

IBN ABDUR REHMAN

Born in British India, in the village of Hasanpur on the bank of the Yamuna River, and grown to manhood in the just-born nation of Pakistan, Ibn Abdur Rehman knows firsthand what divides Hindus and Muslims—and the common humanity that can bind them again. Until the age of seventeen, he lived in a predominantly Hindu town, Palwal in Haryana, about thirty-five miles from New Delhi. “When I was a small child, everybody was non-communal,” Rehman recalls. Hindus and other neighbors found a warm welcome in his home, and his father, a Muslim lawyer, would invariably be offered a glass of water and a smoke when traveling through Hindu villages.

Then, Partition came in 1947, and the teenaged Rehman and his family were forced to migrate to Lahore in the new country carved out of the subcontinent’s Muslim areas. There, as a newspaper columnist and editor, he wrote about Pakistani politics and tensions with India, which continue to fester over the issue of which country has sovereignty over Kashmir—a bone of contention between the two states since 1947. The longtime director of the independent Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, Rehman also became a key participant in the Pakistan-India Peoples’ Forum for Peace and Democracy, which promotes people-to-people dialogue in the two countries. Rehman and his colleagues believe that grassroots interaction will help advance the cause of peace in Kashmir and reduce friction between the neighbors.

Is it working? “What I have learned is that it is wrong to look for a single factor [to bring about peace],” says Rehman. “If the soil is not receptive, you can go on watering and nothing will happen. But if, at the right moment, some external input also comes, then some results will sprout.” Over the past several years, such moments of hopefulness have come and passed. But Rehman says: “I think we have made some small contribution to the realization among the masses that war is no answer, that you cannot alter geography, and that, whether you like it or not, you have to live together.”

Rehman was born in 1930 into a Muslim clan that owned huge tracts of land in Hasanpur, about thirty-five miles downstream from New Delhi. His paternal grandfather alone owned about five hundred hectares, comprising a fourth of the village. The family traces its descent from marauders from Baluchistan, who settled around Delhi in the sixteenth century as soldiers for the Mogul king Humayun. The king had been forced to retreat to what is now Iran after his 1540 defeat at the hands of Afghan leader Sher Shah. But Humayun reclaimed the sultanate of Delhi fifteen years later and rewarded his troops with land surrounding the kingdom.

His grandfather died when Rehman was a child, but he remembers stories about him. “He was honest to a fault,” says Rehman. “In spite of being a landlord, he tilled the land himself and ate only grain he produced.” An educated man who served as village headman and revenue collector for the British, the patriarch loved books, particularly those on philosophy and

mysticism. One of his sons, Abdur Rahman, Rehman's father, had a passion for learning as well. The boy had been sent to live with a maternal uncle, who was childless. But there was no school in that village. So he wrote to his father, asking to go to a place where he could study. That was how Abdur Rahman was sent to Delhi, where he went on to study law and start a practice.

Rehman's mother died when he was eight. "I have a very distant memory of her—as of a shadow," he says. "My father married again and that fine lady was also very kind, but she died when I was fifteen. So my brothers and I were literally brought up by my father." It was his father, indirectly, who started young Rehman on the road to learning English. The lawyer subscribed to a newspaper that was delivered to a bookseller about a kilometer from the family home. Rehman was entrusted with the task of going to the newsstand to fetch the paper, which he would then read as he walked back home. "I was nine," he says. "I remember because the Second World War began on my birthday in 1939."

The war had crystallized the divide in British India between those who strongly supported Britain and others who saw an opportunity for the "Quit India" movement to move forward its agenda and force the colonizers from the subcontinent. Rehman remembers a friend of his father's, a communist leader, who joined the pro-independence Congress Party. "People would gather around him in the center of town, in the country market, and garland him. Then he'd make a speech, denounce the British, ask them to leave, very emotional. Two or three policemen would watch from a distance, and when he finished, one would approach him and say, 'Sire, we take you into custody.' No violence, no attacks on anyone. 'You have the right to say what you want to say, and I have my duty to arrest you.'"

It made a strong impression on the boy to learn that there are such things as rights, "which we should fight for and which the government had a duty to respect." The lesson was reinforced by the British restrictions on processions and public meetings. "So people would go to a graveyard, where the restrictions would not apply, and hold meetings there," Rehman recalls. He attended many such gatherings because his father allowed him to travel around as he chose. "At the age of eight or eight-and-a-half, I could go on a bus or ride on a horse carriage by myself to go from one city to another," he says. "My father gave me the freedom."

