

**RECOLLECTIONS OF MY MEETINGS WITH LEADING WORLD FIGURES
BY SGI PRESIDENT DAISAKU IKEDA
PRESIDENT KOCHERIL RAMAN NARAYANAN OF INDIA**

In his travels for peace, SGI President Ikeda meets with world leaders from all walks of life. In this series, he introduces the lives and character of those memorable figures. President Ikeda is the founder of Soka University and the Soka school system.

I seem to have a mysterious affinity with President Kocheril Raman Narayanan of India. When I visited Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi in February 1979, Mr. Narayanan, then vice-chancellor of the prestigious institution, greeted me warmly.

He said to me with a friendly smile, "Please be professor for a day." When I replied, "No. Please allow me to be student for a day," his smile broke into laughter. His personal warmth and openheartedness shone from his smile.

Four young women who were studying Japanese language at the university sang with beautiful pronunciation the well-loved Japanese songs—"Sakura Sakura" (Cherry Blossoms) and "Haru ga Kita" (Spring Has Come) as the audience clapped in time with the music. When I made the suggestion to the teaching staff that the girls be given the highest marks for their Japanese, Vice Chancellor Narayanan and the students applauded enthusiastically.

One student raised his hand and said he had a question for me. He explained that he was studying for his doctoral degree, and his subject of research was the Soka Gakkai. Mr. Narayanan quipped that I was being studied and asked me to assist the student.

I was immediately impressed by Mr. Narayanan's character, kindness and quick intelligence. He had only recently taken the post of vice-chancellor. Up to that time, he had been a diplomat, serving as India's ambassador to such countries as Thailand, Turkey and China. Just after he married, early in his diplomatic career, he did a stint of duty at the Indian Embassy in Tokyo.

"In fact," he mentioned the second time we met in December 1995, "my eldest daughter was born in Tokyo." That conversation took place sixteen years after our first encounter at Jawaharlal Nehru University. I received word from him: "I am coming to Japan, and I'd like to see you." We met in Tokyo. At that time, he was vice-president of India.

He shared a story about Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru: "My daughter was eight years old. She had won first prize in a poetry contest, and was to receive her award directly from Prime Minister Nehru. But just then I received notice that I was to be transferred overseas, and since my daughter would be coming with me, she would miss the award ceremonies.

"We visited the prime minister's residence just before we left, and before the award ceremony was to be held. Prime Minister Nehru remarked he had seen the poem, saying to my daughter, 'Very good! Very good! I've already read it in the magazine!' There were many students at his residence that day, and he called my daughter up to stand beside him and recite her poem to those present. It was like her own private award ceremony."

Mr. Narayanan told me: "The thing I found most impressive about the prime minister was his humanity."

There are those who lead by force and those who lead by their humanity. Prime Minister Nehru, a direct disciple of Mahatma Gandhi, knew the subtlest workings of the human heart.

President Narayanan has described himself as “one who has sprung from the grass-roots of our society and grown up in the dust and heat of this sacred land.”¹ He was born in 1921 in a small village in the southernmost state of Kerala. He was from the most downtrodden class that for centuries had been oppressed and discriminated against and treated as if they were less than human.

Mr. Narayanan was the fourth of seven children in a family that was destitute and starving. They had no bathing facilities in their home and he had to walk seven kilometers to and from school each day. During the rainy season, the mud came up to his ankles. On those long walks, he was always reading. He couldn’t afford to buy books, so he would devour newspapers or books he came upon, taking careful notes.

Appreciating how fond he was of study, Mr. Narayanan’s elder siblings gave up their schooling so that he might have the chance to get an education. But still the family often could not afford to pay his tuition. He was forced to stand outside the classroom, but he refused to let this humiliation defeat him. He would simply strain to hear every word of instruction going on inside. He recalls with a smile that it was “good training.” A diplomat must be thick-skinned, and being forced to stand outside in front of his classmates when he was young was a useful exercise.

He’s a person of great inner strength. He’s even cheerful when recounting stories of his hardships.

