

I can get the youth to dream. They have fewer biases about society: APJ Abdul Kalam

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Which of the former Presidents inspired you the most?

I believe every President before me contributed something in their respective fields — some in politics, some in education and others in social services. At Rashtrapati Bhawan I found a letter from our first President, [Rajendra Prasad](#) to Nobel laureate Sir C V Raman in 1954 asking him to come to Rashtrapati Bhawan to accept the Bharat Ratna. Anyone would have jumped at the offer. Then I read Sir CV Raman's reply to the invitation. It said, "Dear Mr President, I thank you for giving me such a great honour, but I have a problem. I am guiding a scholar and he is submitting his thesis in December-January. I have to sign the thesis and won't be able to accept the invitation."

For Sir CV Raman, his student's research meant more than anything else. The Bharat Ratna, of course, was awarded to Dr Raman in absentia. Rajendra Prasad is one of our great Presidents, so is S Radhakrishnan, Zakir Hussain and there are a number of other Presidents too.

One of your passions is the youth of this country. But is there any reason to assume that the youth is any different from the older generation? What make you optimistic about the youth?

It's when children are 15, 16 or 17 that they decide whether they want to be a doctor, an engineer, a politician or go to the Mars or moon. That is the time they start having a dream and that's the time you can work on them. You can help them shape their dreams. Tomorrow if I address a group of youngsters and talk about the flag flying in my heart and how I will uphold the dignity of the nation, I can get them to dream. But if I talk to people who are 40, 50 or 70 plus, it will not go down that well. Also, the youth have fewer biases about their society as compared to the grown-ups.

[The People's President: Reached out his hand and put his foot down as well](#)

Do you think India can successfully develop indigenous defence systems?

Many economies in the world are driven by the type of defence systems they sell. If they don't sell defence systems or products that country's economy will collapse. So aggressive marketing is going on wherever defence systems are manufactured. India must learn to be competitive too. Competitiveness involves cost, quality and marketing.

[Bandwidth is the demolisher of imbalances, a great leveller: A P J Abdul Kalam](#)

On your website, in your e-newspaper Billion Beats, and in all the issues you discuss, there is an engagement with ideas but it seems as if you are skirting the social context in which India lives.

I will ask you three questions. One, is providing urban amenities in rural areas an abstraction? No, it is the reality. India has 6,00,000 villages but few towns and cities. So if you go to my website, all the

lectures will be about how to establish this. Number two, my website talks about the importance of primary education. Third, a nation that does not have a vision dies. My 2020 Vision for India is to transform it into a developed nation. That cannot be abstract, it is a lifeline. That is what my website and my e-paper talk about.

What was the reaction among senior leaders in the government, first in the NDA and later in the UPA, to your vision? Were they just polite or did they take you seriously?

First of all, I don't have a Kalam vision. India 2020 is a national vision. As Prime Minister, AB Vajpayee announced 'India Vision 2020' in Parliament and then he announced it at the Red Fort on Independence Day. And he definitely meant it. After [Manmohan Singh](#) took over, at a governors' conference, he said the government would do everything to make 'Vision India 2020' a reality. No political system can survive without a vision for the nation.

How did the political class respond to a technocrat President?

When I took over as President, I studied the Constitution and the more I studied it, the more I realised that it does not prevent the President of India from giving the nation a vision. So when I went and presented this vision in Parliament and in legislative assemblies, everyone welcomed it, irrespective of party affiliations. Vision drives the nation.

When you addressed your vision to politicians was there ever any friction?

Yes, when I touched upon the political side. For example, when I suggested in Parliament that we need a two-party system, there was a lot of criticism. It is all part of the game. That is democracy and that is how we survive.

Did any politician ever tell you this is the business of politics and that you are an oddball?

No, they were very comfortable with me. Somehow it clicked because I had no axe to grind. When I say I have a vision for the development of the nation and its rural areas, who can say no? Can you find one politician who can say that development is not necessary for the country? He will not get votes if he does.

In the run up to these elections, there is a general perception that regional parties are driving a hard bargain, that national parties have lost ground. What's your assessment?

This is the era of coalition politics, whether you like it or not. I had promoted the two-party system. But the coalition system is what has emerged. A new situation may emerge. We may have a coalition in the state and a coalition at the Centre and the two coalitions may become two important political parties – like groupings. Like-minded people may come together — even if the ideologies are different — for power or to make the nation prosperous. If you look at the country's economic record, economic prosperity happened when coalition governments were in power.

What's the role of the media in nation-building and what will be the shape of media in 2020 and beyond?

The media is the only system that can become a partner to national development and in building a good society. I call it 'media for a billion'. That means, you can't just be an urban media, you have to be the media of the nation.