Abdur Rahman was a nationalist who wanted independence from the British, but who opposed the separation of Muslim India from the rest of the country. "He practiced both criminal and civil [law], but he preferred civil and became better known as a civil lawyer," recalls Rehman. "He had a very busy life. He would go to court, and when he came back, he'd rest for an hour or so, then he would meet his friends. Every evening, they would call on him and stay until midnight." Abdur Rahman also spent time reading. "He loved books more than my grandfather."

"I learned almost everything from him," Rehman declares. He does not mean only the time his father tutored him in mathematics, after the boy did poorly in a test. ("After that, I got 100 percent marks year after year," Rehman recalls.) It was also the way his father lived his professional and personal life. He fought for the poor, often taking on cases for free, and cared for the education of children. He admired the Irish for fighting against the British for their freedom and often said that Indians should do the same, instead of becoming bag boys and clerks. Above all, he was a believer in non-communalism. "He didn't distinguish on a religious basis," says his son. "He did not like the Muslim League [because] he did not like partition of the country."

Rehman's own belief in non-communalism was strengthened by two headmasters he admired, both of them Hindu. One of them used to visit his house and ate with the family, which was not the usual practice among Muslims and Hindus. Others in India were not so open-minded. As he grew older, Rehman saw communalist feelings gain a foothold even in his village. "As politics became partisan, people became communal," he says. At the all-boys' high school he attended, there were Muslim and non-Muslim teachers, and they were not always on good terms. As in his village, there were very few Muslims in the school, either on the faculty or in the student body.

The growing animosity filtered to the young people. Rehman recalls a childish incident. "One day, we said to the non-Muslims: 'When intramurals come, let us have a tournament and we'll beat you.' So, like warriors of old, one person from one side and another person from this side, they came to the middle and wrestled. And we beat them and we were very happy." Rehman himself was the target of some resentment. Although he did not think of himself as a good student—"In a population of blind people," he says, "the one-eyed guy becomes important"—others considered him so. Rehman became known as the Muslim who could beat Hindus in examinations.

When it came time for Rehman to go to college, he chose Aligarh Muslim University in the state of Uttar Pradesh. One of his high school teachers had gone there. "When I did my matriculation, my father, who was a very democratic father, called me and asked me what I wanted to do. I said, whatever you wish. He said, 'No, no, I want you to make your own choices. Do what you want, except law.' He said that because, if you're an honest lawyer, you will starve, and if you want to make money by being dishonest, it is not worth doing." At that time, the careers of choice were medicine and engineering. At fourteen, Rehman decided to become an engineer.

But his studies were cut short by Partition in 1947, when the subcontinent was carved into two states, one Hindu and the other Muslim. Rehman's village remained part of India and Rehman's family decided to stay instead of migrating, heeding the counsel of Abdur Rahman. "On 14th August 1947, he went around telling people not to go, to stay where they were," recalls Rehman, who was home from university at the time. This was despite worries expressed by some relatives that Muslims may be attacked.

Rehman had gone back to Aligarh when a mob descended on his hometown. "There was a large number, several thousand people drawn from many villages," he says. "The local people, some of them joined, and some became silent spectators." Hasanpur's Muslim population had gathered in his grandfather's house and another house in another part of the village. The mob attacked both places. "There was fighting, and an exchange of gunfire, and then they succeeded and took over the houses, killing many people and setting everything on fire." A number of Rehman's kin died, including an uncle and his sons and the husband of one of his aunts.

Returning from Aligarh, Rehman saw homeless Muslims under the protection of his father in a makeshift refugee camp. By then, India and Pakistan had agreed on a compulsory exchange of populations. Muslims in India were told to migrate to Pakistan, while Hindus in Pakistan were ordered to leave for India. Women and children, the teenaged Rehman among them, were boarded on military trucks and driven over to the district headquarters. The men walked. From there, they boarded a train to Pakistan. "We packed things in a couple of suitcases, but we lost

our property on the way, so when we arrived, we had no money,” recalls Rehman. His family lost all its land in India but, after some time, was allotted some acreage in Pakistan.

In the new country, Abdur Rahman was asked by the Commissioner of Rehabilitation to take charge of a refugee camp in Lahore. Though just seventeen, Rehman also found employment in the same city as a senior analyst examining food grains purchased by the government. “You looked at rice, you looked at wheat, what the quality was, whether it was broken or whole, whether it was of this or that variety,” he explains. “And then you took a sample, weighed it, determined how many grams were coarse grain, how many this, how many that. It was simple.” The government used the results to decide whether to buy the grain or not and at what price.

