

Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam: *The eternal teacher and visionary of India*

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Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam stands as one of the most extraordinary figures in modern Indian history. His life and legacy extend beyond his contributions as a scientist or statesman; he was a thinker, a philosopher, a poet, and, above all, a teacher who believed in igniting minds with hope and courage. From a humble childhood in Rameswaram to becoming the 11th President of India, his journey is an unparalleled narrative of determination, perseverance, and faith in the power of dreams. On his death anniversary, we remember him not merely as a leader but as a guiding light whose ideals continue to inspire millions across the world.

Dr. Kalam's life began in the serene town of Rameswaram, Tamil Nadu, on 15 October 1931. His father, Jainulabdeen, was a boat owner and imam, a man of wisdom and moral strength. His mother, Ashiamma, was known for her compassion and generosity. Though his family lived with limited means, they were rich in values, integrity, and spiritual grounding. The young Kalam grew up in a close-knit community where Hindu, Muslim, and Christian families lived harmoniously, celebrating festivals together. He often recalled the influence of his Hindu guru, Sivasubramania Iyer, who treated him with love and respect at a time when social barriers were common. These experiences instilled in him a sense of universal brotherhood and deep respect for all faiths. He grew up reading the Quran as well as the Bhagavad Gita, finding spiritual wisdom in both, and this broadened his vision of life.

Even as a child, Dr. Kalam's curiosity was boundless. He watched birds flying over the sea and dreamt of designing machines that could take humans into the skies. His thirst for knowledge was insatiable. To support his studies, he sold newspapers as a boy, yet his financial struggles never diminished his desire to learn. He attended Schwartz Higher Secondary School and later graduated in physics from St. Joseph's College, Tiruchirappalli. His ambition led him to the Madras Institute of Technology (MIT), where he specialised in aeronautical engineering. It was here that

his professors recognised his brilliance and pushed him to achieve beyond his limits. Kalam later admitted that his days at MIT were transformative, as they taught him the discipline and precision needed for great engineering feats.

Dr. Kalam's professional life began at the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), where he



worked on hovercraft technology. However, his defining career chapter unfolded when he moved to the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO). He was part of India's pioneering team that launched the country's first satellite launch vehicle, SLV-III, which successfully placed the Rohini satellite into orbit in 1980. This achievement marked a turning point for India's space capabilities, symbolising self-reliance and technological courage. Dr. Kalam never claimed this success as his alone; he constantly highlighted the collective effort of his team, believing that great achievements are always a result of collaboration and trust.

Known as the "Missile Man of India," Dr. Kalam led the Integrated Guided Missile Development Programme (IGMDP), creating advanced missile systems like Agni and Prithvi. These projects were critical milestones in ensuring India's strategic defence. His leadership during the 1998 Pokhran-II nuclear tests brought India into global focus as a strong nuclear-capable nation.

Yet, despite his involvement in defence technologies, Dr. Kalam was a man of peace. He always maintained that science and technology should safeguard humanity, not destroy it. For him, weapons were meant to deter aggression, not to instigate wars. He frequently spoke of the importance of balancing technological advancements with ethical considerations.

Beyond his scientific accomplishments, Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam was a philosopher who seamlessly combined the rationality of science with the wisdom of spirituality. He read the Bhagavad Gita

daily and found in its verses a profound guide for life. He believed in karma—performing one's duty without attachment to results—a philosophy he applied to his own life and work. He often visited temples, mosques, churches, and gurdwaras with equal reverence, reflecting his belief in the unity of all faiths. His spiritual depth never conflicted with his scientific mindset; rather, it enhanced his ability to see the larger purpose of knowledge and innovation.

Dr. Kalam's literary contributions are as enduring as his scientific ones. His autobiography, *Wings of Fire*, co-authored with Arun Tiwari, remains a source of motivation for millions. It narrates his life story, from the struggles of his childhood to his achievements as a leading scientist and president. The book emphasises that success is not defined by where one begins but by the determination to reach one's dreams. For countless students, *Wings of Fire* is a personal mentor, encouraging them to aim high and never give up.

His book *Ignited Minds* carries for-

ward this mission, focusing on India's youth. He believed that the nation's progress rests in the hands of young people who dare to dream and work hard. "Dream, dream, dream. Dreams transform into thoughts, and thoughts result in action," he often said. Through *Ignited Minds*, he urged students to think creatively, develop problem-solving abilities, and contribute to building a self-reliant India. Both *Wings of Fire* and *Ignited Minds* have become essential reading for students and teachers alike, serving as reminders that the mind is the most powerful tool when nurtured with vision and persistence.

