

In memory of D^r Salam

jeudi 21 octobre 2010, par [SAEED Shahid](#) (Date de rédaction antérieure : 20 octobre 2010).

Mohammad Abdus Salam (January 29, 1926-November 21, 1996) was a Pakistani theoretical physicist, astrophysicist and Nobel laureate in Physics for his work in Electro-Weak Theory. Salam, Sheldon Glashow and Steven Weinberg shared the prize for this discovery. Salam is the first Pakistani and the first Muslim Nobel Laureate to receive the prize in the Sciences. But he was member of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community...

Salam has certainly been honoured far more by countries other than his own and perhaps even disowned by his own country. He was eventually buried in Rabwah but the local magistrate had the tombstone defaced and got the word "Muslim" erased from it. Even in his death, his faith was to be the basis of maltreatment

On October 15, 1979, The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences announced that the world's highest award in Physics would be awarded to three scientists "for their contributions to the theory of the unified weak and electromagnetic interaction between elementary particles". One of them was named Abdus Salam and he was born in Jhang in 1926 to a proud working class Punjabi family. He would go on to become one of the most important theoretical physicists of his day, contribute to one of the most important theories in Physics, the Grand Unified Theory and die a proud Pakistani on November 21, 1996 in Oxford after living a life where he was celebrated as one of the greatest minds of the century. His country however would not celebrate him as a hero and his name remain unknown to a large percentage. The tragedy of his treatment at the hands of his countrymen is unparalleled and there is still visible uneasiness and perhaps even fear in accepting him as a national hero.

Salam left this country once his research work was not appreciated and even frowned upon by the administrators at GC. He had already established himself as a leading theoretical physicist of the day with his doctoral thesis and was given a professorship at Imperial College, aged just 31. He served as the Scientific Secretary of the United Nations Atoms for Peace Conference and remained the Chief Scientific Advisor to the President of Pakistan from 1961 to 1974. He was instrumental in setting up PINSTECH and SUPARCO and remained a board member of PAEC for quite a long time as well. With the IAEA's support, Salam established the International Centre for Theoretical Physics (ICTP) at Trieste in Italy since the Italian government made the most generous offer for the establishment of the centre. Throughout his life he championed the cause of his country and remained loyal to the cause of scientific advancement in third world countries.

When the Nobel Prize was announced, the government of India was the first to invite him and the government of Pakistan only reacted when the High Commissioner in London intimated Islamabad of the Delhi invitation. Out of the 42 honorary doctorates bestowed upon him by universities across the globe, five were from Indian universities. Later, he delivered the convocation address at the Guru Dev Nanak University, Amritsar, in the (pure) Punjabi and the university had on his request invited

four of his primary school teachers as well. The prime minister of India, Indira Gandhi, invited him to tea at her residence, made tea for him with her own hands and sat down at his feet saying this was her traditional way of honouring great people. Country after country, he was welcomed as a state guest, often welcomed by heads of states at airports. In contrast to all this, on his arrival back in his homeland in December 1979 he was received at Lahore, Peshawar and Islamabad by the military secretaries to the governors and the president. The Quaid-e-Azam University had to shift the function of the award of an honorary doctorate to the National Assembly Hall because students of the Islami Jamiat-i-Talaba (the student wing of the Jamaat-e-Islami) had protested and disrupted the event. The event in Lahore had to be shifted to the Senate Hall because of similar protests at the University of Punjab. The protesters threatened to murder him. His alma mater, Government College, did not even invite him.

In his book *The Coffee House of Lahore*, Pakistan's pre-eminent historian K K Aziz narrates the incident surrounding the January 1983 honorary degree award upon Dr Salam by the University of Khartoum (Sudan). Saudi Arabia has immense political influence in Sudan and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia tried to intervene and get the event cancelled because of Dr Salam's religious beliefs. On January 7, the Saudi ambassador met the Sudanese President Field Marshal Nimeiry and asked him to get the event cancelled. The faculty of the university asserted their autonomy and threatened to resign in protest if there were to be any political intervention. The event went ahead but not without controversy as the Secretary General of the Arab Science Foundation found it necessary to interrupt Dr Salam numerous times in his speech. Dr Salam later told Aziz that at an event at the Presidency, Mard-e-Momin Ziaul Haq asked him loudly in the presence of everybody, "Will you offer prayers with everybody or separately?" asserting that he was of a different faith. These are not one-off treatments as in 1986 he wanted to become the Director General of UNESCO but the government of Pakistan refused to nominate him as its candidate. Instead, Lt General Sahibzada Yaqub Ali Khan was nominated as our candidate (he was no less a great man but there is little comparison between the two). In contrast to his motherland, Britain and Italy offered to support his candidature if he were to become their citizen.

Today, the world's biggest particle physics laboratory, CERN, is conducting the largest experiment in the history of mankind at the Large Hadron Collider in search of fundamental answers to the creation of the universe. The Higgs Boson, predicted and worked on by Salam, is at the centre of this research and CERN proudly boasts a street named in his honour. What was this country able to give to this great man? A solitary Nishan-i-Imtiaz? Abdul Qadeer Khan has two of those and the notorious Sharifuddin Pirzada has one as well. The fact that a leading Urdu magazine, Takbeer, accused Salam of selling our nuclear secrets is just a reminder of how his countrymen treated him. We issued a solitary stamp in his honour, but so did the African country of Benin. The ICTP today is named in his honour in contrast to the National Centre of Physics in Islamabad. In fact, except the Department of Mathematics at GCU, there is no landmark, no institute, no building, no department or university in this country named after the greatest scientist this country has ever produced. Salam has certainly been honoured far more by countries other than his own and perhaps even disowned by his own country.

He was eventually buried in Rabwah (renamed Chenab Nagar in pursuance of the persecution and harassment of the Ahmedis) but the local magistrate had the tombstone defaced and got the word "Muslim" erased from it. Even in his death, his faith was to be the basis of maltreatment and the people of his community live as second grade citizens. Something the government of Pakistan can do today is perhaps name the new Islamabad airport after him. Name an institute or two after him, or maybe even financially and administratively help the documentary being made on his life by Sabiha Sumar and Zakir Thaver (a letter in this regard received no response from any government quarter).

It has been 31 years since he became our first and only Nobel laureate, nearly 14 years since his death. The doctrinal differences over faith seem to have far more importance to this country than anything else. Can we forgive ourselves for how we treated one of the greatest — if not the greatest — citizens of Pakistan ? Is there any redemption for the people of Pakistan ? It should be a moment of deep reflection for us all.

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* From the Daily Times,
Wednesday, October 20, 2010 :
http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2010\10\20\story_20-10-2010_pg3_4

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