

INTERVIEW WITH HE. MR. P KUMARAN

Ambassador of India to the State of Qatar

Ambassador of India to Qatar, HE Mr.P.Kumaran Speaks to Young editors of MagiQ and shares his Thoughts and Experience with the blooming buds of ANECX

“Sure. Go ahead”, he said with a smile.



1. How was your experience on Qatar for the past 2 years?

I have been posted to two other Arab countries before, but this is my first time in the Gulf, with such a large Indian community. In terms of work, a lot of the Embassy's resources are dedicated to consular and labour matters. As you may be aware, almost 70 to 75% of the Indian community here are blue-collar workers. Therefore, you need to take steps to deal with problems that they face, such as violation of contracts, salaries being delayed, repatriation of bodies of people who may die due to accidents or otherwise, following up with employers for payment of compensation in cases of work-related accidents etc. Also, the fact that there is a large Indian community means they will need passports to be replaced, marriages, births and deaths to be registered, various types of documents to be attested etc., which gives rise to a lot of consular activity.

In addition, we have a significant economic and commercial relationship with Qatar, with India being the third largest trading partner. We buy almost 65 % of our LNG needs and about 75% of our LPG needs from Qatar. We export a large number of goods to Qatar, including food and other consumables, engineering goods, automobiles and spare parts etc. amounting to about \$1.2 billion a year. We have a lot of trade-related activities happening all the time. We also had some high-level visits in the last three years. HH the Emir of Qatar visited India in 2015, our PM visited Doha in June 2016, HE the PM of Qatar visited India in December 2016. Just a couple of days ago, our Minister of State for External Affairs completed a visit to Doha. We also have a number of cultural activities during the course of the year. Our cultural calendar for 2019 will be exciting, as it will be celebrated as the India-Qatar Year of Culture. When the boycott of Qatar by its GCC neighbors and Egypt was announced on 5 June 2017, it initially got us worried, because there was panic about an anticipated shortage of food and other essential items. Fortunately, the

Qatari government quickly made alternative arrangements to source these items from other places. We also managed to organize additional flights from India to cater to the heavy





demand during the Eid season in 2017.

Our close and buzzing relationship with Qatar therefore keeps me busy. Qataris have welcomed us warmly and have made us feel at home. It makes me feel proud when I hear from Qatari officials that the Indian community is respected for its inclusivity, hard work and law-abiding nature. Overall, I think Qatar is a very comfortable place and the presence of a large Indian community makes me feel we are not far away from India.



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of 2008 happened during

It's an interesting training ground for an Indian diplomat, to understand firsthand the challenges of the Indo-Pak relationship. Libya, on the other hand was a different challenge, as it was under a UN embargo, in addition to US sanctions. You could not fly directly into and out of Libya those days. You had to land in Tunisia and drive down to Tripoli which was about 350 km away. You could not get a lot of things due to the UN sanctions. Libya is a large country and taking domestic flights within Libya was a hazardous affair due to non-availability of aircraft spare parts.

2. What were the challenging assignments in your career?

There are many kinds of challenges that perhaps cannot be discussed in detail. One of the most challenging assignments for an Indian diplomat is a posting in Pakistan. There are many practical challenges while serving in Pakistan. It was difficult time in India-Pakistan relations as the Mumbai attacks

our stay there. We also got the opportunity to meet some really

There is also a lot of excitement in my job at other times. Each place is different and we try not to look at the negatives. So, we try and find something different and interesting in every country we travel to.

3. Do you think women face more challenges than men as a diplomat?

The ratio of men to women in the Indian Foreign Service is very one-sided. There are some practical challenges Indian lady diplomats may face depending on where they are posted, in terms of travelling and living alone. The Government of India is considerate in posting IFS couples at the same station, wherever possible. Some of our lady colleagues have done extremely well over the years. The first lady officer in the IFS dates back to 1950!

4. Many of us look up to you as an inspiration. Did you have an in inspiration as a child?

Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam was somebody I looked up to. And the leaders from the freedom movement, the more you read about them the more you get inspired. My grandmother, someone with just a primary school education, was our greatest inspiration in the family due to the strength of her character. Otherwise I didn't have any role model from my family circles whom I looked up to. My parents worked very hard to ensure the best education they could afford for me and my two sisters.

5. Sir, It seems like you have a very busy life, how do you balance between your work and family life?

I must admit that I do get complaints from my wife saying that I don't manage it well enough. It's not easy. I have too many obligations, due to the large Indian community here. It's not possible for me to go everywhere. Sometimes I send my other colleagues to represent the Embassy at some of the functions. So it is definitely a problem that I don't get to spend enough time with my family. But I do what I can, to achieve as much of a balance as I possibly can.



