

Daisaku Ikeda's Recollections of World Figures
Dr. B. N. Pande—
An Indomitable Champion of Human Rights

AT first glance, you know when you have met a great person who has overcome life-and-death struggles. So it was at my first meeting with India's Dr. Bishambhar Nath Pande, a direct disciple of Mahatma Gandhi (1868–1948). Our minds instantly reached out to each other, and I knew I had met a person of outstanding humanity. In the solid faith and commitment that radiated from his being, he was like a rock; in his profound spiritual depth, he was like the ocean. As we talked more and I came to know him better, that impression only grew stronger.

He is, together with the late Brazilian Academy of Letters President Austregésilo de Athayde, one of the great champions of human rights of our times. There are no more respectable people; we must not fail to commend and value them.

Making the trip all the way to Japan in 1992 in spite of his advanced age (this year [1995] he will turn 89), Dr. Pande shared his family history with me—a family history that is like an account of the Indian struggle for independence in miniature. Dr. Pande told me how his grandfather was executed for his involvement in the independence movement.

In 1857, Dr. Pande's ancestors joined in an uprising of Indian soldiers that formed in response to unbearably cruel oppression from the British government. His grandfather was one of seven children; of the seven, five were killed in the struggle and one disappeared. His grandfather, the only remaining son, was later executed. On the very day his body was brought back to the family home, Dr. Pande's father was born.

Shortly thereafter, all of the family's property was confiscated and they were driven out of their village. Many of the surviving family members were women and children. They hid during the day and traveled on foot at night.

Tragedy struck when Dr. Pande's father was 1 year old. Early in the afternoon, after taking lodging in a certain village, Dr. Pande's grandmother took his father down to a stream to wash. While they were there, British forces attacked the village, burning the houses and the people inside. Thirty-five of the Pande family members were killed. Only Dr. Pande's grandmother and her infant son survived.

Mother and child lived on, undergoing indescribable hardships. How could they forget such sorrow and rage? Because of it, Dr. Pande's father grew up to fight for freedom, too.

In the same way, Dr. Pande grew up with his father's and grandfather's righteous anger carved into his bones. In fact, on the day that Dr. Pande was born (December 23, 1906), his father was in prison.

What prevented Dr. Pande from allowing his anger to turn toward violent revolution and from ending up condemned to death by the authorities like his grandfather? Looking back, Dr. Pande attributes this to two special meetings.

The first encounter was with the poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) when Dr. Pande was a young boy. From Tagore, the young Pande learned three things: about the world, about the love of humanity, and about Mahatma Gandhi. Dr. Pande's second meeting was with Gandhi himself—a meeting that changed his life. From Gandhi, he learned about nonviolence and the nobility of working alongside and for the people.

Tagore represented a garden of culture, while Gandhi personified the great earth of

humanity.

The Indian independence movement grew in intensity. It came to a head in the first month (of the Hindu calendar) in 1919. The British fired on a meeting of civilians in the Punjab; the injured and dead numbered more than fifteen hundred. The Indian people had reached the limits of their endurance. They could no longer accept a government that killed people with impunity, as if they were no more than flies. The youthful Dr. Pande's blood surged. He determined to join Gandhi in the struggle.

IT was on an April afternoon in spring of 1921. Fourteen-year-old Pande, letter of introduction from Tagore in hand, visited Gandhi at his ashram. Gandhi, 51 at the time, looked the boy over slowly from head to toe. He asked the young Pande if he really wanted to live in the ashram. "Yes, of course," was the answer. Confirming that Pande was of the Brahman class, he entrusted the boy into a caretaker's keeping. He then asked the man to raise the boy well, specifying that Pande's first responsibility be cleaning toilets. In India, it was unthinkable that someone from a high caste as the Brahman would ever perform such a task!

Dr. Pande commented that in later years he was deeply grateful to Gandhi for assigning him to clean toilets. He realized that his mentor was determined to eliminate any feeling of superiority that young Brahman child might have felt toward his fellow Indians. Thus, Gandhi's actions as a mentor taught Dr. Pande to empathize with the oppressed.

Gandhi constantly taught his followers never to be alienated from the people, to always enter their midst, and to work for them; to devote oneself to them and serve them; and to become one of them by being their friend and their companion. He taught this all by his own example.

YET there were times when these teachings of Gandhi were not actualized by his followers. For instance, Gandhi lamented that when someone became a member of the national assembly, he or she tended to break away from the common people. But Dr. Pande was different. Even when he later became governor of the state of Orissa (1983–88), he was praised for sharing everything with the people and for living as one of them and experiencing their joys and sorrows, laughter and tears.

