

WHY KASHMIR CALLS TO ME

Version 2 — 10-Minute Talk

Designed for approximately 9½–10 minutes at a reflective pace

Good morning. My name is Rajkumar “Raju” Suryakant Bhatt, Founder of Global Mediation Team.

Before I begin, please join me in one minute of silence for my mother, who passed on September 21, 2022—the International Day of Peace. My brother and sister are here, and together we honor her love and her 50 years of service as a nurse and midwife.

[Pause for one minute of silence.]

Before I speak about Kashmir, I want to begin with a photograph.

[Show photograph with Indira Gandhi.]

At eight, I sat at the feet of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and was amazed by her presence. I began reading Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and other leaders of India’s independence movement. I also saw the painful distance between the haves and have-nots. Gandhiji inspired my dream of helping end poverty and hunger and creating a more peaceful world.

But my connection to India began before I had words for it.

My mother was born in Kenya and my father came through Uganda, although both families came from Vaso, Gujarat, where they had lived a few houses apart. They never met there; their journeys finally brought them together in England.

I was born in London. At nine months, while my mother studied midwifery, I was sent to relatives in India until age four. India became connected within me to family, culture, and spirituality, but also to the early wound of leaving and returning.

I am the oldest of four children—two younger sisters and a youngest brother. I have kept our small family home in Vaso, the only home or land I own. My mother cared for its repairs, and I feel responsible for preserving it.

That home holds ancestry, identity, memory, grief, and belonging. My attachment to Vaso gives me a small window into Kashmiris’ profound connection to home and ancestral land. When land is divided, threatened, or lost, the wound is deeply personal.

My mother served for 50 years as a nurse and midwife. My father was a pujari—a Hindu priest and pandit—who performed marriages, pujas, and blessings. They taught me that service and healing have practical and spiritual dimensions.

Indian culture filled my upbringing: Indian food and weddings, and watching—and sometimes joining—my father’s Hindu rites. India remained part of my daily life in the West.

From age eight, I sat at the feet of my Guruji, Shri Brahmananda Sarasvati—Dr. Ramamurti S. Mishra. Our sattvic, Yoga-Vedanta home taught me meditation, chanting, prayer, vegetarian living, and how to create space within myself.

Growing up Indian in Texas was isolating. As the first Indian student in my high school, I learned to move between cultures—a trailblazer before I knew the word.

This led me to public policy and international relations at the LBJ School, then legislative and appropriations work at the Texas Capitol. My calling toward international peacebuilding remained.

Today, I live in Boulder with my Australian wife, Kahtia. Through thick and thin, she has helped me navigate this personal, cultural, spiritual, and political journey.

My returns to India accompanied passages: scattering my grandmother's ashes in the Ganges in 1969, then returning after my father's passage in 2006 and my mother's in 2022.

After my father passed, I studied mediation and discovered that I also needed to mediate the conflicting parts within myself.

I had spent 30 years searching for healing. I am autistic, but did not know it for much of my life; I tried to "fix" myself without understanding my nervous system.

Meditation and mediation changed my question from "What is wrong with me?" to "What is happening within me, and can I meet it with awareness and compassion?"

I learned that conflict cannot always be forced into resolution. We must create space for wounds, fears, experiences, and truths to be heard.

Why Carter Peace Week?

In 1976, at age 15, I volunteered for Jimmy Carter's presidential campaign. His example as a global diplomat and negotiator inspired me. My mother admired him too and strongly supported my political activism. When Carter Peace Week fell on September 21—the anniversary of her passage—I chose to dedicate this work to her and her life of service.

Why Global Social Witnessing?

From childhood, I watched the world's suffering through ABC, CBS, and NBC, but did not know where inside myself to place it. As an adult, I saw the same cycles. Even while participating in Geneva Peace Week, Carter Peace Week, the Alliance for Peacebuilding, and other communities, I kept searching for another way.

In 2023, I presented on virtual reality bringing human stories closer, including at the United Nations. Through the Pocket Project, I then found global social witnessing: meeting suffering together with awareness, regulation, and compassionate presence, without turning away or becoming overwhelmed. In 2025 and 2026, I brought it to Kashmir.

Why Kashmir?

Kashmir carries South Asia's unresolved wounds. Partition in 1947 brought violence, displacement, and death, while conflict engulfed Kashmir through 1948. Elders passed these stories to later generations through memories, silences, fears, and identities. The past is still present. The 1947 Partition Archive's 10,000 Memories work inspires me by preserving first-person histories and building a bridge toward understanding and healing.

Kashmir is the focus for a larger fundraising vision: a Global Social Witnessing project addressing the inherited wounds of the 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan. Many elders are ready to speak, while reaching survivors in conflict-affected settings—and organizations serving trauma victims on different sides—has brought limited response. That shows how much trust and safety are needed. By witnessing grandparents' stories before they are lost, we may help heal Partition's intergenerational wounds and, through that wider healing, contribute to Kashmir.

Yet Kashmir is not simply a geopolitical problem to be analyzed or solved. Kashmir is a place of extraordinary people, culture, beauty, memory, grief, dignity, and hope.

Since 2020, I have developed the Kashmir Initiative through Global Mediation Team, building relationships among academics, peacebuilders, healing practitioners, and diaspora communities.

Today's speakers are part of my journey. I have known Professor Samir Ahmed and worked with Professor Al Fustes through Carter School conversations on forgiveness and reconciliation. The Pocket Project brought me into relationship with Kosha Joubert and its community of collective healing.

Born in London and raised in the West, I approach this with privilege, resources, distance, and perspective—not to impose a solution, but to create conditions for deeper listening.

Ela Gandhi, Mahatma Gandhi's granddaughter, reinforced something essential for me: Kashmiri people must participate meaningfully in imagining and shaping their own future. Their experiences, needs, and visions must remain at the center.

Our responsibility is to witness without turning away and make room for truth, dignity, grief, and dialogue.

Global social witnessing asks what happens inside us when we encounter suffering.

Can we remain present, regulate fear, listen without immediately taking sides, and hear pain without interrupting or fixing? Can we hold multiple truths while affirming our shared humanity?

Mediating the parts within me now informs how I approach Kashmir's divisions: create space for pain, unheard voices, and human encounter without trying to defeat or silence one another.

I hope to create an opening through which Kashmiris, Indians, Pakistanis, and the global diaspora can see and hear one another differently.

This work connects the infant sent to India; the child at the feet of Indira Gandhi and Shri Brahmananda Sarasvati; Vaso; my parents' service; my search for healing; and the mediator learning to create space within.

I am grateful that Ela Gandhi has agreed to join my next Carter Peace Week program. We hope to hear displaced Kashmiri Hindus and others affected by killings, fear, and the mass displacement of Kashmiri Pandits around 1989 and 1990. Their pain and hopes deserve to be witnessed with dignity.

Not peace as an abstract ideal.

Peace as a living practice of presence.

Peace as the courage to listen.

Peace as the willingness to create space for another person's pain, dignity, truth, and hope.

This is why Kashmir touches me.

This is why I am here.

And this is why I continue to answer its call.