

Meeting with Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam, President of India

It was 15.00 hours on 15th February 2003. I was instructed to be at the upper gate of Raj Bhavan, Mumbai, (not at 3.00 pm but at 15.00 hours).

At the gate, I told the constable that I had an appointment at the Raj Bhavan, “With whom...?” He asked. “With the president of India...” I answered. He carefully looked at me and referred me to the security counter. I was asked to give my visiting card. Somebody there recognized me as ‘The doctor who comes on TV’. My name was very much there on the visitor’s list. I picked up the pass and started walking.

Raj Bhavan obviously has the ‘Raj’ touch everywhere, in architecture, in the smart uniforms of attendants, in the landscaping as well as in the general atmosphere. Everyone was very courteous and friendly. I was ushered in a waiting room where my name in the list was again checked. Between 15.30 hours and 16.00 hours the president was going to meet a total number of six people. There was a sitting MP, member of a popular family owned business group, Editor of a weekly magazine and some families who wanted to meet the president. Fortunately my name was above all these people and the order was followed very scrupulously.

Exactly at 15.35 I was taken to the presidential suite where joint chief protocol officer of Maharashtra state, shook hands with me. He was the person who had called the previous afternoon to inform me that the president of India has granted audience to me. All this was a result of letter posted to the president on 7th Feb. 2003, inviting him for our annual career conference “VEDH”. Within a week the president’s office had granted me an interview with the president during his Mumbai visit. I was taken to a small ante-room where I sat for the next five minutes. The door opened and a smart Indian Air Force officer announced my name.

I entered the spacious room which was completely carpeted. The president was wearing a suit of off-white color. He looked like an old and gracious Banyan tree. He stood up, and extended his hands. I touched his feet and he patted on my back. We sat ‘exactly in a pose that we generally see on television as two heads of state sit, even the flower-arrangements were in place. Other than the ADC, in that entire room, no one was present. I introduced myself, work of IPH and talked about VEDH.

The president asked me about the differences between ‘a psychologist’ and ‘a psychiatrist’. When I started explaining he quipped, “I know the ‘academic difference, tell me the functional difference”. After my explanation he had another question, “Does the concept of mental health include mentally ill as well as mentally challenged?” I had a chance to explain again. When I used the word ‘destigmatization’, he again asked for an explanation. His voice was very soft and I felt as if I am talking to a grand-fatherly figure.

He asked me about format of our career conference VEDH. I had taken photographs of previous years VEDH conferences with me. I also gave him copies of the correspondence that we had with the president’s office. “Sir, we as a team of professionals and volunteers are working for last thirteen years in this field with no godfathers, no foreign funding or backing from an industrial house... We will be glad if you can interact with students from our platform.

“December is a month of visits by foreign dignitaries. Let me see what I can do... my office will get back to you...” He said in the same cordial tone.

I gave him a copy of our Family Mental Health Guide & our IPH memento. He shook hands with me.

“It is a moment of honor for me sir”, I murmured.

He smiled & patted on my shoulders.

“Keep up the good work” were his parting words.

I almost glided through that room towards the entrance; as if in a trance. A simple citizen of this country on the basis of a single letter was able to meet the first citizen of India for full seven minutes and that too within a week of writing that letter... unbelievable!... But, here I was, in the Raj Bhavan premises and the meeting had already taken place.

I do not know whether the president will accept our invitation but meeting him was something very very special.

I came back walking to the same gate from where I had entered Raj Bhavan. Took a cab and right at the kemp’s corner flyover, traffic was stopped. The entire presidential cavalcade passed by. My driver said, “koi bada aadmi hoga...”

“President of India... Dr. A.P.J Abdul Kalam... Main thodi der pahale unke saath tha”... I could not withhold that information.

He stared at me in complete disbelief. I took my VVIP entry pass and showed it to him. He was astonished.

I called up my wife on cell phone. “How was the meeting?” She asked.

“Dreamlike...” I answered.

There are some dreams from which you do not want to be woken up.

