Abdus Salam - the human side

By Dr Mujahid Kamran

Abdus Salam was born to Mohammed Hussain, an employee of the Punjab Education Department, on January 29, 1926 in the small town of Jhang. Salam inherited from his father two dominant traits - a drive to make a mark in the world and a deep religious commitment. His personality was shaped by these traits. Those who knew him well were aware of both these facets of his great personality.

From very early age Salam, under the watchful eyes of his father, developed a love of reading. I once said to him that his father had left a deep mark on him to which he promptly responded "yes, you are correct". He was not only brilliant but also had the gift of immense concentration. He was able to develop and retain this trait throughout his life. There are numerous instances which illustrate this. I will mention only two, one from his childhood and one from his later years. The childhood incident has been narrated to me by his first cousin Col G.M.Iqbal, who is also his brother-in-law. One day, his mother kept on calling him but there was no response.

The worried family launched a search for him. Eventually, he was discovered inside the house hidden behind a stack of quilts (razais and lihaffs) reading a book quite oblivious of the hullabaloo that accompanied the search for him. Col Iqbal further said that Salam used to find for himself suitable nooks and corners or other places in the house where he could concentrate on whatever he was reading.

The second incident is from the year 1992 when I last met him. At the time his illness, a rare disorder of the nervous system, had rendered it impossible for him to walk easily even with a stick. Adjoining his office was a room where he used to rest alone around lunchtime. He asked me to walk him to that room. It was with quite a bit of difficulty that we managed to walk upto the door of his office when he spotted a recent research paper lying on the top of a stack of papers on a chest-high safe or rack. He stopped instantly and started looking at the paper. And then suddenly I felt that he was no longer

with me. He was completely absorbed in it for several minutes and I could sense his immense powers of concentration. His illness, his difficulty in standing, seemed to have disappeared for those minutes and there was an air of such intense absorption about him that it appeared to me that he would not come out of it.

Then he gradually came out of it and we walked to the next room silently.

Salam was gifted with an extraordinary memory. While he was a college student his class fellows were well aware of this gift of his. Prof Dr Waheed Qureshi, one of the foremost experts in Urdu language, was his class fellow in BA at Government College (G.c) Lahore. Dr Qureshi has confirmed to me the following incident. One day, a group of class fellows including Salam walked through Anarkali Bazar in Lahore. When they reached the other end, Dr Waheed Qureshi tested Salam by asking him to recall the name boards on the shops on the right side. In the words of Dr Qureshi Salam was able to recall "about 90%" of the names. Dr Qureshi remarked that what was remarkable was the fact that the question was not planned and Salam had not been mentally prepared in this regard before hand.

Salam had a very critical mind and from a very young age, he displayed this in various ways. He read widely and avidly. He was fond of literature, history, religion, philosophy and science. As a student of FA at GC, Lahore, he wrote an article in Urdu "Asad Aur Ghalib". This article was an investigation into the question as to when Ghalib changed his pen name from Asad to Ghalib. The article was published in the magazine "Humayun" edited by the late Mian Bashir Ahmad. After the publication of the article, Salam asked Waheed Qureshi to accompany him for a courtesy call on the editor. Dr Waheed Qureshi told me that the editor was astonished to see that the writer of the article was a mere lad. "I expected the writer to be a person of mature age - around 50 or so", said the editor.

Salam deeply respected his father and always obeyed him. When he graduated from GC in 1946, he had never gone to the cinema because his father had forbidden him to do so. He was also scolded by his father for playing chess after which he never played the game. He used to say that he owed his success to his father's prayers.

Salam had great leadership qualities. He was elected President of the GC Students Union, and was also editor of the college magazine "R... Those who knew him were well a... that he was magnanimous, arrive decisions after discussing them, decisive, quick and forceful. In a ... tion, Salam instinctively helped ... ple. he liked to help them in their ... reers and there are, no doubt, pe... all over the world who owe their ... reers in a greater or smaller meas... to Salam. All these ingredients m... for a highly successful administra...

Salam was one of those rare ... entists of stature who combine th... supreme creative powers with a gr... capacity for institution building. ... was, therefore, to use the categori... tion of the late Prof Baqi Beg, sim... taneously a "Greek" and a "Roma... He built the Department of Theor... cal Physics at Imperial College wit... a short span as the leading resear... centre in Theoretical Particle Phys... after having been installed there ... Professor and Departmental Head ... 1957. In 1964, he established t... world famous International Centre ... Theoretical Physics (ICTP) at Tries... Italy. He then built a network of ... ganisations such as Third Wor... Academy of Sciences (TWAS), Thi... World Organisation for Women in S... ence (TWOWS), etc.

Abdus Salam was the most r... spected, influential and eloque... spokesman for science in the deve... oping countries.

His great intellectual sature, h... mastery over language, his commi... ment and deep sense of self respec... his enormous confidence and dipl... matic skills made him a "People's En... peror" of scientists from the develo... ing countries form Mongolia to Sou... America, across Asia and Africa. H... death shall be mourned by his admi... ers all over the world. With his de... parture, an era has come to an end.