

# Kalam: a space-scientist and the people's president

with malice  
towards one  
and all



KHUSHWANT SINGH

If there was a public opinion poll conducted today to find out who the common people regard as the best President we have had so far, I've not the slightest doubt that A.P.J. Abdul Kalam would emerge as the outright winner.

The reasons are simple: most of them were politicians who ended their careers in Rashtrapati Bhavan and Indians do not have much respect for politicians. Two, Radhakrishnan and Zakir Hussain were academics, Abdul Kalam, a scientist.

Radhakrishnan was a scholar of Hinduism and a great orator. But he did not practice what he preached. He indulged in cronyism and patronised

people who did not deserve the honours he bestowed on them. Zakir Hussain was also a widely respected scholar. But he did very little besides discharging duties expected of a President.

Abdul Kalam came to the Rashtrapati Bhavan with a formidable reputation as a space-scientist, honoured for his work as he went along: Padma Bhushan in 1981, Padma Vibhushan in 1991 and the Bharat Ratna in 1997. He did not relax in his palatial abode but continued to give inspiring messages to the people: he became our principal morale booster. In my column, written after his first book was published, I was determined to trash it — President or no President. But as soon as I finished reading it, I changed my mind and praised it.

Now I have his second book: *Spirit of India: Reflecting the concerns, aspirations and dreams of the Indian Youth* (Rajpal). It is a compilation of answers to questions, put to him by young men and women across the country. The general trend of what he has to say is summed up in a few lines in the opening: "If the 540 million youth work with the spirit, 'I can do it, we can do it and India can do it', nothing can stop India from becoming a developed country."



■ 'Abdul Kalam became our principle morale booster... Pratibha Patil (right) is a gracious lady, but it riles me that she subscribes to astrology'. AJAY VERMA /HT

I give one more example of his vision. In answer to a question about the persistence of caste and community consciousness he replied: "A borderless society with no divisions of caste and community can only arise from borderless minds. It has taken centuries for our society to evolve into the present structure of caste and community.

Love, patience, good laws and fair justice are the best instruments for our society to transform itself into a borderless community where hands that serve are better than lips that pray."

Now we have the first woman President. She is a gracious lady. But she also has a political background. What riles me most is that she also subscribes



to astrology. I am allergic to those who believe in it and feel that one who holds an exalted position should not believe in such hogwash.

## LONG LIVE OUR SCAMS

Long live Netas' mistresses, Mercedes and their wives' scandals/Long live our scams and scandals/Cheer up, and on the crest of the wave ride/ Rather than cribbing that somebody doctored the e-mail and lied./ Why

must we, our Commonwealth Games deride/ Are we left with no national pride?/ What if the organisers eat up ninety per cent of the money/ They are still spending ten per cent, honey/ What if Delhi is broken as if after Nadir Shah's invasion/ What if the stadia leak at the time of inauguration/ The whole money is well-spent/ What if the costs escalate a thousand per cent/ And the price in the market is less than the treadmill's rent!/ Have a least, and think of our great country/ Think of the hard labour put in by the Organising Committee/ Have a heart and some optimism display/ Such opportunities don't come every day.

(Contributed by Kuldip Salil, Delhi)

## NAIL BITING

Pappu's parents had tried their best to stop him biting his nails. The family went for a picnic at the Qutub Minar. They climbed up to the first storey. On their way down, they ran into a pregnant woman who had given up climbing after going up a few stairs. Pappu asked his mother "Why is the woman so fat?" She replied: "Because she bites her nails." The woman overheard their conversation and asked Pappu: "Baby, do you know me?" No," answered Pappu, "but I know what you have been upto."

(Contributed by J.C. Mehta, Delhi)