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The Rediff Interview/Professor Pervez Hoodbhoy

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Pervez Hoodbhoy, professor of physics at the Quaid-e-Azam University in Islamabad, has been one of the most vehement opponents of Pakistan's nuclear policies.

He has also been an ardent supporter of the theory that peace benefits everyone, including India and Pakistan.

Professor Hoodbhoy was in Mumbai to attend the World Social Forum where News Editor **Pankaj Upadhyaya** spoke to him.

What is a professor of physics doing at the World Social Forum?

I am very happy to be here at the WSF, where there are 80,000 people and 1,000 participants. I had tried to come earlier to India because it is very important to build bridges between the two peoples and to bring about people-to-people contact.

I am glad I was able to come. Last year, when I was invited to the Asian Social Forum in Hyderabad, I was denied a visa by the Indian government. This time, fortunately, I did get the visa... I have spent five days over here. These have been very educative and enjoyable days for me. I met a very wide cross-section of people from India. My friends from the academia, friends with whom I have shared emails but had never met. I think I have learnt a lot and more important than that I feel more hopeful and committed working towards peace and *rapprochement [between India and Pakistan]*.

The WSF will not issue any resolution or statement. Do you think that is the right approach for a gathering of this size and importance?

I don't know what to say about that. The fact that people with different causes were invited here under the umbrella of the WSF is to my mind a great achievement. People from all over the world with very different issues came and were able to take their message across to others. Now, I don't think the WSF is the world government. It should perhaps take firm positions on some issues. But obviously it cannot take on more than a few things because then, one, the agenda would become too broad.

Can you specify what those few things you have in mind are?

I think in the last year or so, we have had developments in the world, which are very alarming. The invasion of Iraq is something that enjoys, probably, total consensus among the people who are here. And if there had been a statement -- maybe there is, I don't know -- that would have been good. I think a statement welcoming the peace initiative between India and Pakistan would have also been good. A statement against fundamentalism and the threat it poses to India and Pakistan and to Islamic countries, and all over the world for that matter, would have sent a very definite message.

So these are things I would have liked. But then, the fact is that in the kind of sessions we had all these things were said with great emphasis, so it may be [*that*] it would have been nice to have a joint declaration, though I would not think it was absolutely necessary.

And the nuclearisation of South Asia?

Again, you are right. If there had been a statement it would have been welcome. I really don't know why they decided not to issue one. Perhaps because there were too many competing demands. I have no idea. I am not involved at all with the administration of the WSF. I am just an invitee.

You are a professor of physics, yet you are also one of the most vociferous opponents of Pakistan's nuclear policies.

Oh! I don't think there is any mystery in it at all. It is a moral obligation on the part of scientists to oppose tools by which humanity would be destroyed, annihilated. And there is a long tradition of this starting from Albert Einstein, who was the first person to conceive of the release of atomic energy in the form of an explosion. He was also among the first people to oppose the bomb.

The Russell-Einstein manifesto is the central document for the Pugwash movement, which was a movement of scientists against the bomb. So scientists have opposed bombs in the past. Now, they are not so relevant because making a bomb is not a great work of science anymore, it is something that... something for industry to do.

But India's President is also called the Missile Man...

President [A P J] Abdul Kalam is not a man who is acclaimed as a great scientist because he has produced works of science, but rather as a person who has a strong engineering background and who has proved to be a very capable organiser. And then, obviously, also a very good politician because he has been able to become President.

So he, like our national hero, Dr A Q Khan, is not somebody who is celebrated in the world of science and known for his original scientific research, but as somebody who is dedicated to a particular path and that path happens to be creation of weapons of mass destruction.

How easy, or difficult, has it been for you to oppose the bomb in Pakistan?

Unfortunately, there were very few scientists who opposed the bomb. You can count them on the fingers of one hand. But I must tell you it is something necessary because the bomb is something that is enormously destructive and quite capable of being used. It is something that is morally unacceptable for any society to have and this includes, of course, both Pakistan and India.

But beyond that, the dangers of its use are greater on the subcontinent than anywhere else in the world, for several reasons. The fact that we share a common border and there is no warning time for missiles to cross over from one side to the other. The fact that we have let our behaviour to be dominated by emotion rather than fact or reason. And the fact that we have hurled nuclear threats at each other. This is unprecedented anywhere else in the world. So I think this is a cause of concern for all citizens and if I as a scientist have raised my voice it is, I think, a matter of my personal survival.

Are you encouraged by the peace process between India and Pakistan?

I am delighted by it, and also astonished because I think something like this was long overdue... it is time people be allowed to visit the other country. Time for trade, time for cultural exchanges.

What surprises me, however, is why did it take so long in coming? And what happened that suddenly caused this wild mood swing? Because, just four months ago, the two countries were hurling threats at each other and behaving in the most uncivilised way... they had essentially broken off diplomatic relations. There was no representation of high commissioners in either capital. And then, suddenly, the doors have been opened, although nothing major has happened in the intervening four months. So, while one welcomes it, there is also the worry that if it is a mood swing, then could there not be a mood swing the other way as well?

So people who believe in peace must work towards improving the climate between the two countries so that they can put a hold on the wild swings of moods of their leaders. And it will be harder and harder for leaders to take back the gains that have been made if larger number of people cross over from one side to the other.

You have been here for five days. You must have discussed these things with your friends here. What do they say?

I think everybody is very happy. At the same time they don't know whether it [*peace*] will last if there is another terrorist attack. Will it [*the peace process*] survive that? So there is worry about this. However, while it lasts, everybody that I met over here thinks we should capitalise on it, we should push it forward as much as possible and build bridges and do what was not possible in the last few years.

