

APJ: Lessons to learn from a Legend

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“We are all born with a divine fire in us. Our efforts should be to give wings to this fire and fill the world with the glow of its goodness.”

-Dr APJ Abdul Kalam

Introduction

The journey of India’s ‘missile man’ and the 11th President Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam is not a classic rags to riches story, but a rare odyssey of rags to fame. An institution builder, a workaholic bachelor he motivated young scientists and ignited the minds of young students across the country. His vision 2020 to transform India into a developed nation, role in the development of the Agni missile and educational leadership endeared him to a wide section of the people.

From humble beginnings in the tranquil shore town of Rameshwaram in Tamil Nadu to the Rashtrapathi Bhavan, Kalam’s life is a trajectory of achievements built on dreams, grit and determination. Political leaders across parties and his scientist friends recalled his rich contributions to the

nation. In India, where icons are invariably from the silver screen or the world of cricket, Kalam matched their popularity thanks to his simplicity, motivating nature and achievements.

What is Special about APJ?

Dr Kalam defied all the stereo types with ease and grace and was different in more than one aspect. First is his humble beginning in a poor family of boatmen in a remote town, Rameshwaram, in Tamil Nadu.

Second is his Muslim identity. At a time when India was traumatized by pre and post partition woes, Kalam with his single minded devotion to achieve excellence has risen to great heights. He was very much religious and a true nationalist who made all of us proud with his contribution to nuclear tests or rocket launches or missile

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technology.

Third is his technocrat-scientist back drop. Many senior scientists or technocrats prefer to stay away from key responsibilities of leading the nation. But he never thought that leading the country was the job of only politicians and that is the reason why he was liked by politicians too.

Fourth, he never stopped at being the President of India. Many former Presidents we have had in India did nothing after demitting the office. For them, remaining as the former President was more than enough. But, Dr Kalam is not such one. For him, Rashtrapathi Bhavan was not a stop, but a sojourn. He continued his mission even after leaving the high office in 2007. That is the reason why our President Pranab Mukherjee praised him as saying that Dr Kalam remained “People’s President” even after leaving the post.

Fifth is his age. Kalam was never constrained by his old age. Even in his 80s, he was as active as he was in 40s or 50s. That was why he chose the line of teaching after leaving the post of President. Of course, there were many heads of state in the West who address seminars and lectures after their tenures. But, they all address grown-ups and intellectuals. But, Dr Kalam had chosen youth as his audience and derived more pleasure in talking, interacting and sharing ideas with them. This is amply

evident in his last engagement before breathing his last on July 27.

Few takeaways for the youngsters from this great Visionary:

Integrity

He who sees me everywhere, and sees everything in me, he never gets separated from me, nor do I get separated from him”

-Bhagwat Geetha Ch. VI verse 30

APJ was gifted with a wet grinder in a function at Erode. He refused it as a gift but wanted the grinder for his home. So he gave a cheque on company’s [Sowbagya Wet grinders] name. When they had not deposited it for 2 months as a possession of honour, got a call from his office to deposit the cheque or the grinder will be returned. Everyone has to learn this and adhere and that will be great tribute to him.

How Leaders Should Manage Failure?

“When failure occurs, a leader should humbly own it and acknowledge it. When success comes, the leader should again have the humility to give credit to all the people who worked for it.”

-Dr APJ

In 1973, Kalam became the project director of India’s satellite launch vehicle program, commonly called the SLV-3, whose goal was to put India’s “Rohini” satellite into orbit by 1980. He was given funds and human resources — but was told clearly that by 1980 they had to launch the

satellite into space. Thousands of people worked together in scientific and technical teams towards that goal.

By 1979 they thought they were ready and as the project director, he went to the control center for the launch. At four minutes before the satellite launch, the computer began to go through the checklist of items that needed to be checked. One minute later, the computer program put the launch on hold; the display showed that some control components were not in order. Experts told him not to worry as they had done their calculations and there was enough reserve fuel. So Kalam bypassed the computer, switched to manual mode, and launched the rocket. In the first stage, everything worked fine but in the second stage, a problem developed. Instead of the satellite going into orbit, the whole rocket system plunged into the Bay of Bengal. It was a big failure.

That day, the Chairman of the Indian Space Research Organization, Prof. Satish Dhawan, had called a press conference. The launch was at 7:00 am and the press conference — where journalists from around the world were present — was at 7:45 am. at ISRO's satellite launch range in Sriharikota [in Andhra Pradesh in southern India]. Prof. Dhawan, the leader of the organization, conducted the press conference himself. He took responsibility for the failure and said that the team had worked very hard, but that it needed more technological support. He assured the media that in another year, the team would

definitely succeed. Though Kalam was the Project Director and it was his failure, but instead, Dhawan took responsibility for the failure as Chairman of the organization.

The next year, in July 1980, they tried again to launch the satellite. And this time they succeeded and the whole nation was jubilant. Again, there was a press conference. Prof. Dhawan called Dr. Kalam aside and told him, "You conduct the press conference today."