Apparently he rarely speaks about his childhood, but his feelings for the exploited and underprivileged burn with volcanic force within his breast. After our meeting in Tokyo, he attended an international conference in Hiroshima, where he shared his heartfelt sentiments. “What humanity needs most,” he declared, “is sympathy for the suffering of others. We need to care for others as if they were ourselves, so that when we witness some cruel act or tragic occurrence, wherever it may have taken place, we think, ‘That could have been me.’ We need education that fosters in people such compassion.” In his speech, he also quoted Gandhi’s ambition “to wipe every tear from every eye.” All leaders, he insists, must regard the suffering of any person as their own suffering. I am reminded of the determination of my own mentor Josei Toda “to eradicate all misery from the face of the earth.”

Mahatma Gandhi abhorred the system that defined a certain group of people as “untouchable.” He denounced it as a creation of the devil. He loved these people at the very lowest rung of society, renaming them the Harijan, or “Children of God.” Gandhi said that while he did not particularly wish to be reborn, if he were, he would choose to be reborn as an untouchable so that he might share the pain, sadness and insult they bear.

The young Mr. Narayanan was able to continue his studies with the assistance of the Harijan Scholarship that Gandhi had established. He worked and worked and finally graduated from university at the top of his class. He did brilliantly in school, but career success did not follow easily, perhaps because of his caste.

He left his hometown to become a journalist. One of the highlights of this period of his life was an opportunity to interview Gandhi. He was nervous and excited when he arrived. His timing was bad: Gandhi was right in the middle of lunch; most of India’s top leaders were in the room with him. In addition, Gandhi was observing a day of silence as part of his religious practice. Yet Gandhi gladly responded to the inexperienced young journalist’s questions, jotting his replies down on paper.

When Mr. Narayanan completed his interview and was about to leave the room, one of those in attendance called out to him. Gandhi had instructed that he be given a meal before

he left. Mr. Narayanan was astonished by this compassion. Surely Gandhi had felt bad that he was eating his lunch while this thin, hungry young man had asked questions. That kindness, that consideration for others, impressed the twenty-four-year-old Mr. Narayanan even more than Gandhi's thoughtful replies to his interview questions. No doubt because he had suffered much indignity in his childhood, the young journalist was deeply sensitive to others' feelings. He would never forget Gandhi's kindness.

Who could have ever imagined that a half-century later, that young man would become the president of India? In July 1997, in the year of the fiftieth anniversary of Indian independence, he became the republic's tenth president. Gandhi had once expressed the wish that the president of independent India be selected from among the most oppressed and discriminated class; now his wish had come true. From the standpoints of learning, character and experience, there was no better choice. Mr. Narayanan won ninety-five percent of the votes cast.

Three months after he had taken office, I visited him at the presidential offices in New Delhi. "Thank you for coming," he said. He welcomed me with the same warmth as always, hurrying over to shake my hand.

President Narayanan's term in office lasts until 2002. I shared with him my conviction that in the twenty-first century, India, a country of great spiritual richness, will play an increasingly important role in world affairs. I believe, I said, that from the broad perspective we will see the emergence of a triumvirate of pivotal nations: the United States, China and India. When the world was dominated by two powers, the United States and the Soviet Union, we had the Cold War. When there are two centers of power, they inevitably polarize into opposition. But we are entering an age of three centers of power, which will lead the world toward harmony and stability.

When I referred to the ancient Chinese historical novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* to support my case, the learned Dr. Narayanan said he knew the work well. He smiled and said, "I agree with your vision, President Ikeda."

I praised him for the profound content of his speeches. "The truth is," he said, "I sometimes borrow from your writings for ideas."

"I know you're just joking," I said, "but thank you for the kind words."

"No, it's true!" he insisted. I couldn't help but recall our friendly repartee at Jawaharlal Nehru University so many years before.

Whenever I meet Mr. Narayanan, our conversation turns to young people. Most likely because the Indian president wishes to pay back the support and encouragement he received from Gandhi and Nehru, he is always concerned about the education and development of the youth. In his inauguration speech, he said that it is inevitable that India's youth should show "indifference" and become "cynical" when they are confronted with the corruption of the nation's leaders. He vigorously urged all to remember that, unless they set an example for the youth, India's future will be in jeopardy.

And in that same speech, he again recalled the fervent wish of Mahatma Gandhi to "wipe every tear from every eye." For President Narayanan, a leader is a person who is willing to give his or her life for the sake of the poor, the oppressed and the exploited. □

1. Presidential inauguration speech delivered on July 25, 1997.