Rehman stayed at the job for nine months, and then he was fired. The young man, who had not even started shaving, could not stand what he saw as the incompetence of the head of the laboratory, whom he thought suffered from an inferiority complex and wanted to oppress employees. He went up to him and told him he was a fool. Because his father was away at the refugee camp, Rehman lived with an uncle, who kept telling him he had a good job that he must be careful to keep. “But I was not really interested,” says Rehman. “I was doing this laboratory work only to mark time, because we didn’t have money for me to do anything else. Even before my services were terminated, I had decided that I would not serve in government, ever. I did not like it.”

So he resumed the study of his favorite subjects, physics and mathematics. In time, however, a growing interest in history and politics overtook his scientific ambitions. Instead of choosing a career in science, Rehman ended up as a movie critic for the English-language *Pakistan Times* and, eventually, as a full-time staff member of the newspaper.

How did that happen? “Even in high school, I had felt like writing,” he says. He would write poetry, though he describes the scribbling as “utter nonsense.” The writing bug bit again while he was working at the laboratory, when he felt emotional about Pakistan and passionate in his belief that landlordism should not be allowed in the new state. The Urdu-language magazine, *Qindeel*, published his pieces, including one on the death of a servant killed by communalists. Another article on the distribution of land to peasants and cultivators, rather than to absentee landlords, appeared in the weekly *Afaq*. His uncle was incensed. “I was denounced as a no-good chatterer,” says Rehman. He had told him: “You have no right to take land because you are not cultivating it.”

Rehman was not paid for the magazine articles but got a six-month free subscription to *Qindeel*, a weekly magazine published by the *Nawa-i-Waqt* newspaper group. He continued writing while at the college, including letters to the editor, which he sent to various newspapers. Then, in 1950, he wrote an English profile of Tipu Sultan (1750–1799), the learned ruler of Mysore who died in the midst of a military campaign against British colonizers. The *Pakistan Times* published it. “After a month or so, I received a statement saying I was entitled to one hundred fifty rupees, and after some time, the check came,” recalls Rehman. “That was the decisive moment.” The fee was equivalent to what had been his monthly pay at the government laboratory.

The check misspelled his name, however, and so did the article’s byline. The newspaper rendered his name as Rehman, with an *e*, instead of Rahman, with an *a*, as his father spelled it. Instead of requesting a correction, the young man decided to adopt the new spelling, exhibiting a

laid-back philosophy that would inform his other decisions. “From the beginning, I learned from my father that everything is not a matter of life or death,” he explains. Rehman would not sweat small things like a misspelled name. “If you like tea and I like coffee, it doesn’t matter. I’m not going to bother about it. You take a stand on only some things, a few things.”

Sometime later, the *Pakistan Times* invited readers to write movie reviews for fifteen rupees apiece. “I said, this is very simple,” recalls Rehman. “I’ll go see a film and write an article. So I became a cinema critic.” He would spend a rupee and a half for the ticket and one rupee for the snack. Instead of taking the bus, he would often walk. “So I made a clean profit of ten or eleven rupees per movie,” he laughs. “It was corrupting.” The venture was also empowering. “It gave me confidence that I could live by myself. I learned austerity from my father, you know. I didn’t love clothes. I was not fond of good food. The only thing I was fond of was buying books.”

After two years, the newspaper invited him to become a full-time member of the staff. That meant not only reviewing mostly American and British movies, and the occasional Pakistani or Indian film (the import of Indian movies was later banned), but also reporting on what was going on in Pakistani studios, meeting filmmakers and artists and, on the side, writing about the theater as well. He became a subeditor in 1953 and assistant editor and leader writer in 1962. It was a remarkable rise for a young man with no formal training in journalism. Then, as now, the *Pakistan Times* was a very influential newspaper and the training ground of many of the country’s best journalists.

Rehman learned on the job. “I went to the bookshop to look for any books that could help me understand journalism,” he recalls of the early days. “But mostly I learned from working on that desk.” Among the lessons was not giving in to pressure—but also taking into account the interests of media owners without compromising journalistic integrity. Rehman remembers one night in 1957, when Lahore was flooded and no one but himself and another staffer came to the office to produce the paper. “Somebody came and said, ‘I’m the private secretary to the chairman of the board, and I want you to take this man’s story.’ I told him to leave the office immediately.” There were no repercussions and Rehman was never asked about the incident.

