

Akhter Hameed Khan Centennial Birthday Celebration Lecture **Address of Welcome**

October 23, 2014

Guest of Honour Begum Akhter Hameed Khan
Chief Guest Mr. Sartaj Aziz
Keynote Speaker Dr. Golam Mathbor
Distinguished Ladies and Gentleman!

It is a matter of great pleasure for us that Begum Akhter Hameed Khan has kindly taken the trouble to be present amongst us this morning.

I feel great pleasure and honour in extending a very warm welcome to Prof. Dr. Golam Mathbor who had come all the way from the United States at his own cost to deliver the Akhter Hameed Khan Centennial Birthday Celebration Lecture.

We could not have been more fortunate in having a Chief Guest than Mr. Sartaj Aziz. My association with him dates back nearly three decades when he first came from Rome to visit AKRSP, where he was Vice President of IFAD. In him I found a true believer in Social Mobilisation and his support to Rural Support Programmes has not wavered. I only wish there were some more ministers and advisers like him in government.

I am especially grateful to Rector NUST Engineer Muhammad Asghar and his Pro Rector Irfan Akhtar for hosting the lecture and sincerely taking up the concept of establishing a School of Social Sciences to widely disseminate the valuable legacy left by Akhter Hameed Khan countrywide.

When I look back on my 83 years of life including over 61 years of working life, I find it a bundle of coincidences and one of the most far reaching coincidence was my chance meeting in 1959 with Akhter Hameed Khan in the Green Arrow Train which used to ply between Chittagong and Dhaka. I was Assistant Commissioner of Brahmanbaria, a subdivision of Comilla district in the then East Pakistan and Khan Sahib was the Director of newly established Pakistan Academy for Rural Development in Mahatma Gandhi's Abhoy Ashram at the district headquarters. Khan Sahib chose my subdivision as the field

orientation area for the Academy's newly inducted Faculty holding Ph.D degrees from the American universities. When Khan Sahib succeeded in persuading his erstwhile colleagues in the ICS (Indian Civil Service) who used to call him "a fool but a good fool" to revamp the colonial law and order administration into a Development Administration, Khan Sahib requested the Provincial Chief Secretary to lend my services to the Academy for a fortnight to help in drawing up a training course for the civil servants chosen to man the newly created posts of Additional Deputy Commissioners (Development) in each district. It was a most rewarding experience for me to have spent those days under his tutelage. Although in 1961 I was transferred to West Pakistan having completed my tenure in the eastern wing, Khan Sahib always remained in my thoughts.

In 1972 when I got myself appointed to Pakistan Academy for Rural Development, Peshawar, I persuaded Khan Sahib to visit me before going to Michigan State University where he had been invited to take up a job as a Professor, having got displaced from Comilla in the wake of separation of the eastern wing. I was trying to replicate the Comilla model in Daudzai an adjoining thana to the Academy. Khan Sahib looked at it and sent me a note after his visit saying "Daudzai is an island of sincerity in the area of hypocrisy and keep on sending me your monthly progress reports, I would be deeply interested in its progress" and a year later when I sent him an invitation to participate in an international seminar the Academy was organizing. His typical response was to rubbish the idea of coming for a week and dubbed it wastage of money and time and offered to come as Adviser to the Academy, on condition that he will accept no more than Rs. 1,500 pm as his remuneration. I was delighted and accepted his terms with the exception that he will have to accept Rs. 2,100 as monthly salary which was my salary. I was over the moon, under his direct guidance, Daudzai prospered and the then NWFP government got a province wide replication of Daudzai model approved by Federal Economic Committee of the Cabinet. This attracted jealousy and on trumped up charges against the Academy of subversion because under the programme large scale mobilisation of rural poor was being fostered both Khan Sahib and I were thrown out of the Academy and my dream of province wide reduction of poverty in KP came to naught.

Khan Sahib returned to Michigan and I sought refuge under UN umbrella. However, God willed otherwise and in 1982 I was asked by the Aga Khan Foundation, Geneva to initiate

Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) in Gilgit, Baltistan and Chitral. To my good fortune Khan Sahib had also returned to Karachi and initiated the world famous urban slum development programme the Orangi Pilot Project. I was also told by the Director Special Programmes, Aga Khan Foundation Robert Shaw that it was Khan Sahib who had suggested to him to secure my services from UNICEF with which I was working in Sri Lanka.

My tutelage under Khan Sahib which had come to an abrupt end recommenced with Khan Sahib paying regular visits to AKRSP during my twelve years tenure there and wrote 12 reports of his visits which became the main guidelines for implementing AKRSP. With the establishment of National Rural Support Programme (NRSP), Khan Sahib agreed not only to become a Director but also paid frequent visits. Thus I had the good fortune of the benefits of Khan Sahib's advice and mentoring from 1959 to 1999 when, sadly for all of us, he left this world.

