship warriors. “I don't see a temple for Arjuna or a temple for Karna, never,” says Ramdas. “Only gods are idolized. The greatest of our warriors is Ashoka, the great prince [of 300 BC], and what did he do? He gave up war as a means to an end because he couldn't accept that he had to kill so many people. That's how he took to Buddhism.” Modern India has adopted as its national symbol the image of four lions standing back to back, a sculpture on top of the Ashoka Pillar at Sarnath that represents strength and peace. “The greatest of warriors,” says Ramdas, “are people who understand peace best.”

The same thing can be said of General George C. Marshall, he says. The US Army commander in chief helped America and its allies to victory in World War II, but he is better known not as a warrior but as the rebuilder of a war-shattered Europe through the Marshall Plan. Another American soldier Ramdas admires is Admiral John Leahy, who was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff when the United States decided to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. He pleaded with President Harry Truman not to use the nuclear option because Japan was on the verge of surrender. But the Americans dropped the bomb anyway. “Leahy said, ‘I was not brought up or taught in my Navy to do this kind of harm to humanity,’” says Ramdas.

“By no means am I comparing myself to any of these giants,” he makes clear. But, like them, he believes in peace, not war. “We must look at the role of the military in a different light today. They have also to learn to trim their sails and adapt themselves to change because we don't live in a static world. Things are changing constantly and there's no fixed answer to any situation.” That said, as an admiral, Ramdas was careful to avoid conflict with his military colleagues. He resolved not to preach. Besides, he says, “They all knew by my actions, and by my wife's actions, that we were completely secular people. Our own conduct was, to my way of thinking, enough without having to preach or teach.”

In 1994, a year after his retirement, Ramdas was invited to join a new peace advocacy group called the Pakistan-India People's Forum for Peace and Democracy (PIPFPD). Nirmal Mukherjee, a former cabinet secretary, was the Indian chapter's first chairperson. "He said, 'Join us and stand for election [to the national committee], I want you as my Vice President,'" Ramdas recalls. The newly retired admiral had other commitments and wanted to spend time on his farm, but he could not say no. "Mukherjee's health was deteriorating and he had a lot of problems, so he felt genuinely that he needed to have somebody to be with him." Ramdas became vice-chairperson of the national committee of the Forum's Indian chapter in 1996. Due to Mukherjee's ill health, Ramdas virtually ran the organization until he was elected chairperson himself in 2000.

The PIPFPD was formed by concerned Indians and Pakistanis in 1994 to encourage people-to-people dialogues between the rival neighboring states and to expose national-level opinion makers to grassroots sentiments for peace on both sides of the border. Mukherjee was one of the founders, along with peace activist Teesta Setelvad and scholar Rajni Kothari on the Indian side, and former Pakistani prime minister Mubashar Hasan, psychiatrist Haroon Ahmed and his wife Anis Haroon, and journalist Ibn Abdur Rehman on the Pakistani side. Rehman was Ramdas's eventual counterpart as chairperson of the Pakistani chapter. Although Ramdas was not a signatory to the People's Forum's founding declaration, he was in dialogue with the founders and openly supportive.

"There were some political differences among the early signatories," says Ramdas, and by the time he became vice-chairperson, two or three of them had already resigned over largely ideological differences. He succeeded in persuading some of them to return. "I felt that this must not be a forum for very narrow views of political ideology. . . . It should be broad-based. Luckily for me, with my background, with no political leanings and a completely independent stand on issues . . . people respected me, enabling me to restore some kind of stability."

Under Ramdas's stewardship, the People's Forum grew dramatically. New chapters arose around the country. "It was not very Delhi-centric or North India-centric, which tends to happen," he says. "This took on a national character. We deliberately staged our joint conventions in different regional centers." At these conventions, from one hundred to two hundred delegates from each country met alternatively in India and Pakistan. In India, the first three conventions were held in Delhi in the north, Kolkata [Calcutta] in the east, and Bengaluru [Bangalore] in the south. Aside from staging such high-profile meetings, the People's Forum also promoted understanding and goodwill by arranging people-to-people gatherings between politicians, diplomats, soldiers, teachers, students, artists, and other citizens from the two adversarial states.

Led by Ramdas in India and Rehman in Pakistan, the People's Forum persevered with its mission even as relations between the two countries remained precarious. In 1998, for example, India conducted underground nuclear tests; Pakistan responded with its own nuclear tests. Tensions cooled when the two sides signed a general accord in 1999 (pledging to resolve all outstanding issues, including sovereignty over Kashmir), but they flared again when India launched air strikes against Pakistani fighters who had infiltrated Kargil, an Indian-occupied area in Kashmir. Pakistan hailed the armed men as "freedom fighters" but eventually called on them to withdraw, and an uneasy peace ensued.