At another time, Rehman got a phone call from the chairman himself. “He said, ‘Look, I have no business to talk to you, I have been trying to contact the editor. His telephone is not working so I’m obliged to telephone you directly. The gentleman sitting with me is a former minister. He had a case against him and he says he has been acquitted. He wants his story to be prominently displayed. I promised him that I will speak to the office. I’m not asking you to do anything. You decide in your judgment what to do with it.’ That was the degree of independence we had, you see. We were encouraged.”

Requests were granted whenever possible. While a public company, *Pakistan Times* was partly owned by a politician, who expected his speeches to be covered. “And it was covered,” says Rehman. “But the objectivity was maintained. Everybody was told to get both sides of the story. And no polemics in the news; politics was in the views column. I may be wrong, but I think it was a very correct training.” The young man thrived in the cut and thrust of his chosen profession. He lived alone for the first five or six years and so spent his days and most of his nights in the newsroom, learning and polishing his craft. (In 1958, Rehman married Tauseef Khurshid, who has stood by him through thick and thin. They have raised three sons and two daughters.)

Rehman learned to write and edit in the midst of the din of teleprinters, ringing phones, and loud conversations. “I deliberately put myself to the test, that I should be able to write even if there’s hell going on around me,” Rehman recounts. “It requires some effort because I have seen some people who would put a red light outside their room, meaning nobody is allowed in. I thought that was nonsense. I could write in an airport, I could write in a bus.” He could also expound on almost everything; aside from writing editorials and subediting, he continued doing film reviews. He continued studying history, politics, literature, education, and cinema. “I’m still in that process,” Rehman says now.

On October 7, 1958, President Iskander Mirza declared martial law and named Commander in Chief Ayub Khan as chief martial-law administrator. Later that month, Khan deposed the president in a bloodless coup. Khan held elections in 1965 and became the country’s second president, despite charges that he rigged the polls. His main opponent was the immensely popular Fatima Jinnah, sister of Pakistan’s revered founding father Muhammad Ali Jinnah. Khan lifted martial law but it was reimposed in 1969, after he handed power over to another general, army chief Yahya Khan, who became Pakistan’s third president.

Not yet thirty at the time, Rehman found these political developments disturbing. “I can say that I did not reconcile mentally to martial law, even for a single day,” he says. The military government took over *Pakistan Times*, prompting the editor and chief reporter to resign. Rehman stayed put. “I was a very immature person. It seemed to me, and I was foolish, that life would continue as before. Perhaps at the back of my mind was the view that this was something very temporary, like a windstorm. Let it blow. Let me retain my position where I am, because if I shift, I may be blown over.”

It was a vain hope. The paper’s editorials took on a pro-Ayub Khan slant. “I had an argument with my editor,” Rehman recalls. “He asked me to write something on a domestic issue. I wrote something, but it was very bad. I said, ‘I’m not convinced of this policy that I’m supporting.’ He said, ‘Yes, but we should be convinced.’ I said: ‘I can’t. You can ask me to represent the case, but you can’t ask me to believe in it.’ He said: ‘You have to write with conviction.’ I said: ‘My conviction doesn’t lie there.’ He understood, and I give him credit for that.” The pro-regime editorials were written by others on the staff. “They also did not agree with them, but they were professionals who could write for or against something equally well,” says Rehman. “They treated me with great affection and put up with my idiosyncrasies.”

His editors—“very noble-hearted, great people,” Rehman describes them—allowed him instead to write on noncontroversial topics. “I was freed from the obligation of writing in favor of Ayub Khan,” he says. “I wrote about education, and there was no problem with that. You could write anything. I wrote about agriculture, no problem. I wrote about labor. There were some problems, but not much.” He tackled Africa, Asia, and the law. Ayub Khan did not impose upon every area, and so there was a huge swathe of public discourse that Rehman could write about.

But he got sacked anyway in 1970—for trade-union activity. By this time, Ayub Khan’s successor, Yahya Khan, was chief martial-law administrator. While keeping a low political profile as a journalist, Rehman had become more active in the journalists’ trade union, which had never accepted martial rule. He was a member of the union’s central committee and on the organizing committee of a national strike for better wages. “It was the only national strike in Pakistan’s history,” says Rehman. “And we succeeded. Our demands were met. But we were

sacked.” At the instigation of Yahya Khan’s minister of information, about two hundred workers from various publications were fired.

