**Ramdas for peace**

Dr Naazir Mahmood

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Peace activists come in a hundred and one varieties. Some are diehard peaceniks from their student days, others are new converts who spend their early lives fighting and then realize the futility of belligerence.

From columnists and development professionals to educators and finance experts, the Pakistan-India Peoples’ Forum for Peace and Democracy (PIPFPD) has had a wide range of members since its creation in 1994.

Peace activist Laximinarayan Ramdas – who died on March 15, 2024 at the age of 91 – was a former head of the Indian Navy who took it upon himself to speak his mind. I first met him in April 2000 when a large delegation of Pakistani peace activists visited India. My wife Sanober and I, with our two daughters – six-year-old Zoya and four-year-old Sawera – were among the delegates to the Fifth Joint Convention of the Pakistan-India Peoples Forum in Bangalore (now Bengaluru).

At that time, I was working for ‘Dawn’ in Karachi. Our editor, Saleem Asmi – an active member of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan and a peace activist – gladly agreed to grant me two weeks off to visit India. Though it was not my first visit to India, it was our first to South India. Ramdas – or Ramu da, as most of us started calling him – was so fond of children. He and his equally benevolent wife, Lalita Ramdas, showered their love on our two daughters, who had suddenly become mini-celebrities for Indian media as the youngest delegates from Pakistan.

For the past 40 years, Ramu da and Lalita campaigned for all the right causes in South Asia and beyond. They stood firm against all adversities and were an ideal couple for many of us. Despite being well-travelled and having the opportunity to settle anywhere in the world, they had their feet rooted to the ground they belonged to – the Subcontinent. When India and Pakistan tested their nuclear devices in 1998, Ramdas was one of the most vocal opponents of the nuclear arms race in South Asia. He strongly advocated for nuclear disarmament and restraint and repeatedly asked India and Pakistan to initiate peace talks.

Coming from a former naval chief, it was a significant suggestion that both governments should have followed. His efforts drew worldwide admiration, earning him the prestigious Ramon Magsaysay Award in 2004 which he shared with his Pakistani counterpart, our very own IA Rehman. This was in recognition of his efforts to advocate peace between the two nuclear-armed neighbours when he was the chairperson of the PIPFPD’s India chapter.

He later entered politics with an anti-corruption movement and then with the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), but that was a brief stint, resulting in his removal as internal Lokpal (ombudsman) by AAP in 2015.

He joined Congress leader Rahul Gandhi in the ‘Bharat Jodo Yaatra’ in 2022 and was also involved in a range of campaigns on several issues. He wrote an open letter to former president Ram Nath Kovind, seeking his intervention in directing all political parties to desist from using military symbols and uniforms or depicting actions by military formations or personnel for political purposes.

His leadership was invaluable for several movements for communal harmony and justice in India, and he kept himself involved till his end. Activist circles across borders loved him for his charming and inspiring personality that strove to build a strong constituency of peace.

Even more admirable was his stance that Jammu and Kashmir was not a land dispute between India and Pakistan but a historical battle for justice for the people of the divided region. In an increasingly polarized India where Muslims – and especially Kashmiri Muslims – are a constant target of BJP goons – Ramu da was a beacon of light and a tower of strength against bigotry and fundamentalism.

Multi-religious prayers at his funeral conveyed a clear message that he was a secularist to the core, and despite being born into a Hindu family, he had respect for all religions.

On multiple occasions, Ramu da’s indomitable spirit came in handy for peace activists in South Asia, as he stood tall to challenge all sorts of authoritarian attitudes displayed at various levels in India and Pakistan. Human dignity was close to his heart, and his struggle for human rights was exemplary. He considered justice and peace vital for any human society that claimed to be civilized. His association with the India-Pakistan Soldiers Initiative for Peace (IPSI) and the Coalition for Nuclear Disarmament and Peace (CNDP) was a source of strength for both organizations.

It is worth mentioning that the CNDP, which came into being in 2000, is India’s national network of over 200 advocacy organizations, groups, individuals, and mass movements that demand the rolling back of nuclear programmes in India and Pakistan. Unfortunately, there is no such coalition in Pakistan apart from some individuals such as Dr AH Nayyar and Pervez Hoodbhoy, who openly call for nuclear disarmament. Ramdas also supported the struggle against special economic zones in Maharashtra under the 22 Gaon Bachao Andolan (movement to save 22 villages).

Ramdas was always ready to challenge the highest authorities in India by fearlessly voicing his concerns against injustices against marginalized communities, be it with religious and ethnic minorities or with children and women anywhere in India. He stood against the communalization of Indian politics by the BJP and the Saffron Brigade or the Sangh Parivar – as it is commonly known in India. Like an enlightened and progressive intellectual, he urged both India and Pakistan to uphold the democratic fabric of society, promote secular values and shun religious bigotry and extremism.

Like his counterparts in Pakistan, such as Asma Jahangir, Hina Jilani, Dr Mehdi Hasan, Mubashir Hasan, IA Rehman, and many others in India, Ramdas touched many lives. When we met him in India in 2000, he loved our two daughters and shared with us the names of his three daughters: Kavitha, Mallika, and Sagari. Little did we know that within a couple of years, we would have another daughter – Ujala – to join the three-daughter club. He was indeed an inspiration for at least two generations of peace activists.

Whenever we met and interacted with him, he came across as a straightforward and no-nonsense individual who cared for others and was always welcoming. Ramu da and his wife Lalita Ramdas complemented each other in an unusual way that was both intellectually sound and personally beneficial. Their commitment to democracy and freedom was a model for others, and they were free of all prejudice.

Like their comrades such as Ashok Mitra, Kuldeep Nayar, Nirmal Mukherjee, Nirmala Deshpande, Syeda Hameed, and Tapan Bose, Lalita and Ramu da formed a strong front to defend democracy and peace across borders.

He believed that people should have the primary stake in deciding their future through a democratic process and by establishing and maintaining peace. The Jammu and Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society was fortunate to have full support from Ramdas as the chairperson of the forum. He filed numerous petitions and issued numerous statements against the political victimization of activists and journalists in Kashmir, a position that not many former soldiers can take in India – or Pakistan for that matter.

He was against increasing defence budgets in the Subcontinent and spoke openly about the need for more allocations for education and health rather than for arms and ammunition.

His opponents were mostly from the conservative and right-wing groups in India. Warmongers on both sides of the border never liked advocates for human rights and peace such as Asma Jahangir in Pakistan and Ramdas in India. Ramdas also devoted his energy and time to a solidarity forum set up to advocate for Falesteen and was always ready to associate with new initiatives for peace anywhere in the world.

The writer holds a PhD from the University of Birmingham, UK. He tweets/posts @NaazirMahmood and can be reached at:

mnazir1964@yahoo.co.uk