Dr. Kalam's tenure as the 11th President of India from 2002 to 2007 brought a unique charm to Rashtrapati Bhavan. He was not a conventional politician but a man of ideas and action. During his presidency, he sought to make the office accessible and people-friendly. He often invited students to the presidential palace, interacting with them directly and encouraging them to share their dreams. His speeches, simple yet profound, were filled with hope for a better India. He wanted the presidency to be an institution that inspired the nation, particularly its young minds.

Global leaders admired Dr. Kalam for his intellect, humility, and vision. He interacted with presidents, prime ministers, and scientists from across the world, always advocating for peace, sustainable development, and cooperation. He firmly believed that the power of knowledge and science should be used to uplift societies rather than divide them. He championed the idea of a knowledge society where innovation, ethics, and compassion go hand in hand.

One of the key visions Dr. Kalam championed was "India 2020," which aimed to transform India into a developed nation. He envisioned a country free of poverty, illiteracy, and corruption, supported by strong infrastructure, sustainable agriculture, advanced technology, and an empowered youth. To achieve this, he introduced the concept of PURA—Providing Urban Amenities in Rural Areas. He believed that empowering rural communities with education, healthcare, and technology would bridge the gap between urban and rural India, ensuring balanced national growth.

Education was the cornerstone of Dr. Kalam's philosophy. He often said that education is not about memorising facts but about cultivating creativity, curiosity, and the spirit of inquiry. He encour-

aged teachers to inspire students rather than merely instruct them. To him, a teacher had the power to ignite a spark that could change the world. Even during his presidency, he continued teaching whenever possible, whether it was at schools, universities, or public gatherings.

After his term as president ended in 2007, Dr. Kalam returned to his first love—teaching and mentoring young minds. He travelled across India, giving lectures and interacting with students. His presence was electrifying; he had the rare ability to connect with children and teenagers at their level, encouraging them to see themselves as future leaders and innovators. He believed that every student should have the courage to think differently and the determination to turn their ideas into reality.

Dr. Kalam's sudden passing on 27 July 2015, while addressing students at IIM Shillong, left the entire nation in shock. Yet, there was something poetic about his final moments—he left this world doing what he loved most, speaking to young minds and motivating them to achieve greatness. His funeral in Rameswaram witnessed an outpouring of love and respect, with people from diverse communities and backgrounds coming together to pay their respects. It was a testament to the unifying force of his life and work.

Dr. Kalam's influence extended far beyond the borders of India. His vision for a peaceful and technologically advanced world earned him admiration from leaders and thinkers worldwide. He spoke at the United Nations and other global forums, emphasizing the importance of sustainable development, renewable energy, and universal education. He believed that global peace could be achieved through knowledge-sharing and cooperation rather than conflict.

As a poet, Dr. Kalam expressed his dreams and hopes through verses that blended science with spirituality. His poems often spoke of freedom, love for the nation, and the potential of humanity. His poetic soul revealed his sensitivity and belief in beauty—not just in nature, but in human character and actions. He wrote about the importance of living a life of purpose, of giving rather than taking, and of rising above self-interest for the greater good.

His humility remains one of the most striking aspects of his personality. Despite receiving the Bharat Ratna and numerous international honours, he

lived a simple life, owning few personal possessions. He valued relationships and service over material wealth. His home in Rameswaram, where he spent his early years, remained a symbol of his grounded nature. Even as president, he never lost touch with his roots.

Today, on Dr. Kalam's death anniversary, his teachings hold greater relevance than ever. In a world torn by division, his message of unity, hard work, and ethical progress serves as a guiding light. He reminded us that a nation's strength lies not just in its economic power but in the character and vision of its people. His dream of a strong, self-reliant India still challenges us to work together across differences and to create a society where every child's dream can flourish.

Dr. Kalam's books—*Wings of Fire*, *Ignited Minds*, *India 2020*, *Turning Points*, and *My Journey*—continue to guide millions. These books are not just personal narratives but blueprints for a life of courage, resilience, and service. They are filled with anecdotes, lessons, and reflections that resonate across generations. Students, in particular, find in his writings a mentor who encourages them to dream beyond limits.

His concept of leadership was simple yet profound. He believed that a true leader is one who creates more leaders, not followers. He encouraged individuals to take responsibility for their communities, to think of solutions rather than problems, and to act with integrity. His leadership style was rooted in empathy and collaboration, qualities that made him stand apart in both scientific and political fields.

Dr. Kalam's life story proves that greatness is not determined by birth or wealth but by vision, hard work, and the willingness to serve others. He rose from humble beginnings to become the President of India, yet he always introduced himself as a teacher. This humility endeared him to millions. His interactions with students—whether through personal meetings, emails, or public addresses—always left a lasting impact.

Even in his absence, Dr. Kalam's vision continues to ignite minds. Every innovation in Indian science and technology, every step towards inclusive growth, and every effort to empower youth is, in a way, a continuation of his dream. His words—"You 'have to dream before your dreams can come 'true'"—remain a mantra for those who aspire to create change.