

When Canadian Governor General delayed his oath-taking for APJ Abdul Kalam

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Toronto: APJ Abdul Kalam was so much respected in Canada that the current Governor-General David Johnston delayed his oath-taking in 2010 so that he could personally - as president of the University of Waterloo - confer an honorary doctorate on the former Indian president.

"David Johnston was appointed the Governor General of Canada when he was the president of the University of Waterloo in southern Ontario. But he delayed his oath-taking for the sake that he (as university president) could personally honour Dr Kalam," says Chennai-born V.I. Lakshmanan, who is an internationally renowned scientist and innovator in green technology.

A close friend of Kalam, Toronto-based Lakshmanan was instrumental in bringing the late president to Canada three times after he left Rashtrapati Bhavan in 2007.

Lakshmanan told IANS: "The current governor general of Canada was so impressed by the credentials and humility of Kalam that the University of Waterloo where he was the president at that time decided to confer an honorary doctor of engineering degree on Kalam. David Johnston went with me to New Delhi to meet Kalam and came back so impressed by the late president that his University of Waterloo decided to honour Kalam."

In fact, Canada was the only country that Kalam visited multiple times - thrice - after his retirement because of his close friendship with fellow Tamilian Lakshmanan.

"Every time he came here, he would say that he wanted to meet only scholars, researchers and children. He was not interested in meeting the CEOs. The Canadian prime minister and governor general were very impressed by his vision."

The friendship between Kalam and Lakshmanan deepened so much that the two went on to co-author a book called "Peace and Prosperity for the 21st Century".

Deeply saddened by the death of his great friend, Lakshmanan said: "Kalam was a true Mahatma. He was the Gandhi of the 21st century. Our shared passion for science and culture deepened our friendship. I knew him closely, he was a giant. You won't find a humbler man than him. Kalam was a thorough vegetarian."

Recalling his interactions with Kalam, he said: "He hated wastage...Dr Kalam was so careful that he didn't waste even a single drop of water...he was very frugal."

Lakshmanan said, "Though Dr Kalam was a Muslim, his knowledge of Hindu philosophy was so deep that few people could match him...you could discuss duality, Carnatic music, anything...he could talk with so much depth. We both talked in Tamil and English."

During his visits here, Kalam was quick to grasp where India could benefit from Canada, says Lakshmanan.

"Once I was driving him from Niagara Falls. On the way he saw the connectivity of waterways. He said why India can't benefit from Canada's unique experience in waterway connectivity. Why we forget everything once the monsoon is over. He would say his dream was to see India and Canada work together in civil nuclear energy and connecting waterways (in India)."

Lakshmanan, who returned from India last week, says he met Kalam for the last time on July 15 in New Delhi.

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