That was when Rehman and other dismissed journalists started their own newspaper, *Daily Azad*, which ran for around eleven months. Funded by their own meager savings, the new publication called for the restoration of democratic institutions and opposed military action in East Pakistan, whose leaders were threatening secession. “It succeeded so well that we sank,” he says. On the first day, they printed twenty-five thousand copies. They sold out, so the next day, the print run was increased to thirty thousand. On the third day, they ordered forty thousand copies—“without realizing,” Rehman says, “that the more copies we published, the more money we lost.” The cost of paper and ink offset the incremental gains from selling the extra copies.

Daily Azad’s popularity attracted advertising, however. “We could have survived,” says Rehman, who served as managing director and member of the editorial board. “But two things happened. When the military operation in East Pakistan became more serious, we were declared as agents of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman [leader of the pro-autonomy Awami League, which had won in a landslide in East Pakistan in the 1970 elections]. Secondly, the stock market collapsed, so all the investment money was blocked. People who had given advertisements had no money to pay us.” With no income for staff and publication costs, *Daily Azad* had to close.

During its brief life, the paper tried to further the cause of peace. “We knew the political activists on both sides personally, so we talked to them,” says Rehman. “Please come to a political settlement. Wars and force will not solve anything.” With a senior colleague who knew both Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, leader of the Pakistan People’s Party (winner of the 1970 polls in West Pakistan), Rehman traveled to Dhaka in the east. “I remember talking to several persons, including K. Husein, who became foreign minister in the [Mujibur Rahman] government, and [distinguished economist] Rehman Sobhan. We failed, but we tried.” When military action began, *Daily Azad* collected signatures for peace. It was the only paper that published the petition. “Everybody was craving for a killing,” says Rehman. “It was shameful.”

India intervened in the dispute and defeated the Pakistani Army. East Pakistan declared itself the independent nation of Bangladesh. Yahya Khan resigned and Bhutto became president. In 1972, Rehman and other journalists sacked from the *Pakistan Times* were asked to return. Rehman reassumed his post as assistant editor but retired two years later “at the very advanced age of 44.” He did not agree with the way the paper was run. “Even after the restoration of democracy, we had to continue the same policies [as under Yahya Khan],” he explains. “So I said thank you very much and goodbye.”

He became chief editor of *Cinema*, a new magazine formed by the state agency National Film Development Organization. Rehman left the agency in 1977, when a general, Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, staged a coup and imposed martial law. (Bhutto was hanged in 1979.) “His government did not like people who were notorious for being opposed to military rule,” says Rehman. He became executive editor of the politically independent *Weekly Viewpoint* in 1978. “The weekly was brought out by only three persons, and so we had to do as much work as we had to do for a daily,” he recalls. But Rehman also found time to write columns and articles for other papers, on everything from sports to culture to politics.

He spent ten years at *Weekly Viewpoint*, during which time he and his colleagues were under strict censorship. The censors “would cut off whole pages,” he recalls. “It became a constant struggle to communicate with people in spite of that censorship. So we had to discover a

language. For example, we would write about Latin America, about its banana republics. And they would censor it. ‘You want to be clever?’ So we wrote an Aesop fable about a donkey and they cut it out, too. It was a constant struggle to denounce dictatorship without using that word.” Instead of using “democracy,” Rehman would say “consensus” or “consultation.” In 1981, the entire staff of *Weekly Viewpoint* was arrested and imprisoned for six months, but they still managed to put out the magazine from jail.

In 1989, Rehman returned for the second time to *Pakistan Times*, this time as the state-run newspaper’s chief editor. Zia-ul-Haq had died in a plane crash, and Benazir Bhutto, daughter of the executed Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, had become prime minister. Her information minister, who knew Rehman, asked him to take over the daily. Rehman agreed. He recounts: “Before going, I told him: ‘Look here, the paper belongs to the government, but I don’t want to be a government employee. If you can bear to have an independent newspaper, I’ll do that. I reserve my right to criticize you.’” He also made clear that he was not joining Bhutto’s Pakistan People’s Party, although he was aware that many in the country assumed that he was a party member.

One of Rehman’s first acts was to engage Aziz Siddiqui, a former colleague at *Pakistan Times* who had subsequently left to join the *Gulf Times* in the Middle East. “I had the best journalist in the country as my editor,” says Rehman. “That was the reason for Benazir Bhutto’s complaint that this paper looks more like an opposition paper than a government paper.” When Benazir was deposed in 1990, Rehman gave up on the newspaper. “The military did not want a civil government to continue,” he explains. “How will they tolerate an independent press? Aziz and I decided that our days in journalism were over—finished.”

