



An aerial view of the 'Abdus Salam International Centre for Theoretical Physics', at Trieste

Courtesy: www.ibn-oeaw.ac.at

# Tribute to greatness

**Hiba Akbar** talks to *Omar Vandal and Zakir Thaver* about their efforts to make a documentary on the great *Dr Abdus Salam*

**“T**o this day I remain in awe of what my late father achieved in such a short space of time, and the impact he had on so many lives, in so many ways,” says Ahmad Salam, son of Dr Abdus Salam, on the website of Kailoola Productions LLC. Omar Vandal and Zakir Thaver, along with a team of advisors and experts, lead on to capture this impact on camera.

We know Abdus Salam as Pakistan’s only Nobel Laureate to date, and the first ever Muslim Nobel Laureate in science. But how much do we know about him as a person and as a human being?

Dr Abdus Salam’s story is the story of a young boy from rural Jhang who saw a light bulb for the first time at the age of fifteen, and rose to set up the International Centre for Theoretical Physics (ICTP) in Italy and win

the Nobel Prize for Physics at the age of fifty-three. Along the way, he set a record for the highest marks ever scored in Matriculation Exams, and taught at Government College, Lahore and Cambridge University in the UK.

That is about as much as any of us know about Salam. At one stage, Omar Vandal and Zakir Thaver, two Pakistani youngsters studying in the US, were no different from those who know so little about the great man. Salam’s death flew by in 1996 while they were pursuing their degrees abroad without even stirring a leaf back home. They had no idea about his achievements beyond the Nobel Prize. Surprised and ashamed at not knowing about a Nobel Laureate from their own country, they decided to investigate further. It is in this process that the idea of making a documentary about Salam was born.

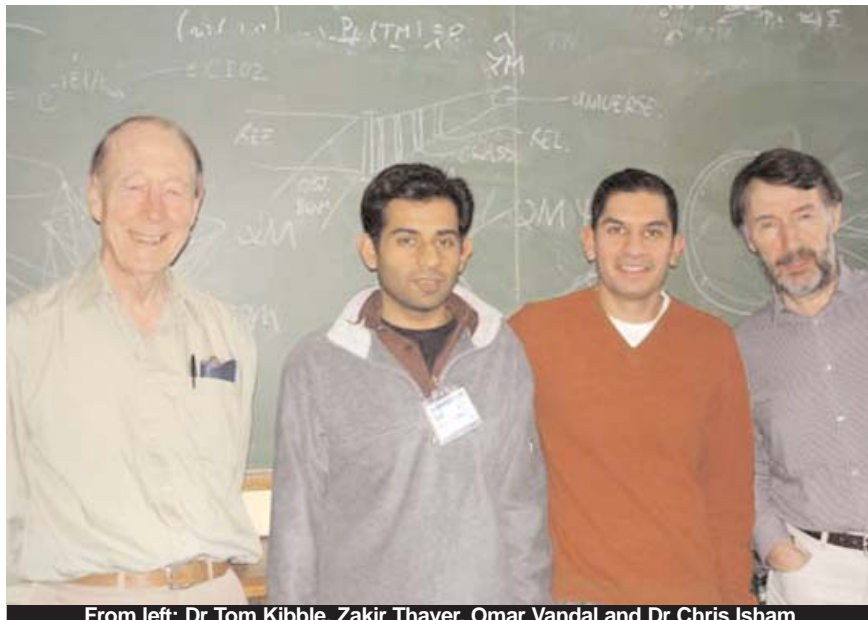
Excited though I was about meeting people who are working on a documentary about the late Nobel Laureate, what I was not expecting was their immense passion and zeal for anything and everything to do with Salam. What started off as an interview ended up being a torrent of Salam-related facts; facts

that made even a person like me who appreciates Salam’s work, respect the late Nobel Laureate infinitely more.

Omar and Zakir were quick to point out that they aren’t nationalistic per se. Their reason for making this documentary is simply to honour Dr Salam and pay him the tribute that he truly deserves. “He was a massive figure on the world stage,” says Zakir, “and he did so much to motivate third world scientists. We’re just thinking along those lines. We want to get his inspirational story out to people”.

And what makes him such a ‘massive figure’ for Omar and Zakir?

“When you talk to all those people who had been associated with Salam in his life, you get a sense of how great he was,” says Zakir. “When we sent out our first emails about this documentary back in 2002, we got responses within the hour! Pervez Hoodbhoy, his family, even Steven Weinberg – who shared the Nobel Prize with Salam – replied almost instantly, praising our initiative. The ICTP sent over archival material to start us off. All these people are extremely busy – scientists – and they took the time to reply to us



From left: Dr Tom Kibble, Zakir Thaver, Omar Vandal and Dr Chris Isham

**Zakir and Omar do not lose hope. They continue to ‘work by day and hustle by night’, as filmmaker Mira Nair advised them to. Just when they are about to lose hope, a small \$50 donation, coupled with a friendly, supportive email sends the two onto cloud nine, and they are back, working with the same fervour as before**

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simply because it was about Salam. *That* is how great a personality Salam is. We're just feeding off their energy!"

