



Abul Kalam Azad

## In Defense of Liberty and Justice

*"Today's world is traveling in some strange direction. You see that the world is going toward destruction and violence. And the specialty of violence is to create hatred among people and to create fear. I am a believer in nonviolence and I say that no peace or tranquility will descend upon the people of the world until nonviolence is practiced, because nonviolence is love and it stirs courage in people."*

– Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, 1985

The following statements were offered by Abul Kalam Azad as he assumed leadership in 1920 with Mohandas Gandhi and others in a campaign of non cooperation to protest the British imposition of severe restrictions on civil liberties using the Rowlatt Acts. He had just been released from four years in prison imposed for nationalistic statements he made in his journal, *Al-Balagh*. Gandhi referred to Azad's 33 page "Great Statement" as an "eloquent thesis" and "an oration deserving penal servitude for life". In his statements, Azad expresses both universal principles of human freedom and justice and indicates the distinctive values of Islam in relation to peace and democracy. More about Abul Kalam Azad, his friendship with Gandhi and his tireless work for over 50 years for Indian independence and universal education were the subject of an Institute of World Culture Forum, **Practicing Principles of Nonviolence**, held Saturday, October 2, 2010 at Concord House.

"History bears witness to it that whenever the ruling powers took up arms against freedom and justice the court-rooms were used as most simple and harmless weapons. The jurisdiction of courts is a force that could be utilized both for justice and injustice. In the hands of a just Government it becomes the best means of righteousness but to the repressive and tyrant Government no other weapon is more useful for vengeance and injustice than this.

"Next to battlefields courts have played a prominent part in setting the example of injustice in the history of the world. From the holy founders of the religions to the inventors and pioneers of science, there is no holy or righteous personality which was not produced before the courts like criminals.

"The iniquities of courts of law constitute an endless list and history has not yet finished singing the elegy of such miscarriage of justice. In that list we observe a holy personage

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like Jesus, who had to stand in his time before a foreign court and be convicted even as the worst of criminals. We see also in the same list Socrates, who was sentenced to be poisoned for no other crime than that of being the most truthful person of his age. We meet also the name of that great Florentine martyr to truth, the inventor Galileo, who refused to belie his observations and researches merely because their avowal was a crime in the eyes of constituted authority . . . When I ponder on the great and significant history of the convicts' dock and find that the honour of standing in that place belongs to me to-day, *my* soul becomes steeped in thankfulness and praise of God . . .

An awakened nation aspires to attain what it considers its birth-right, and the dominant authority would fain not budge an inch from its position of unquestioned way . . . We cannot deny facts of human nature and its inseparable characteristics. Like good, evil also desires to live in this world and struggle for its own existence. In India also such a struggle for the survival of the fittest has already commenced. Most certainly, therefore, nothing can be a higher crime against the domination of Government as at present established, than the agitation which seeks to terminate its unlimited authority in the name of liberty and justice. I fully admit that I am not only guilty of such agitation, but that I belong to that band of pioneers who originally sowed the seed of such agitation in the heart of our nation and dedicated their whole lives to the cherishing and breeding of this holy discontent.

"It is my belief that liberty is the natural and God-given right of man. No man and no bureaucracy consisting of men has got the right to make the servants of God its own slaves. However attractive be the euphemisms invented for 'subjugation' and 'slavery', still slavery is slavery and it is opposed to the will and the canons of God. I therefore consider it a bounden duty to liberate my country from its yoke. The notorious fallacies of 'reform' and 'gradual transference of power' can produce no illusions and pitfalls in my unequivocal and definite faith.

Liberty being the primary right of man, it is nobody's personal privilege to prescribe limits or apportion shares in the distribution of it. To say that a nation should get its liberty in graduated stages is the same as saying that an owner should by right receive his property only in bits and creditor his dues by installments.

"Evil cannot be classified into good and bad. All that is in fairness possible is to differentiate the varying degree. For instance, we can say very heinous robbery and less heinous robbery, but who can speak of good robbery and bad robbery? I cannot, therefore, at all conceive of any justification for such domination because by its very nature it is an act of iniquity."

"Such is my duty as a man and as an Indian, and religious injunctions have imposed upon me the same duty. In fact, in my view the greatest proof of the truth of my religion is that it is another name for the teaching of the rights of man. I am a Musalman, and by virtue of being a Musalman this has become my religious duty. Islam never accepts as valid a sovereignty which is personal or is constituted of a bureaucracy of a handful of paid executives . . . Monarchs, foreign dominations, selfish religious pontiffs and powerful sections had alike misappropriated this liberty of man. They had been fondly nursing the belief that power and possession spell the highest right. The moment Islam appeared, it proclaimed that the highest right is not might but right itself. No one except

God has got the right to make serfs and slaves of God's creatures. All men are equal and their fundamental rights are on a par. He only is greater than others whose deeds are the most righteous of all . . .

“The tenets of Islam are preserved in its scriptures. These, under no circumstances, make it permissible for Muslims to enjoy life at the expense of liberty. A true Muslim has either to immolate himself or to retain his liberty; no other course is open to him under his religion. To-day the Muslims have come to a firm decision that in freeing their country from its slavery they will take their fullest share along with their Hindu, Sikh, Parsi and Christian brethren.

“For four years I have suffered internment, but during my internment even I have never desisted from pushing on my work and inviting people to this national goal. This is the mission of my life, and if I live at all I elect to live only for this single purpose . . . ”In this war of liberty and justice I have adopted the path of non-violent non-co-operation. Opposed to us stands an authority armed with the complete equipment for oppression, excess and bloodshed. But we place our reliance and trust next to God, only upon our own limitless power of sacrifice and unshakable fortitude.

“Unlike Mahatma Gandhi my belief is not that armed force should never be opposed by armed force. It is my belief that such opposing of violence with violence is fully in harmony with the natural laws of God in those circumstances under which Islam permits the use of such violence. But at the same time, for purposes of liberation of India and the present agitation, I entirely agree with all the arguments of Mahatma Gandhi and I have complete confidence in his honesty. It is my definite conviction that India cannot attain success by means of arms, nor is it advisable for it to adopt that course. India can only triumph through non-violent agitation, and India's triumph will be a memorable example of the victory of moral force.”

Abul Kalam Azad