I understand Dr. Pande's feelings: his pride and joy is to live his life exactly as his mentor taught him. When his mentor, Gandhi, loved by millions, praised Dr. Pande's efforts, it was as if he, too, was praised by those millions. Is there any greater glory than this?

Young Pande devoted himself to work with his mentor. At age 15, one year after his meeting with Gandhi, Dr. Pande spent six months in jail. Altogether, he has been imprisoned eight times, for a total of nearly ten years.

He lived through tumultuous times. His boyhood was spent commuting between prison and Tagore's school. As he grew into a youth, he witnessed abominable cruelty and the arrogance of those in power. Yet, at the same time, he saw the nobility of the people, who had abandoned all fear.

During the massacre in Peshawar, for instance, more than 400 were killed, but not one of them took a bullet in the back. Under the barrage of British fire, they marched forward, ever forward. In another state, ten children were strung upside down from trees by British soldiers. They hung there, nearly unconscious and bleeding from the nose and mouth. However, when Dr. Pande approached, he could hear them

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whispering in weak voices, like the sound of a mosquito's hum, "Long live the revolution."

In 1932, there was a general strike to protest Gandhi's imprisonment. Dr. Pande and the other people of the town lay down in front of the British soldiers. The officers beat the demonstrators with clubs, and the mounted police trampled them. Dr. Pande's knee was broken—to this day, it has not completely healed. Even this could not deter them.

Gandhi's power was his "great soul" (lit. mahatma) that could transform the people into heroes. When Gandhi passed through a crowd, people's hearts were purified, and all fear evaporated.

WHEN a mentor and his disciple are united in spirit, unbelievable courage, strength and compassion emanate from their lives. The relationship between Gandhi and his followers was a great experiment, a great demonstration, which unfolded during the passionate struggle for freedom.

In 1942, Dr. Pande went to East Bengal. Five young girls were at the head of a demonstration of a thousand people. "Disperse or we'll shoot!" shouted the British commander. But the girls did not run away. The girl in the lead, who was carrying the flag, was shot: Within thirty seconds, twenty-eight bullets were fired into her frail body, and she fell. Immediately, the next girl picked up the flag—she was also shot. The third, then the fourth, and the fifth girl in turn took up the flag and each was shot down. All died grasping the flag to her heart. When the last girl was struck down, the flag was still waving.

When independence was finally declared, Dr. Pande said that he didn't have the heart to celebrate. The cost, the sacrifice, had been too cruel.

We must also never forget the tears that have been shed. Our freedom today, too, owes much to those who fought bravely against oppression and laid down their lives in the struggle.

Gandhi taught Dr. Pande to be a soldier in the army of the spirit of nonviolence, and to spare himself no hardship for the sake of practicing its tenets. Dr. Pande replied by keeping up the struggle long after his mentor's death. Gandhi's goal—to wipe away the tears from every eye that cries—has not yet been achieved; the light he kindled must not be allowed to be extinguished.

Dr. Pande did not forget that the women who marched in the Salt March never dropped their salt, no matter how many times they were beaten by the British. They held onto their fist of salt with their last ounce of strength, even as they drifted from consciousness in the hospital. In their hands, they were holding onto the dream of the day when the people, who had been oppressed for so long, would claim final victory.

DR. Pande confided to me that if he were only twenty years younger, he would like to work with and support me more actively in the struggle for world peace. He declared that he understood how great were the difficulties I had experienced, because he had also been fighting those same difficulties throughout his life. When I heard his words, a strong emotion passed over me. "Your words," I said, "are the greatest support I could ever hope for."

I was moved by Dr. Pande's integrity and earnestness. What a contrast from the majority of leaders, who only use their positions to further their own interests and protect their privileges! The vow to serve others that he took as a young boy still burns brightly in his heart.

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Dr. Pande then offered an important insight. Gandhi, he said, practiced the teachings of Shakyamuni as a means to transform society. He went on to say that Buddhism originally declined in India because the priests grew too wealthy and became corrupt. However, Dr. Pande believes at the present time that the SGI is bringing the message of both Shakyamuni and Gandhi to society around the world through action.

Before he died, Gandhi said that if his spirit could serve as a light to the world, he would go on speaking even from his grave. These last words have come true. Through the person of Dr. Pande, who embodies his mentor's spirit, Gandhi still speaks to us today.

Dr. Pande looked me straight in the eye and declared that, as Gandhi's disciple, he would not let his mentor's cry fade, but he would continue to fight, keeping his message alive until the last day of his life. □