I had always looked upon Akhter Hameed Khan as my mentor and teacher. My relationship with him was truly of a sage and a disciple. His presence was overpowering and commanding a respect not out of fear but intellectual superiority of a level which belies any description. I feel like a pygmy trying to describe a giant. My relationship with Akhter Hameed Khan was more like Boswell's with Dr. Johnson. I can at best be a biographer or a historian recounting my association with the great man but to capture his innate qualities, his intellect, his vision, his depth of knowledge, his scholarship, his understanding of the religions of the world, his Sufi streak, his Buddhist way of life, his understanding of Islam and the Quran, his academic work, his poetic muse, his love for his family and above all his mission to help the suffering humanity and his passion to benefit his countrymen by his experience is beyond my capabilities. I have captured only a few facets of a personality which was so versatile and complete that in the words of Shakespeare "that nature might stand up and say to all the world: This was a man". Akhter Hameed Khan was a complete human being – his motto was simple living and high thinking.

When I asked him, "why did you resign from ICS"? Unlike the general impression that he resigned in protest against the policies of the colonial regime his answer was typical of his personality. He said he had learnt a great deal from the British and he realized that they

had nothing more to offer him. The British were masters of good administration of establishing pax Britannica but they had not much to offer to alleviate the sufferings of impoverished humanity. To understand the problems of the poor, Akhter Hameed Khan decided to quit the prestigious civil service but he was all praise for the British for respecting his views, his way of living and never interfering with his personal life. Akhter Hameed Khan became a labourer and accepted the internship of a blacksmith. However, he said one day he realized that God had not created him to be a labourer. He, therefore, decided to join the Jamia Millia in Delhi where Dr. Zakir Hussain, the future President of India was the head of the institution but Akhter Hameed Khan was disillusioned somewhat in the same manner as with Allama Mashriqi. Akhter Hameed Khan was a pacifist. He was a follower of Buddha's teachings of peace not war. He did not subscribe to German philosopher Nietche's heroes. He was a man of peace. He used to despair at hero worship in Pakistan. Sometimes he used to compare contemporary Pakistan to Ranjeet Singh's regime when the Khalsa Army used to boast to fly their flag on the Red Fort. The Maharaja used to beg his generals by putting his turban on their feet to desist from adventurism and never to take on the British army. Immediately on Ranjeet Singh's death, the chauvinistic Khalsa engaged the British and lost the Sikh Kingdom.

During his visits to AKRSP, he used to spend hours with the field staff and the activists and get to the bottom of the rural situation. Every time I accompanied him, I used to learn something new. He was literally a walking encyclopedia. His knowledge was fathomless. When on his visit to Sri Lanka, he asked me to take him to a Buddhist monastery to meet a Monk he surprised everyone there by reciting Dhammapadda in original Pali which monks could not understand because they had learnt only the translation in Sinhalese. He used to caution me never go to the original sources in matters of religion. You would be in for a shock what interpreters have made of the original and any challenge to their interpretation would be fought tooth and nail forcing you to retreat for the sake of your own skin. He was greatly influenced by Buddha's teachings and often used to call himself a Buddhist Muslim. He would have chosen Buddha's way and got rid of the worldly desires but he said I love my family too much. I can't leave them. But in adversity he would always seek solace in Buddha's saying "This world is full of Dukha".

I tried getting AHK interested in National Rural Support Programme (NRSP). Initially he was very sceptical of my having accepted an endowment of Rs. 500 million from government for NRSP which Mr. Sartaj Aziz persuaded Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to give. He had reached the conclusion that in Pakistan there was no government and no governance. He used to quote Dante's hell as equivalent of Pakistan Government which had these words inscribed on the gate "All that ye enter. Give up hope". With some reluctance he agreed to visit NRSP regularly and encouraged us by saying "NRSP is a great national asset. It is our last hope. I also tell you, yours is no easy job". His apprehensions about the danger of supping with government came to the fore when the successor government of the day wanted NRSP to return the five hundred million rupees given to it as if I was a blue eyed boy of Mr. Nawaz Sharif. Fortunately on AHK's advice, the money had already been converted into an endowment and when government demanded that all the directors should resign and liquidate the company, AHK being one of the directors reminded the Board of its moral responsibility to NRSP's clientele the 100,000 (at that time now the number has risen to over 2.5 million) rural households and the staff of NRSP and carried the day with him against liquidation of NRSP.

Once when I asked him will I have to wear Khaddar like him to do the work he was doing? He retorted you don't have to become a behropia. Don't insult the intelligence of the people. They will recognize your true worth in any garb. In Northern Areas he used to remind me that your western dress or hat or travel by helicopter has made no difference in poor people recognizing your real worth.