For the People's Forum, the most challenging time came in December 2001, when an armed gang attacked India's Parliament and killed fourteen people. India accused Pakistan of being behind the attack, a charge that the Pakistani government of General Pervez Musharraf, who had come to power in a military coup in 1999, strenuously denied. "This crisis had a terrible impact on government-to-government relations," says Ramdas. "We

suddenly snapped all ties and called the high commissioners home; we shut down air traffic, shut down all communications between the two countries. There were no trains, no buses, everything was stopped." As the crisis mounted, troops from both sides began massing along the border.

The war alert and travel restrictions made it nearly impossible for People's Forum members to keep up their cross-border dialogue. "But we still managed to go and meet with each other," Ramdas recalls. "Some of them would come to us; some of us would go to them, via the Dubai route." This was costly but the stakes were high. People's Forum members were desperate to prevent an open war between two nuclear-capable nations. "There was a lot of lobbying, a lot of contacts . . . and feverish activity, although not publicized. . . . I wrote appeals, I met with people. Many others were doing the same thing. It was a very trying period."

Among those with whom Ramdas met was Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. He remembers telling him, "You have to stop this. We have to pull back our troops because they are getting tired, and when tired troops are on the front line, anything can go wrong." The prime minister was evidently listening. He pulled the Indian forces back from the border; this prompted Pakistan to pull its troops back as well. The next step was for the border itself to be reopened, but neither government acted. Ramdas and his colleagues searched for a way to force the issue. They found one in an unlikely place: the charter of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), of which both India and Pakistan are members. A provision in the SAARC agreement allows legislators and vice-chancellors of universities to travel between member countries without visas. The Forum persuaded twelve members of Parliament in Pakistan to cross the border for a visit with their counterparts in India. They were automatically allowed in because of the SAARC provision. "That's how we broke the ice," says Ramdas.

Although at the last minute, the Indian government "shied away" from hosting the parliamentary visitors formally, says Ramdas, many Indian MPs greeted the Pakistani delegation warmly and one of them hosted a gala evening event for them. In this way, says Ramdas, "we managed to turn things around a little bit." The ice broken, the People's Forum helped to facilitate cross-border travel originating from both countries. "We can take a little credit for the restoration of communications and other relations after the face-off," he says. The apogee occurred when the Indian cricket team played a match series in Pakistan—cricket being a sport that both countries delight in.

Ramdas says that PIPFPD acts primarily as a catalyst. "We've done a lot of work in trying to focus attention on youth and education," he says. "We have also encouraged business houses to get together. Large numbers have exchanged visits now, formally sponsored by associations of commerce." The Forum urges the two governments to be more liberal about cross-border travel. "We should be able to come to the border, flash our passports, and the authorities should just stamp them and we should be able walk through." He admits this "will take some time."

In his work with the People's Forum, Ramdas worked closely with his counterpart in the Pakistani chapter, Ibn Abdur (I. A.) Rehman, who served concurrently as director of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. The two men first met in 1994 and collaborated repeatedly in the Forum's joint congresses, seminars, workshops, and behind-the-scenes lobbying.

The two men rarely disagreed. "Sometimes I sensed that we should be doing more," he says, "but in any large-based people's type of movement, you have to be patient and gather momentum." Both Ramdas and Rehman have now passed the reins of leadership to others. Ramdas has been named president emeritus for life of the India chapter, however, and remains a member of the national committee.

Meanwhile, Ramdas's activism has spread well beyond the People's Forum. Along with his wife Lalita, in November 2000, he became a founding member of India's National Coordination Committee of the Coalition for Nuclear Disarmament and Peace. "Nearly 120 organizations came together," Ramdas recounts. Each one had a somewhat different agenda. But they all agreed on one key point: "We didn't want nuclear arms. We wanted peace." The group wrote a constitution and, since then, he says, "we've been meeting regularly and, through conventions and meetings, making people aware of the hazards of nuclear weapons."

In hindsight, says Ramdas, he should not have been surprised by India's 1998 atomic bomb test. On the electoral hustings, the winning party, BJP, had stated clearly in its manifesto that it would carry out such tests if elected. "Saying something for electioneering is one thing, and doing it is something else," says Ramdas. "They insisted that they would carry out a strategic defense review before they conducted nuclear tests. Unfortunately, things happened far too quickly. There was no strategic defense review. They just went ahead." The test was conducted on May 11, 1998.

