

Afghan professor writing first Pashto book on Gandhi

Talking about Mahatma Gandhi in war-torn Afghanistan is not as absurd as it seems, says a 50-year-old Afghan professor who teaches here and is writing the 'first ever book in Pashto' on the great Indian proponent of non-violence.

A.K. Rashid witnessed the worst of civil war in Afghanistan, something that turned his city, Kabul, into blackened ruin, tore apart families - including his own - and drove its citizens into refugee camps. That is why he wants to reintroduce Gandhi to his people.

'I want to reintroduce Gandhiji to my people. We need him now,' Rashid, a visiting Professor of Pashto at Jawaharlal Nehru University here, told IANS.

Rashid has been busy researching various sources on Gandhiji's life - be it in Hindi, Gujarati or Bengali - for his book, tentatively titled, 'Gandhi - Azwant Au Fikar' (Gandhi: Life And Ideals)'.

'It will be the first ever book in Pashto on Gandhi,' says Rashid.

Rashid recently presented a paper titled 'Gandhian Approach of Resolving the Afghan Conflict' at a workshop here. Recognising the seeming incongruity of his topic, his first words at the presentation were, 'Just a mere sound of the above topic will bring a sarcastic smile on everyone's face!'

But Rashid says: 'Non-violence is an ancient idea of our region. It is also the main basis in the holy Quran. A Muslim has to be non-violent, as it is said so in the holy book,' he says. 'I have read the holy book thoroughly. Nobody can challenge me on that.'

He says the 'first and only army of non-violence' was formed among the Pashtuns, referring to the Khudai Khidmatgar movement founded by freedom fighter Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan against British rule in India. The Pashtuns are one of the dominant tribes of Afghanistan.

Rashid says Gandhi's teachings were compatible with Islam. 'I believe, in more than 60 percent of his beliefs he is following Islamic law.'

'We learnt about Gandhiji in our school textbooks... He is extremely well known. In fact, when (late Indian prime minister) Indira Gandhi came to Kabul (in 1976), people lined up in droves along the motorcade route, as they thought that Gandhi's daughter had come,' Rashid says.

Rashid had first come to India in 1996 as a visiting professor and stayed on for four years - during which he completed a doctorate from Jamia Millia Islamia. He had also done a translation of Kalidasa's 'Meghadootam' from Sanskrit to Pashto during that period.

In 2004, he returned to his fifth floor Kabul apartment to find his beloved library - which had over 2,000 rare books in Pashto and Dari - riddled with bullet-marks.

'I found six bullets embedded inside pages. My books had become the latest victims of terror,' says Rashid, with a chuckle. 'I removed the books from their shelves and put them into sacks. That's how they still remain in my locked flat,' he says.

Within two years of returning to Kabul, he was back in India in 2006 for his current stint as a visiting professor with JNU's Centre for Persian and Central Asian Studies.

His family remains scattered across the world, with some members in Kabul and the rest, including his three children, outside its borders. 'We are a typical Afghan family,' he says with a sad smile.

Interestingly, after his presentation at the workshop, an Indian listener came up to him. 'The man said nobody believes in Gandhi here (in India). I told him that you may not believe in him, but we need him in Afghanistan,' says Rashid.

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