As Zakir narrated to me what Asghar Qadir, a student of Dr Salam, and now lecturer of Physics at Quaid-e-Azam University, told them, I began to get a sense of what they mean. Qadir related how, once while on the phone with Salam, Qadir began complaining to his ex-teacher how difficult it is to do anything out of the box here in Pakistan, how difficult it is to 'give back', as Salam kept insisting his students must. These complaints made Salam see red. He lashed out at Qadir, shouting at him over the phone for complaining about a tiny hurdle he had met on his road. Salam reminded him that if he himself could set up the ICTP almost entirely on his own, Qadir could do his bit too, however little, to help Pakistan.

The ICTP (Abdus Salam International Centre for Theoretical Physics), in fact, was Dr Salam's life. His attitude of work there and the close attention he gave every aspect of this establishment reveals how dear it was to Salam, dearer than even the honour of the Nobel Prize. He worked tirelessly for the ICTP, never taking days off, never 'slacking off' so to say, in order to inspire the people around him to do the same.

The ICTP was born out of Salam's own intellectual isolation during the time he was in Pakistan. After having finished his education at Cambridge University, Salam returned to Pakistan to teach at Government College, Lahore. The lack of post-graduate research here frustrated his brilliant mind. He wished to carry out further research in the field of Physics, but it was fast becoming clear to him that Pakistan was not the place to achieve that. Thus, he was forced to choose between his country and his discipline: he chose the latter and went to Europe to carry out research in Physics.

In 1964, Salam set up the International Centre for Theoretical Physics in Trieste, Italy. He had initially wanted to set up the centre in



The Abdus Salam Block at Government College University, Lahore

Pakistan, but the Government back home was less than interested. Today, the ICTP is a home base for students from developing countries looking to remain abreast with cutting-edge research and knowledge in the world of Physics. Salam's mission to help scientists from developing countries is being fulfilled in its full letter and spirit at the ICTP today.

People associated with the ICTP look upon Dr Abdus Salam as a hero. Students who have

been at the ICTP claim that Salam has 'changed their life'. Tears well up in the eyes of eighty-year-old academicians at the ICTP who have worked with Salam in the past when they talk about him. Pakistanis at the centre are often posed the question "So, when are you winning the Nobel Prize?" People in Trieste automatically assume that all Pakistanis are as brilliant as Salam. "It is the one place on earth where you feel proud to be a Pakistani," adds Omar with a sigh.

So making a documentary about someone who seems to have charmed so many people in his life must be pretty easy, I ask them. But the truth is quite the opposite. The documentary is proving quite a challenge for Omar and Zakir, simply because of one factor: finances. Both undertook this project purely out of interest. While Salam's colleagues, students, friends and family have been immensely supportive, giving Omar and Zakir a lot of their time, others have been less helpful. The whole project requires about US \$500,000, and to date they have not been able to collect even a quarter of that amount. With the major part of the filming of the documentary in Europe to go, money is fast becoming a major concern for the young filmmakers.

These filmmakers looked to the corporate sector in Pakistan to fulfil the project's financial needs. However, people have not been as supportive of their initiative as Zakir and Omar had hoped they would be. Many have been hesitant to donate or pledge because of Salam's Ahmadi faith. "Which is surprising when you consider what a teacher at Salam's old school, sporting a beard going down to his waist said to us," says Omar. "The man plainly stated: 'Salam was not simply an Ahmadi. He was a Pakistani first!' when we hesitantly pointed this out to him."

With Salam's picture hanging in their classrooms, these students and teachers at Government High School, Jhang, are the epitome of dedication to Salam's dream. As Zakir and Omar describe to me just how much these children who have never even seen Salam are in awe of the man, I begin to wonder why

everyday Pakistanis find it difficult to put their money where their mouth is. People completely willing to donate back off the minute they discover Salam's faith. Despite the option of donating anonymously at the documentary's website, few have used that option to donate even a few dollars to this cause.

Still, Zakir and Omar do not lose hope. They continue to 'work by day and hustle by night', as filmmaker Mira Nair advised them to. Just when they are about to lose hope, a

small \$50 donation coupled with a friendly, supportive email sends the two onto cloud nine, and they are back, working with the same fervour as before. Former students of the ICTP regularly email them telling them how Dr Salam has 'changed their life'. "Just a \$20 donation with a nice email makes us so happy, we spend the next hour online talking about how good it feels," chuckles Omar.

"Ramanujan inspired a generation of Indian scientists. Madam Curie, a woman from Poland continues to be an inspiration to this day. Salam's story

has the potential to do the same," Omar points out. Zakir and Omar plan to do just that: one of their dearest plans is to show the documentary to the children at Salam's old school in Jhang.

With the likes of Sabiha Sumar (director of *Khamosh Pani*), Indian filmmaker Mira Nair, Dr Ahmed Zewail (the only other Muslim Nobel Prize winner besides Salam), Dr Moeen Qureshi and Charles Townes (another Nobel Laureate) on board for their project, one can expect a lot from Omar and Zakir, provided they have the finances in the future to continue with their project uninterrupted.

As I got up to leave, I felt awe and appreciation for Dr Salam balloon within me. I smiled to myself as I realised that Omar and Zakir's passion for the nation's tragic hero had rubbed off on me. ■

Omar Vandal and Zakir Thaver have set up a website for the documentary at [www.abdussalamdocufilm.com](http://www.abdussalamdocufilm.com)

Hiba Akbar lives in Lahore



Salam's childhood home in Jhang