Along with other critics, Ramdas was inclined to interpret the nuclear test as part of the BJP's attempt to garner political support from Hindu fundamentalists. The fundamentalist movement had been growing in strength since Hindu militants destroyed the Muslim Babri Mosque in Ayodhya in 1992, in the belief that the sixteenth-century edifice stood on a site that was formerly the birthplace of Lord Ram, a Hindu god. The government "was trying to sow the seeds of discord . . . between the two communities," says Ramdas, "although it claimed and pretended that this was not so." For him and many others in India, this bitter fruit ripened in 2002 when riots in the state of Gujarat caused the deaths of hundreds of Hindus and Muslims. Human rights groups accused the BJP-led Gujarat state government of fanning the violence.

Ramdas became involved in trying to heal communitarian wounds in Gujarat. "I engaged on my own, not as a People's Forum man," he recalls. "There were many like me who joined an inter-faith delegation to Gujarat. There were Catholics, there were Protestants, there were Buddhists, there were Jains, there were Sikhs, and there were Muslims. We went there to meet with the people—to empathize and sympathize with them and find out what was going wrong. At least in my view, we acted as healing balm, at the same time sending a very strong message to the whole country and to the people of Gujarat in particular."

In 2003, Ramdas helped found the People's Integration Council, an overtly political action group "to bring together various members of the opposition . . . in one common platform with a one-point agenda: to get rid of the government." The next year, the BJP lost the national elections and a coalition led by the Congress Party took power. "The people knew exactly what the BJP was up to and they gave a fitting reply in their vote," says Ramdas. "The voters may not have been able to say what they wanted, but they certainly knew what they didn't want. They didn't want their peace to be disturbed, they didn't want their own temples and mosques to be destroyed, and they didn't want Christian nuns to be raped."

For Ramdas, the 2004 election results showed that democracy in India is strong enough to manage the tensions created by negative communal forces. What is needed, he says, is "a certain amount of reengineering in the structures, in the attitudes, in the democratic space." He would like to see leadership anchored more in integrity and less in corruption. "Meeting force with force is not the answer," Ramdas adds. A new approach is needed. Even though "some terrorists and militants might take advantage of you . . . it is better to prevent the fire than to try to fight it afterwards."

India understands and accepts that subregional interests have to be given space, says Ramdas. "It is important to give consideration and attend to the concerns of

particularly remote areas. Even when we sweep the floor, we don't always pay attention to corners. We forget them."

One region in no danger of being forgotten, however, is strife-torn Kashmir, in the north bordering Pakistan and China. Here, too, Ramdas advocates a new approach, "something workable and sustainable," he says. He likens his approach to an isosceles triangle, with the smaller base representing the Kashmiris. "If you look for the equilibrium point in an isosceles triangle, you find that the center of the gravity is near the base; both sides have to move in towards that center." In other words, let the Kashmiri people in on the process. "While we are talking to our own Kashmiris [in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir], the Pakistanis are also talking to their Kashmiris, with civil society also interacting," Ramdas explains. "Whatever we do to finally craft a peace solution, it must have the consensus of the Kashmiri people on both sides of the border." Of course, he adds, the solution must also be acceptable to India and Pakistan, and also to China, which controls a large tract of land in Kashmir gifted to it by Pakistan to build a road.

Ramdas likes to tell people about a conference in which Indian and Pakistani young people took up the question of Kashmir. The youths, aged seventeen to twenty-one, were assigned to mixed teams and asked to elect their own prime minister, defense minister, power minister, and so on, and given five or six hours to negotiate a solution to the conflict. "There were the usual ambassadors, communicators, the press, media—the children took various roles," Ramdas recalls. "It was a fantastic session because, as it happened, an Indian boy was made General Musharraf on the Pakistan team, and a Pakistani boy was made Prime Minister on the Indian team."

The group came up with what Ramdas describes as a "very novel suggestion." It said the two sides should bring down the number of troops in Kashmir to fifty thousand. The respective governments would continue administrating the territories under their control but would allow the Kashmiri people to move freely across the de facto borders so that they could meet easily and work things out for themselves—uninfluenced by the occupying powers. In time, perhaps, "peace will be restored." How politically feasible is this? Says Ramdas, "Anything is politically feasible if you want it to happen."

Hale and active at seventy-three, Ramdas intends to continue working with the People's Forum to help solve the problem of Kashmir. "You know how much money we have wasted from both sides?" he asks. "As somebody said, we could have built ten Kashmirs in the rest of India for the money we have poured down that tube." The People's Forum has set up a chapter in the troubled state itself. "Don't step back, we tell both sides. Even if you don't come up with answers or solutions, please meet regularly at various levels, between officials, between more senior people, between ministers, between the heads of the institutions."

No matter what happens, he tells them, keep talking. "It may take you five minutes to find an answer, or ten years. But don't give up."

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