

APJ ABDUL KALAM

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“Eisamay & Times of India” 31st July 2015
(English Version)

He was neither handsome nor fair, and frankly speaking, he was not born with any of the qualities that one would associate with a “super star”. But fate has little to do with birth, and APJ Abdul Kalam proved this once again. After I moved to Delhi, I met him at different official functions and I often wondered how a person, who was neither politician nor a teacher, could speak with so much convincing and persuasive logic. He used the simplest of terms through messages that would endear him to the common man.

In fact, I think his disadvantages were his greatest advantages. Since most Indians do not speak with a cultivated Ox-bridge accent, his heavily-accented delivery (parts of which I never understood) endeared him to most Indians, with such fondness as Shashi Tharoor can never get. The fact that he was born in a small village in a boat owner’s family and that he had to distribute newspapers for a living as a child, spurred him on to the highest post.

His academic career was just average in school, college and university, and he did not appear to be excessively interested in studies, because he wanted to become a “fighter pilot”. It was only when he joined the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) that he really took off, to become India’s “Rocket Man”. His free and frank approach and his tenacious capacity to convince youngsters, made him some sort of a folk hero.

Kalam was born for bigger things than wasting four years in Physics in Madras University or working as Junior Scientist in DRDO. He was not content within the stately but cold walls of Rashtrapati Bhavan. He had several interesting ideas, projects and dreams and one of his most ambitious schemes was called PURA, i.e., ‘Providing Urban Amenities to Rural Areas’. He was

convinced that congested, over-crowded cities with abominable municipal services could not be the formula with the second-most populous country in the world could bank on. We had to think differently. And that is why Kalam sahib said that instead of bringing the rural population to over-crowded cities, it was better to bring urban facilities to rural areas, so that the senseless migration could stop. It is a pity that the Scheme did not find the favour it should have, after he left.

On the 16th of this month, I flew in the same flight as Dr. Abdul Kalam from Delhi to Chennai and both of us were seated on the first row, with just his secretary separating us. I gave a brief smile and he smiled back. I was seriously thinking of asking him about how much progress his beloved PURA scheme had made. But then, for some reason, I thought it was silly to ask him in the plane because I could always drop in at his house in Delhi.

Now, I realise that I should have asked him on that very day, because he will never be occupying that house in Delhi.