Kalam learned a very important lesson that day. When failure occurred, the leader of the organization owned that failure. When success came, he gave it to his team. The best management lesson he learnt did not come to him from reading a book and it came from that experience.

Source of Inspiration

In 2007, Dr APJ Abdul Kalam had addressed the European Parliament in Strasbourg, France, during the 50th anniversary of the formation of the European Union. The speech that is considered one of the most memorable ones by Kalam, captured the attention of the world leaders after he made an impassioned plea to all humanity with words that would resonate forever.

"Where there is righteousness in the heart, there is beauty in the character. When there is beauty in the character, there is harmony in the home. When there is harmony in the home, there is order in the nation."

Great Motivator

Three drug research centres in four months and that was the scorching pace at which he inaugurated the massive research centres of Indian drugmakers in 2004. And be it at Wockhardt, the then Nicholas Piramal or Sun Pharma, Kalam's message to the scientists was universal – seize the research opportunity. These were not mere words of encouragement from the President for the scientific minds gathered there, but a call to use innovation and research to improve public health.

And it came from a scientist who had used his knowledge of missile-technology to help develop an artificial leg that was way lighter than the ones people then used. In fact, his Kalam-Raju stent (wires inserted to remove blocks in blood vessels) is, more than ever, relevant today, as policymakers discuss the quality and pricing of locally manufactured medical devices.

Concern for His Country and People

Former President APJ Abdul Kalam was worried about the terror attack in Gurdaspur and the repeated disruptions of Parliament in his final hours before he collapsed during a speech at the IIM-Shillong and died. The 83-year-old scientist hailed as the “Missile Man” shared his concerns with his aide Srijan Pal Singh while travelling from Delhi to Shillong via Guwahati. Singh, who co-authored the books “Target 3 Billion” and “Reignited: Scientific Pathways to a Brighter Future”

with Kalam, said in a Facebook post that the former head of state was “absolutely worried about the attacks in Punjab”.

Further, the topic of Kalam's address at the IIM-Shillong was “Creating a live-able planet Earth”, and he related the terror attack to the topic and said, “It seems the man-made forces are as big a threat to the live-ability of Earth as pollution.” Kalam even asked Singh to prepare a “surprise assignment question” for the students at IIM-Shillong, where he collapsed during his speech on Monday evening, 27th July 2015. He was rushed to a nearby hospital where doctors declared him dead. The former President had wanted the students to suggest three innovative ways to make Parliament more productive and vibrant. But he remarked to Singh: “But how can (I) ask them to give solutions if I don't have any myself?”

A Versatile Persona

After his term as the President, he returned to his passion — teaching, writing and public service. He received several prestigious awards, including the Bharat Ratna, India's highest civilian honour. From successfully launching satellites through Satellite Launch Vehicles, to the Pokhran-2 nuclear tests in 1998, Kalam was wedded to self-reliance in technology. A versatile person, his passion was not limited to science alone. He was a poet, played the veena and was conversant with both the Quran as well as the Bhagavad Gita. He has authored many books.

Kalam on Leadership Qualities

According to Kalam, any leadership — whether it is political leadership or leadership in technology — requires that the leader have six traits. First, the leader must have vision. Without vision, you cannot be a leader. Second, the leader must be able to travel into an unexplored path. Normally the tendency is for people to travel along well-laid out ways. Third, the leader must know how to manage success, and even more importantly, failure. The fourth trait is that the leader should have the courage to make decisions. Fifth, the leader should have nobility in management. Every action of the leader should be transparent. And finally, the leader should work with integrity and succeed with integrity.

All these traits apply to Kalam saab. He was in constant touch with the people and

the Rashtrapati Bhavan [i.e. the Presidential residence in New Delhi], during his time, has become the people's residence. When he was President he travelled to every state, cutting across hills, deserts, and seas and was in touch with millions upon millions of people.

Conclusion

For Dr. Kalam Rashtrapathi Bhavan was not a stop, but a sojourn. I have seen Dr. Kalam attending a school day function at Aurobindo School at DD Colony in Hyderabad last October. Who will think that a former President of India would agree to attend a school function? But, Kalam is different. Kalam, in his death, left us a message that no matter what we are and who we are, we can dream big and strive to realize those dreams.



The rishis of the past have also given us science. You too are a rishi. You have achieved such a high post, yet your life is simple. - Pramukh swamiji, Akshardam



Pearls from Dr. Abdul Kalam:

'Whatever you want to say, however much you hate me, you are still my brother.'



'If someone is able to show me that what I think or do is not right, I will happily change.'



'The basis of all systems, social, political, rests upon the goodness of its people. No nation is great or good because parliament enacts this or that, but because its people are great or good.'



'We must not progress at the cost of others, but sacrifice a part of ourselves for the good of others.'



'Those who wished to sincerely serve society must be spiritually pure, and only those who are spiritually pure must sincerely serve society.'