My coming away from AKRSP greatly saddened him that another opportunity to develop a self-reliant model for Pakistan was lost. I terribly missed the regular contact I used to have with him in AKRSP. He concentrated more and more on urban development and when I would complain to him about not giving me enough time supported by Begum Akhter Hameed Khan, he chided me for not concentrating on developing and replicating models at home instead running abroad all the time. He was most solicitous about my health and sometimes would innocently ask me "do you really need to earn so much money?" He would never understand that I did not need the money for myself but like him I also loved my family and wanted to give them everything in this world. He had already seen me living in a small room without modern amenities in the elephant country in Mahaweli forests of

Sri Lanka or in a small apartment in Gilgit for fifteen years. Anyway I was happy that he had started finding new disciples and the complaint he made in 1983 in the following speech was no more true:

“Nowadays there is a curious reluctance, especially among the younger generation to understand and learn. Everyone seems to think he is a master. It is strange because Masters are not born. What my sneering friends dismissed as my charisma was an acquired skill, a skill acquired after a long period of apprenticeship under British, Gandhian and American masters, a skill further sharpened by the study of many successful models in other countries – Japan, Taiwan, Yugoslavia, China, India and Israel. I never felt ashamed of my long and multiple discipleship. I never pretended to be an original thinker. I thought I could teach after I had devoted much time and labour to learning from many sources. When I was young I accepted the wise precepts of Khwaja Hafiz: **“Nasihāt gosh kun janan ki as jan dost tar darand javanan-i-saadatmand pindi-piri-dana ra”**”.

“As I grew old I began to think perhaps wrongly that I have not grown old in vain, that throughout my long life. I have been a good student; therefore, in my old age I could be a good teacher. In my delusion I thought that at last I too had become a pir-i-dana, a wise old man and I could give guidance to javanan-i-saadatmand enlightened young men. Alas, in twenty years, only one enlightened young man Shoaib Sultan Khan cherished me as a worthy teacher. He applied my methods, of course with necessary modifications, first in Daudzai and then in Mahaweli. And now he is applying them with further refinement and thoroughness in Gilgit. He has definitely disproved the obscurantist charisma theory. Is it my fault that I found only one enlightened young man”?

Despite his modesty, the fact is that more than four of his disciples got Magsaysay Award, also known as Asia’s Nobel Prize, two of them came from Pakistan myself and Tasneem Siddiqi, perhaps a record in the history of Magsaysay Award Foundation. AHK got the Award in 1963.

He was disturbed at dependence on foreign experts, saying “As I look back, I realize that there is one main feature in Pakistan which is very disturbing; the failure of governance. Things, which were done competently in the colonial past, are neglected. Let me give you an example. In the Punjab, the world’s largest irrigation network was built by Indian experts, the chief engineer might have been an Englishman but he had worked in India for 20 to 30 years. He was not a London-based consultant but an Indian officer and all his assistants were Indians”.

Despite the gloom enveloping the country, AHK always could see the brighter side. He spoke of the resilience and success of the informal sector. He used to challenge anyone to find a beggar in Orangi. He had great faith in the people – in their willingness to do things themselves to improve their situation. All they need, according to him, were support organisations and level playing fields. He used to say, “In Pakistan development will not come from the top. It will come from the bottom and it shall happen in pockets – one island formed here and one island there and one island will be made by you”.

Akhter Hameed Khan was the very epitome of the principle of simple living and high thinking. In his non-rural development garb his humility and generosity as a man, was amazing. His rapport with the rustic, the non-genteel, the labour, the lower government functionaries and the like was inimitable. He was absolutely at ease with them as much as he was uncomfortable with the pseudo intellectuals and experts. He neither knew evil nor could perceive evil and thus in judging people was very gullible. He was often led astray by such unscrupulous persons leaving him hurt and confused. He had no cunning and accepted everything on its face value. Why such an open, forthright, honest and simple person should have ever been misunderstood was something beyond my comprehension. Trumped up cases of blasphemy were instituted against him.

When I got an opportunity at a dinner hosted by the Prime Minister, I spoke to him about the injustice to AHK. He agreed to see him and Qazi Alimullah arranged the meeting. The Prime Minister listened to AHK for nearly an hour but I knew from his expression he was not listening because AHK only spoke of development and did not realize he had gone to him to talk about his blasphemy cases. After the meeting AHK observed the PM did not understand what he was saying. When I asked him “why didn’t you speak about your

blasphemy case”, he replied, “do you know when Monim Khan, Governor of East Pakistan used to complain against me to President Ayub. The latter used to brush away all complaints by retorting AHK is the only person in Pakistan who never comes to me for any personal favour”. Anyway the Prime Minister ordered the withdrawal of the cases against AHK. The request of the Government of Sindh in Karachi was accepted by the presiding judge and the case was allowed to be withdrawn however, the case registered in Multan was not allowed to be withdrawn by the court despite Punjab Government’s request and remained pending till his death.

Akhter Hameed Khan passed away in the United States where he was visiting his beloved daughter and I am glad Ayesha now a full-fledged MD doctor is here. President General Pervaiz Musharraf posthumously honoured Akhter Hameed Khan by conferring Nishan-i-Imtiaz.

In conclusion I will repeat what I have often said. “In all my travels throughout the world, I have never come across a person of the stature of Akhter Hameed Khan. I sometimes wonder did Pakistan really make the best use of the unique experience with which he was so willing and keen to benefit his countrymen and women. But now it is too late even to ask this question. The country has missed an opportunity of a century”.