

UPF Remembers Late Indian President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam

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New Delhi, India—UPF-India observed the UN International Youth Day 2015 by commemorating the life and legacy of former Indian president Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, who passed away on July 27 at age 83. Approximately 300 people attended the memorial program; among them were several distinguished guests, including the late president’s advisor Mr. Srijan Pal Singh, who had traveled with Dr. Kalam on his last journey (please read below about Mr. Singh’s experience with Dr. Kalam). Although the event was small in size, the program was beautiful.

Dr. Kalam used to say, “Don’t declare any holiday on my death. Instead, work harder; that will be my best farewell.” Keeping Dr. Kalam’s words in mind and dedicated to doing more for the nation of India, the Youth Federation for World Peace-India launched Youth for Service, an initiative whose aim is to inspire youth in India to volunteer—primarily teaching poor and needy children—and provide them with opportunities to enhance their external and internal abilities to become future leaders, at the event.



My Memory of the Last Day with Dr. Kalam

It has been eight hours since [Dr. Kalam and I] last talked. Sleep eludes me and memories keep [streaming through], sometimes as tears.

Our [last day together] (July 27) began at 12 noon, when we took our seats on a flight to Guhawati. Dr. Kalam was seated in 1A and I was seated in IC. He was wearing a dark colored “Kalam suit.” I complimented it, saying, “Nice color!” Little did I know this was going to be the last color I would see him wear.

[Two-and-a-half hours] of flying in monsoon weather [made the flight seem long]. I hate turbulence, [but it didn’t effect Dr. Kalam]. Whenever he would see me go cold in [a] shaking plane, he would just pull down the window pane and say, “Now you don’t see any fear!”

[After the flight, we drove] another 2.5 hours to the IIM (Indian Institute of Management) Shillong. [Over the] five hours [of travel], we talked, discussed and debated. [Our trip together that day] was one of hundreds we had over the last six years. Three incidents/discussions in particular will be “lasting memories of our last trip” together.

First, Dr. Kalam was absolutely worried about the attacks in Punjab. The loss of innocent lives left him filled with sorrow. The topic of Dr. Kalam’s lecture at IIM Shillong was “Creating a Liveable Planet Earth.” He related the incident to the topic and said, “it seems the man-made forces are as big a threat to the liveability of earth as pollution.” We discussed how, if this trend of violence, pollution and reckless human action continues, [people] we will forced to leave earth. “Thirty years, at this rate, maybe,” he said. “You guys must do something about it...it is going to be your future world.”

Our second discussion was more national. For the past two days, Dr. Kalam was worried that time and again [India’s] parliament, the supreme institution of democracy [for the country], was dysfunctional. He said, “I have seen two different governments in my tenure. I have seen more after that. This disruption just keeps happening...I really need to find a way to ensure that the parliament works on developmental politics.” He then asked me to prepare a surprise assignment question for the students at IIM, which he would give to them at the end of his lecture. He wanted them to suggest three innovative ways to make parliament more productive and vibrant. “But how can [I] ask them to give solutions if I don’t have any myself?” he said. For the next hour, we [considered] option after option...We wanted to include this discussion in our upcoming book, *Advantage India*.

Third, was an experience from the beauty of his humility. We were in a convoy of 6-7 cars. Dr. Kalam and I were in the second car. Ahead us was an open gypsy with three soldiers in it. Two of them were sitting on either side and one lean guy was standing atop, holding his gun. One hour into ride, Dr. Kalam said, “Why is he standing? He will get tired. This is like punishment. Can you ask that a wireless message [be sent to him] to sit?” I had to convince him that [the soldier] was probably instructed to keep standing for better security. [Dr. Kalam] did not relent. We tried to radio message the driver of the vehicle, but that did not work. For the next 1.5 hours of the journey, [Dr. Kalam] [asked] me thrice to hand signal him to sit down. Finally, realizing there [was] little we [could] do, he told me, “I want to meet him and thank him.” Later, when we [arrived] at IIM Shillong, I asked the security people [where the security guy was] and got hold [him]. I took him inside [where] Dr. Kalam was, and Dr.

Kalam greeted him, shook his hand and said “thank you buddy.” “Are you tired? Would you like something to eat? I am sorry you had to stand so long because of me.” The young guard, draped in black cloth, was surprised by [how Dr. Kalam] treated him. Lost for words, he said, “Sir, aapke liye to 6 ghantebhikhaderahenge.”

After this, we went to the lecture hall. He did not want to be late for the lecture. “Students should never be made to wait,” he would always say. I quickly set up his microphone, and as I did, he smiled and said, “Funny guy! Are you doing well?” When Dr. Kalam said “funny guy,” it could mean a variety of things, depending on the tone [of his voice] and your own assessment [of the situation]. It could mean you have done well, you messed up something, you should listen to him, or just that you have been plain naïve—or he was just being jovial. Over the six years I have [worked with Dr. Kalam], I learned to interpret “funny guy” like the back of my [hand]. This was the last [time] this would be the case.

“Funny guy! Are you doing well?” he said. I smiled back, “Yes.” Those were the last words he said. Two minutes into the speech, I heard a long pause after he had completed a sentence. I looked at him, and he fell down.

We picked him up. [A] doctor rushed [in] and we tried whatever we could [to resuscitate him]. I will never forget the look in [his semi-]closed eyes and [holding] his head with one hand, as we tried to revive him. His hands were clenched, curled onto my finger. There was stillness on his face and those wise eyes were motionlessly radiating wisdom. He did not show pain, only purpose was visible.

In five minutes, we were at the nearest hospital. In another few minutes, the doctors said the “missile man” had flown away, forever. I touched his feet, one last time. Adieu old friend! Grand mentor! See you in my thoughts and meet in the next birth.

As I turned back, a closet of thoughts opened.

He would often ask me, “You are young, decide what you would like to be remembered for?” I kept thinking of new impressive answers, until one day I gave up and resorted to a tit-for-tat. I asked him, “First, you tell me, what would you like to be remembered for? President, scientist, writer, the “missile man”, India 2020, *Target 3 Billion*....What?” I thought I had made the question easier by giving options, but he sprang a surprise on me: “Teacher,” he said.

Then something he said two weeks [before] when we were discussing his missile time friends. He said, “Children need to take care of their parents. It is sad that sometimes this is not happening.” He paused and said, “Two things elders must also do: Never leave wealth at your deathbed—that leaves a fighting family. Second, one is blessed if one can die working, standing tall without any long-drawn [ailment]. Goodbyes should be short, really short.”

Today, I look back, [Dr. Kalam] took the final journey teaching, [which] is what [he] always wanted to be remembered doing...He left us as a great teacher, standing tall. He leaves the world with nothing accumulated in his account but loads of wishes and love of people...

[I will] miss all the lunches and dinners we had together, the times you surprised me with your humility and startled me with your curiosity, the lessons of life you taught in action and words, our struggles to race to make [it onto] flights, our trips, our long debates. You gave

me dreams, showed me dreams need to be impossible, for anything else is a compromise to my own ability. The man is gone, the mission lives on. Long live Kalam.

Your indebted student,

Srijan Pal Singh



Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam meeting the guard who was standing in the gypsy