Do you think a compromise or a solution for Kashmir is possible?

I think [*Pakistan President*] General [*Pervez*] Musharraf made a very bold statement when he said that Pakistan can discuss Kashmir without insisting on the implementation of UN resolutions. And he has been very strongly criticised by the people on the right, the MMA [*Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal, a coalition of Islamist parties ruling the North West Frontier Province and Baluchistan*], and the jihadists. So there has been some backtracking on this. The foreign minister [*Khurshid Mahmood Kasuri*] and then the prime minister [*Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali*] said no, no, we are still determined to stand by the UN resolutions.

But the fact that it has been said once has broken a taboo. I think that Pakistan is now going to have to show flexibility on Kashmir. Its position has been weakened by insisting upon jihad and by pushing a policy that was suicidal, which harmed its own position on Kashmir, which harmed the Kashmiris and, of course, which bled India for a very long time.

So, support for the jihadis is definitely down. One can see the fact that they are so angry and they have made repeated attempts to assassinate Musharraf. I think that India has also acknowledged that attacks from across the border, what they call cross-border terrorism, are down. And of course, the ceasefire at the LoC has been a very good thing, a very welcome thing. People are now returning to normal lives.

One just hopes that this good climate will persist. Because it is in a good climate only that Kashmir can be negotiated, resolved. How far one can go on that, beyond the positions of the two countries, at the moment I don't know. I don't think that a solution is possible at the moment. But if we can cool Kashmir down and keep it cool for the next few years, then the possibility becomes stronger.

Are political parties in Pakistan ready for a compromise on Kashmir?

The real power is with the army. It is the army that has taken positions on foreign policy, particularly on Kashmir. It is the army, which has its hand on the jihadis and at least for now there is a contradiction between them. The other thing is that if you ask about political parties, the MMA will not support Musharraf, but all the others are going to go along.

And the leaders in exile? Do you think if they return, they will take a stand on Kashmir different from what they had taken earlier?

Oh yes, I think if they ever come back -- and that is certainly not clear -- they would have to adjust themselves to the new realities. New realities like, you can't pursue what was started in 1989-1990 -- that's a dead-end policy. So I think that within the Pakistani State as a whole, the establishment is coming around to the view that this is not sustainable.

Of course, there are still parts of the establishment that are not going along with this, and this includes Pakistan Television, which continues its propaganda. Which, by the way, never broadcast what Musharraf said about the UN resolutions. So, all parts of the State do not act at the same time and are not necessarily in agreement with each other. But I think it is only a matter of time...

How would you compare the media in the two countries?

If I look at newspapers, I find it [*the Indian media*] to be less free than in Pakistan. The English language press in Pakistan is very critical of the government... often critical not just of the government, but of State policies as well. State television is totally slavish. But private television channels are more independent and they are becoming increasingly popular. So I see as far as media goes we are not too different from each other.

Your area of expertise is education. Do you see any exchange happening between institutions here and those in Pakistan?

I would love to have that! Particularly because Pakistan's higher education system has been destroyed over the last 30 years. It is in an absolutely appalling state. So, although there is a lot of money available for new universities and university teachers' salaries are quite high, there are not enough good teachers and so...

I have written about this. Perhaps the only way of reviving the higher education system is to have well-qualified Indians coming and teaching for short periods in Pakistan. The kind of salaries they would receive are much better than what they would get in India, and this would work to our mutual advantage.

Right now Pakistan is looking for university teachers abroad and it is not getting a very good selection of people who want to come to Pakistan and teach there. I would say if relations between us [*India and Pakistan*] become better, then this possibility that I suggest should be seriously entertained.

You must be in touch with the universities and colleges here. Do you see any possibilities? Anything happening in this area?

You know, the prejudice is mutual. I think this [*example*] illustrates the prejudice on this side. Last year I won the Kalinga Award for the popularisation of science. This is an award that was

instituted by the Kalinga Foundation in India, which has two parts. One part of the award is a cash prize and a medal, and for that I went to Hungary and I received it from the president of Hungary and the prime minister of Hungary.

The other part was a visiting professorship to India for six weeks paid for and organised by the Indian government. Now this prize was instituted in 1952 and all prize winners of the Kalinga award have been invited to India, but I have not received an invitation and that is only because I am a Pakistani.

There are private businesses here that have begun looking at Pakistan seriously as a market. There is Ashok Leyland, there is Tata Motors, and there are some FMCG manufacturers. Do you think a few years down the line the IITs and IIMs would be able to set up branches in Pakistan?

Perhaps 10, 15, 20 years down the line. Not so soon. But first there will have to be trade and let's see how that trade goes, how people in Pakistan react to it, because, after all, India is a much bigger economic power and there is a certain amount of fear that it may swamp the market.

Do you agree with this theory that since India is a bigger country, it should make bigger concessions to Pakistan?

Certain things, yes. For example, India started the nuclear race and India is still driving the nuclear race with the development of thermonuclear bombs and its ABM [*anti-ballistic missile*] systems, which I think will be very destabilising. It will drive the two countries to a situation where war will become ever more possible. So there I think the onus rests upon India.

But on other things it could be different. I think Pakistan has an equal responsibility for peace. And yes, of course, it was Pakistan which started Kargil. It was Pakistan which started the war in 1965.

How frequently will you be coming to India now that there are fewer visa restrictions?

I was fortunate to get the visa this time and this was for the WSF. If it had been for something else -- for tourism -- I don't know if I would have got a visa. So it is a bit premature. We will have to see how many people get through. Another thing is that I have a double difficulty. I am an employee of the government of Pakistan. So I have to get permission from them as well as a visa. So I have to jump through two hoops, not one.

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