They both ended up at the voluntary nongovernmental group Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP). Founded in 1986 by Asma Jahangir and guided by its founding chairperson, Justice Dorab Patel, the commission aims to work for the ratification and implementation by Pakistan of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to mobilize public opinion in favor of accepted norms of behavior regarding human rights, to cooperate with and aid national and international groups in the promotion of human rights, to prevent violations of human rights, and to provide legal aid and other assistance to victims of those violations.

Even as a journalist, Rehman had been active in the human rights and peace movements. While at the *Pakistan Times*, he served briefly as a vice president at HRCP. In 1989, he helped arrange the first dialogue between community leaders and business people in Pakistan and India, even as the politicians and military forces in both countries were preparing for war. “I had gone to Delhi and was at the India International Center talking to a friend,” Rehman recalls. “Then a man from Calcutta came up and said to me: ‘Is it possible for you to help me in organizing a dialogue?’ I was in a hurry to go somewhere else, so I said, ‘Yes, I’ll do that.’”

It was vintage Rehman. Someone had once described him as “a fool who puts his signature on each and every statement.” He does not deny it. “To anybody who says he’s opposed to dictatorship, I would say, ‘Yes, I’m with you.’ We may not be able to go far. Out of ten attempts, nine may fail and maybe one will succeed. So I will not miss that one.” Rehman helped organize two dialogues, participated in a forum in Lahore with Pakistani, Indian, and other South Asian delegates, and, in 1993, traveled to the United States for a conference with participants from Pakistan and India and people from Kashmir, the subject of a territorial dispute by the two governments.

Freed from the long hours of running a newspaper, Rehman threw his energies into human rights and peace-promotion work. In 1994, he was among twenty-four like-minded Pakistanis and Indians who opened a public dialogue for peace and reconciliation, an event that led to the founding of the Pakistan-India Peoples' Forum for Peace and Democracy (PIPFPD). The other founders on the Pakistani side included former federal minister Mubashar Hasan and psychiatrist Haroon Ahmed and his wife Anis Haroon and, on the Indian side, prominent intellectual Rajni Kothari, radical filmmaker Tapan Bose, senior bureaucrat Nirmal Mukerji, and peace activist Teesta Setalvad (who was later honored, along with Rehman, with the Nuremberg International Award for Peace and Human Rights in 2003). "I was certainly not the most prominent or the wisest or the most active," he says of the group. Even so, Rehman was elected PIPFPD chairperson of the Pakistani chapter every year for a decade. "They said of me: 'No one has anything against him, let him be the chairperson,'" he laughs.

Rehman guided the PIPFPD until 2003, often working in collaboration with his Indian counterpart, Admiral Laxminarayan Ramdas. Through those years, the organization held a series of conventions of one hundred to two hundred delegates from each country alternatively in Indian and Pakistani cities. Among the resulting resolutions were calls for the two sides to embark on mutual-arms reduction and troop pullbacks, to end cross-border provocations, and to work toward a peaceful, democratic solution in Kashmir. The group also arranged people-to-people meetings between legislators, diplomats, soldiers, artists, teachers, students, and other citizens from the two countries. The aim has been to promote friendship, understanding, and goodwill among the grass roots and influence decision makers.

Rehman's involvement with the PIPFPD is a natural outgrowth of his work with the HRCP. "When we started this commission, the first people who joined us or helped us were cynical," he recalls. "They would say, 'Human rights? Are we human?' That's because they had been frustrated. They had no rights, no civil liberties. They could be flogged, they could be imprisoned. And they were lawyers, economists, bureaucrats. It was so very disheartening. For several days, I was very confused."

Then an insight came to him. "I started answering them: 'If you start believing that you are not human, you will cease to be human. You have to believe that you are a human being. And if you believe that you are a human being, then from then onwards, we can talk of rights.'" Today, says Rehman, nobody says that he or she is not human. "People have started asserting their rights. They may not get them, but they're conscious of them." Once, he recounts, the commission received a letter from a poor village woman complaining against a military officer. In the past, "people were meek," he explains. "The women were raped. Children were abducted. They never said anything." That this woman found the courage to write a letter against someone in authority was a big change.

Traveling around Pakistan, HRCP members met people who had never tasted meat, who never had a square meal. They saw citizens working like slaves. Rehman asked a man who was freed after thirty years of bonded labor: "Why didn't you think of freeing yourself earlier?" The man replied: "I didn't know that I could be free." To the extent that Pakistani society as a whole is now aware that they are human beings and they have their rights, says Rehman, that is success.