Does it worry you that there are not enough people in India who do science and engineering?

Science leads to technology, technology leads to products and marketing. The type of technology we used in India has already been developed elsewhere. So if you want to be in the top 10 of the global competitive index, science — the fundamental nature of science — has to grow. I am promoting what is called 'science cadre'. According to this, 400-500 people who do their MSc and PhD will have assured employment. And then, we need leaders like Sir CV Raman. For him, a Bharat Ratna is not important, a scholar is important.

Most of our researchers go abroad. So unless our own education system is reformed, all our best people will go for research elsewhere.

I saw the Professor Yashpal report. It talks about our university set up. We have two systems — the university system and the IIT system. The IIT-IEC is a powerful establishment for India as well as abroad. Regarding the university research, a movement has started. Out of 2% GDP for a science and technology. 8% is to be pumped into fundamental research.

How did you tackle Mr Musharraf when he visited India?

I met Musharrafji at Rashtrapati Bhawan. Just before that the SAARC countries chief paid a visit and I said that India and SAARC countries have two enemies: poverty and disease. When the former Pakistan President was with me, I gave a presentation to him on how instead of fighting each other, India and Pakistan should get together and fight disease, poverty through development. He calmly heard and smiled.

On the issue of climate change, one of the ideas floating around now is to have sector-based reforms for those industries that emit less. Do you think we are ready for such sector-based reforms?

The car you drive in New York, in Kolkata, in New Delhi, produces 30 billion tons of CO₂. This car pollution is coming out of fossil fuels which we buy for \$45-50 billion. I have been advocating that we go from fossil fuel usage to solar power, to nuclear power and bio-fuel. With bio-fuel, agriculture will also benefit out of that.

You are known as the people's President, but living in an establishment like Rashtrapati Bhawan, there is a tendency for officials to insulate you. How did you get over that barrier?

I, personally, believe that nobody can cordon me off because when I go to schools and colleges there are thousands of students there. Nobody can control them. Only when I talk do they fall silent. It seems to me that I have a communication with the people. How do I communicate with the people? I have a website that is updated; every day I check my email; thirdly, I opened up Rashtrapati Bhawan as the people's Bhawan. In 2005, a million people came to see the Mughal Gardens and they could meet me too.

The story of your life story is inspirational. Tell us about your years in Rameshwaram and the environment you grew up in.

I will recount two incidents. The first incident: in the fifth standard, I was a 10-year-old boy and I had a great teacher, CS Subramanyam Iyer. Subramanyam was a science teacher and he was teaching us about the way birds fly. The same evening, he took us to the seashore at Rameshwaram and showed us, practically, why they flap their wings, how they change their direction. That day he gave me a vision for life. A teacher can do that. That day I decided my area of work would have something to do with flying. I went into physics, then aeronautical engineering, I became a rocket engineer, then I became a rocket technologist, a space technologist. I also flew an aircraft. The second incident.

When I was 12 years old, my father became the president of a panchayat board. The same evening, somebody came to visit us. My father had gone for namaaz. The man gave me a packet for my father. When my father came home and asked me what it was and I said it was a form of cake. He opened it and saw a number of silver vessels and other trinkets. He stared at me and then he gave me a beating. He said I had no business to receive the gift. The message for me was that God gives you whatever you need in life.

We've talked of science and technology and IT but there is very little talk about Sociology, Political Science even though these subjects are so important. Why are we not even moving forward on certain subjects?

Yesterday, I was addressing future IAS officers and I asked them are their subjects. Nearly 60% had taken sociology. Some were engineers, doctors, some commerce and history students. I am insisting that in technical institutions humanities should be included. I am also an advocate of creativity being given primacy up to class eight. My suggestion is that at school, in the afternoon session students should be given vocational training. So they leave school with a school certificate SSLC plus a certificate that they are capable of doing some work. Then their employment potential will increase.

You write a lot about your ideas and views but you never write about going out with friends, watching a film. Don't you indulge in such activities and if you do, who is your favourite actor?

If you ask me about my favourite music, I like traditional music. I have not seen a film in the last 50 years.

Do you think at this point in India's history we are at a critical juncture where hate speeches are becoming a part of our daily life? How do we combat this?

Don't you think every citizen has a responsibility? I believe a person who has been educated, has a responsibility towards his nation. That is why I used to say every individual should be a good member of a family. Every individual has to be a good member of society. Every individual has to be a good member of the nation. Every educated individual should be a good member of the planet earth. The question is how to make the individual into a good member? 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. When there is order in the nation there is peace in the world. Who will give us that righteousness in the heart? Our parents, our teachers in a spiritual environment.