6. What are your hobbies and interests?

Nothing in particular. I enjoy playing golf with friends, reading books and watching sports. Photography used to interest me in college and in the early years after I started working, but I don't have time for it anymore. In school and in college, I used to play football and also participate in athletics, especially pole vault and middle-distance running.



7. Do you believe you've reached the zenith of success or you think you have more to achieve?

Even within the IFS, there are several more levels for me to climb in the coming years. There is no end to what you can do! I am happy that I have been able to contribute my mite to making our community a little happier. There is always more to do; there is so much to do for our country and for the world in general. So, absolutely no question that I look forward to doing more in the coming years.

8. How do you think your friends and family help you to become the person who you are now?

My family and friends have supported me a lot, both before I joined the IFS and also during my school and college days. We didn't have much of a role model in my extended family. No one in my family has been a civil servant. Actually, no one in my family has ever been to college or university. In fact, I am the first person in my family to get an engineering degree and also the first one to join the civil services. Two years after me, my sister joined the IAS. My parents have worked really hard to get me and my sisters to where we are today.

9. Could you tell us more about your job, like the duration spent in each country or how did you overcome language barriers etc?

It took me 24 years to become an Ambassador. I started in Egypt as a Third Secretary in January 1994 and stayed there till May 1997. I spent my first two years learning Arabic at the American University in Cairo, while also working at the Embassy in the afternoons. All of us in the IFS are allotted a foreign language (other than English) to learn. My next posting was Libya, where I was Second Secretary. We had an Indian community of about 15000 there, but we had substantial commercial interests and had undertaken several large infrastructure projects. My wife joined me there after we got married. We went to Brussels next and enjoyed our posting there very much. It was efficiently organised and was professionally enriching. Our first son was born there. Then we returned to India and I worked

in Western Europe Division in the Ministry of External Affairs for two years. I then moved to Bangalore as the Regional Passport Officer. It was an assignment very different from the others that the IFS offers, especially in terms of the intensive public contact it entails. It was essentially a management job, requiring us to ensure that the passport issuing mechanism ran smoothly in all its aspects, including submission, processing, police verification, delivery, grievance-handling and resource management. I was able to introduce a number of reforms which were appreciated by my seniors in our Ministry. Some of these ideas were later absorbed into the Passport Seva Project as best practices. I found the experience both interesting and personally satisfying.

I was fortunate that my next three postings were Pakistan, USA and Sri Lanka - each of them considered important for our foreign policy for their own reasons. These were huge learning experiences for me. I then returned to India and was appointed Head of the Consular, Passports and Visa (CPV) Division in the Ministry. I again got an opportunity to undertake some reforms in our consular and visa procedures. I was thereafter posted to Qatar as Ambassador. You know the rest!

10. All of us are going to write some of the most important exams of our lives. What advice do you have for us to manage exam stress and tension?

I'm afraid my tricks are rather old! The exam system has changed in many ways and I'm not sure if those old tricks work anymore. But I still work with my kids to help them prepare. My sons are in the 10th and 8th grades in the American School of Doha. Each one has his own style of dealing with academic challenges. Fortunately for us, both of them are good in academics. The first one is more organized and works hard. The second one is quick at understanding new ideas, but does not believe in preparing hard before an exam. But I work with them whenever I get time and try to give them additional challenges, especially in mathematics and science. I really think there's no alternative to hard work and sustained preparation, so that there is no stress on the eve of an examination. My advice to my kids is to lead a balanced life and divide their time well, so that you can play, do things you enjoy and also spend some time learning and studying everyday.

11. This being a mandatory sort of a question, for a young adult like me aspiring to become a civil servant as you are at a later point in life, what advice would you like to give?

Preparation for the Civil Services Examination takes anything between one to two years. The main challenge is that a large number of people take the exams. You of course have to be very good at the optional subjects you choose. Further, the coverage of some of the subjects, especially the papers relating to General Studies and the Essay, are virtually open-ended. A lot of aspirants see value in going to coaching centres which analyse the subjects and past papers systematically and package the study material in a format that can help you prepare efficiently. There are several large cities in India where there are good coaching centres. So if you want to do well in the exam, I would advise you to join a coaching centre and prepare systematically. You have to remember that the success ratio is very low. Sometimes people work hard and still don't get in. So it is advisable to have a backup career option, even as you give the Civil Services your best shot.

"Thank you, sir. I think we are all done for now"

"It was nice meeting all of you. All the very best"