But while the struggle for human rights has come alive, so too has opposition to the movement. "When ordinary people are asking for their rights, some people are losing their privileges," he says. "When women say, 'We want education,' some patriarch is losing his

position. When women say, 'We'll marry of our own choice,' some elders in the family are losing their prerogatives. As non-Muslims ask for their rights, there will be more blasphemy [charges] against them."

The combative response often comes from governments, especially dictatorships, that disguise themselves as democratic administrations. "They say, 'We respect human rights,' yet I know they are telling lies," says Rehman. "But I can use those false promises to hold them [to their pronouncements]." The commission has sought to establish itself as nonpartisan and independent—to the point of coming to the aid of Nawaz Sharif, for example, who was jailed after losing the prime ministership. "He approached us, saying 'The People's Party' is victimizing us.' We said, 'Okay, let's investigate.' We opposed his detention."

People came up to the commission and asked: "He was against you. What's the matter?" Says Rehman: "I have to uphold the principle, you see. Nobody should be arrested and detained without cause. If somebody has done something, try him." When Pakistan exploded a nuclear device, almost everyone in the country was bursting with pride. Not the HRC. "We opposed it," says Rehman. "We don't like war. We don't like armaments. We don't like army rule." The organization may be unpopular, he adds, but "for the commission to establish itself as a nonpartisan, independent safeguard of democracy is a great thing."

For Rehman, this is the lodestar of all his strivings: democracy. "Our people started experimenting with the first lesson of democracy, namely, elections, in 1919," he says. "The British did not give much power to the people, but the idea that people elected their representatives had sunk in." It is an enduring ideal. Every nine years, says Rehman, Pakistanis fought against a dictatorship. They came out to the streets, they faced bullets, and the dictator had to withdraw; the parliamentary system revived. "What is it that a people who have never experienced genuine democratic rule are hungering for, are all the time running after? It's the people's conviction inside, and also the training they received, that is now rooted considerably."

Speaking in 2004, Rehman described the government of Pervez Musharraf as one that "imposes military rule but does not call it military rule." Musharraf, he said, "rules by decree but doesn't describe it as martial-law regulation. He says, 'Everything is as before. The president is there. The courts are there. Political rights are there. We will have elections. We will have parliament, democracy, rights'—without meaning to honor them." But the fact that a government feels the need to dissemble, says Rehman, "is due to the realization that, in Pakistan, you cannot get anywhere without respecting or pretending to respect people's desire for democratic government."

For Rehman, military rule is the antithesis of democracy. "The moment you acquire a gun, you give up discourse, you give up argument. You have a slight disagreement, you use your gun." Rehman faults military rule for fostering another scourge in Pakistan, namely, religious extremism, which he traces to the iron rule of Ayub Khan. "He declared politics a dirty word, which meant no political parties. But the mosques remained free, so they became the only platforms [for political expression] and filled the vacuum created by the suppression of politics and political activity." Then, when Zia-ul-Haq came to power, he co-opted the mullahs. Before then, they were dependent on the charity of the community, which fed and clothed them. Zia-ul-Haq turned the mullahs into bureaucrats and encouraged the growth of religious seminaries at the expense of secular colleges and universities.

Religious extremism became a big issue under Musharraf in the wake of the terrorist attacks on the United States in 2001. “Mullah is a dirty word with the international community,” says Rehman. “Musharraf [and the army were] supposed to come down heavily on the Taliban, on al-Qaeda, on terrorism. They [were] not sincere. They would not allow terrorists to attack American interests, but they would allow them to operate in Kashmir. They would allow terrorists to go to Chechnya. This is foolish and dangerous.” Religious extremists, he believes, cannot operate on their own. “If the state doesn’t nourish them, they won’t get strong.”

Rehman blames the military mindset for the conflict with India over Kashmir as well. “In Pakistan, for a long time, the people believed the myth spread by military leaders that they could fight India,” he says. “They don’t believe it now. The military people may still think so, but the people don’t. So when the people become convinced that India is no longer armed [against Pakistan], then the ground is prepared. We have not persuaded them. They have learned it through their own experience.” The same is true in India, he says.

