A Brief Meeting, a Lasting Impression

Remembering the legend- Avinash Chandra Saxena

I hadn't known him as a newborn, nor an infant nor gurgling baby. I definitely didn't know him as a curious toddler, nor as an adventurous boy, nor a rebellious teenager. Even as he grew into an opinionated writer, a dutiful husband, a caring father, he was a stranger to me. He went on amassing experiences and accolades, growing and greying, from junior reporter to chief editor, from father to grandfather... and yet, I didn't know him...

It was only when he turned 86, and I, 27, that our paths crossed for the first time. He was the final frontier - the head of the family - who needed to see me and deem me fit (or not?), for his oldest grandson to take as a wife.

I had the jitters before meeting him. Of course, his reputation preceded him. 'Nana', as my may-be-husband Prateek fondly called him, had held many an important title in his long, successful career with one of India's leading newspapers. Prateek had raved to me about his honesty and integrity, telling me stories about his conduct in his life as a journalist, as well as a family man. I was told that his friends and colleagues were proud to be his associates and still sought his expert opinions on current affairs at their weekly get together at the Press Club. He was the kind of older brother whose siblings looked up to him, even as octogenarians themselves! And most of all, he was the head of the 'Om Parivaar', adored by one and all.

So my first meeting with Nana was set up for July, in the middle of the Delhi summers. I took care to dress appropriately for the occasion. I was to go to their home at the Press Enclave.

I tried to smile confidently as I entered the room, wondering if my thumping heartbeat was going to give me away. And then I saw his face... with the most serene smile, he stood up from his chair so gracefully, and said, "Aao beta aao". I took it all in at a glance- his stylish safari suit, his tilted beret, and polished wooden cane. Wow. No amount of description nor praise by Prateek could have done him justice. You had to be present with him in the same room to truly feel his aura and understand that you were in the presence of greatness. Simple, humble, unabashed greatness.

What followed was unsurprising, in retrospect... we chatted, he asked me poignant questions to understand my view of life- none of the regressive Indian "Can you cook/ can you clean" nonsense- he was more interested in my thoughts and ideas, what plans I had for my own career as a scriptwriter and video producer. The conversation with him flowed easily, and I found myself filled with the same awe and respect for him that I had heard in Prateek's voice every time he talked about Nana.

I'm glad to say that he thought I was a good match with his grandson, and the next time I met him was directly at the wedding- looking sharp as ever in his spectacularly tailored safaris and paghdi. He participated with gusto through each of the different functions, from Haldi to Bhaat, Sangeet to Baraat. And when the time came to bless us, he was the proudest and happiest one in the photos.

After that, every time I met him, be it at family weddings or my first-born's Mundan ceremony, he made sure to engage with me, always with either a kind word or a witty repartee, as the occasion demanded.

It was an honour to celebrate his 90th birthday with him, looking back at his life through the lenses of all the people he had influenced through his nine invaluable decades on the planet.

When COVID struck, it didn't even cross my mind that we could lose the strongest pillar of the family to this awful virus. The news of his passing came as a devastating shock. It will remain a great regret that he left for his heavenly abode, without meeting his second great grandchild in person... however, as he would have said, "The show must go on", and so it will. We just hope that wherever you are watching us from Nana, 'the show' lives up to the high standards you set for us all in the family. You live on, in our hearts and memories, always.

Remembering Nana more fondly than ever today, 12 July 2022, on what would have been his 94th birthday.

Maitri Saxena