Referring to the PIPFPD, Rehman says, “I think we have made some small contribution to the realization among the masses that war is no answer, that you cannot alter geography, that whether you like it or not, you have to live together.” But the initiative must lie with the countries and their governments, he says. One problem in both Pakistan and India is that governments do not talk to the people. “They don’t take the people into their confidence,” he says. “I still believe sincerely that if I tell the truth to the people—‘Look here, these are the problems and they are serious, please tighten your belts, we can’t promise anything, we have to struggle to get out’—people will agree to that. But if you tell them lies—that everything is okay, we’re progressing—then, naturally, they will expect that you will do something. The moment the states water down their rhetoric, the people flower immediately.”

“Pakistan can have no future without peace with India,” he continues. “The worst mistake a people can make is to live in the past, which means trying to solve today’s problems with yesterday’s efforts. All great empires, all great governments, have gone because they tried to meet today’s problems with yesterday’s weapons. That’s finished. We have to fashion for tomorrow’s problems tomorrow’s weapons.”

What next for the cause of human rights and peace? Rehman is also involved with the Asian Forum for Human Rights and South Asians for Human Rights. “We have to define peace in a language that every man can understand . . . and also how [people-to-people diplomacy] can be replicated. We are very strong on regionalization.” He emphasizes, however, that convenors in Pakistan and India realize each society has its own dynamics. “We can only say, in our circumstances, this works. Do not copy experiments from other societies. But you can profit from other people’s mistakes.”

The progress in Pakistan-India relations also needs to be nurtured. The tentative moves by Pakistan and India toward peace talks over Kashmir are certainly encouraging. “My colleagues and I are entering a difficult phase,” Rehman concedes. “The goody-goody phase will be over in a few months, and then you have to decide on substantive issues.” He has ideas about the way forward. “My own take is, don’t bother about disputes, only try to solve whatever is possible. When you have good relations with each other, the disputes will be more manageable.”

The people of Kashmir must also be consulted. “I will not tell Kashmiris what kind of tradition they should have,” says Rehman. “I will not even tell them, ‘One of us is finding a solution.’ Give the Kashmir people peace. Respect their rights. Don’t oppress them. Let them

think. If the two sides want to meet, let them meet. If they try to do something jointly, let them have it.” As he sees it, the dispute is not in Kashmir. The dispute is between the two countries, and so the Kashmir solution can come only within the context of a settlement by the two governments. “India and Pakistan have to convince themselves to live in cooperation and not in confrontation,” says Rehman. “And then Kashmir will be solved.”

There is a long row to hoe, especially within Pakistan. “The military has now entangled itself into everything,” sighs Rehman. “The previous military rulers ruled from a distance. Now they have got into [everything]. They have militarized the bureaucracy. They are in every department and service. They have their own bank. They have their industrial corporations.” Still, he thinks the military also realizes that it cannot win a war with India. Rehman urges a fresh alternative. “You develop your strength in some other area,” he says. “You become a good government. You progress in science and technology. You win respect as a noncombatant state, and then things will turn in your favor.”

The real solution, though, is the military’s return to the barracks and the country’s return to democratic rule. “But I think we have to go through a long process,” says Rehman, pointing to the need to revive popular support for democracy and increasing the people’s share of power. “In the past, under democratic governments, power was in the hands of two hundred people,” he recalls. “So the military came and removed those two hundred. Now, who is the general who can arrest five hundred thousand people? If power is in the hands of half a million people, the military cannot take over.”

At seventy-four, Rehman is acutely aware of the snail-like pace in human rights and peace in the subcontinent, but he refuses to be discouraged. “Every day I close my book, today’s over, next day will be another life,” he says. “I sometimes tell my friends that I rise with the sun full of optimism, full of marvel, because every day I *live*. You get weary and tired and frustrated, but I bury the pessimism in the evening. Tomorrow will be another day.” Another of his aphorisms: “I believe that the only thing that we are interested in is the opportunity that the next generation will have. As somebody said in politics: ‘All the struggle is about the next generation and the kind of equal opportunity they will have.’”

Rehman is reminded of this every day, as he sees his two grandchildren, “the little despots,” as he laughingly describes them. They are the children of his son Ashar and his wife, who live with Rehman and his wife in Lahore. Another son, who has two sons of his own, stays in the same city. “Ever since I got this stroke, he comes to visit me every evening,” says Rehman, who until today still rents. As a socialist, he opposes property ownership, although he had many opportunities in the past to acquire land and build a family home. “Now, I feel that I was wrong,” he says. “My family tells me, everybody tells me that I’m a bloody ass, which I am.”

Maybe. But a rented house where love resides is always a home. And a far better place than a palace if blessed by the presence of an unwavering democrat and staunch activist for human rights and peace.

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