

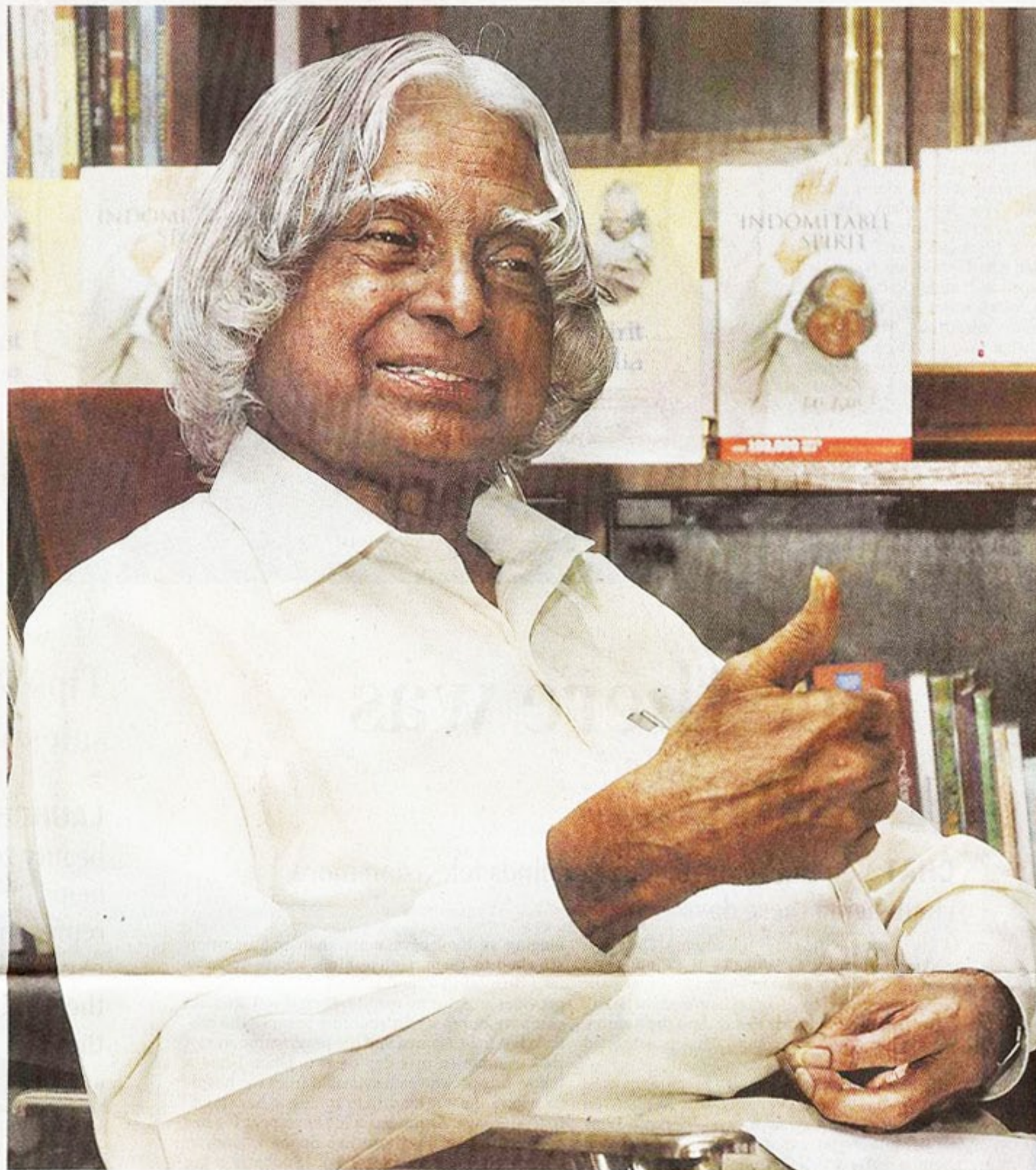
Cinema • Fashion • Food

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Music • People • Youth

The mind of a leader

INTERVIEW The country's future is in the hands of the teachers, former President APJ Abdul Kalam tells ZIYA US SALAM



THE WAY AHEAD Former President APJ Abdul Kalam believes more reforms are called for in the area of primary education
PHOTO: V.V. KRISHNAN

Darkness has descended at the residence of former President APJ Abdul Kalam. A local short circuit has left all of us in darkness. Facing an emergency light sits Kalam in his study, his silver eyebrows gleaming, his face retaining its familiar spark. As he winds up a chat with his publishers, Rajpal, there is divine justice. The lights are back. This time he opens up to talk about his latest book, "Spirit of India", a book that encapsulates the soul of the youth of the country with a selection of questions, many of them irreverent, that Kalam had to field in his interaction with youngsters over the past decade or so.

"I have interacted with 9.5 million youth of this country," the former President says. His modesty prevents him from adding that his latest book is being translated into four languages, including Marathi, Gujarati, Assamese and Hindi, while his earlier venture, "Indomitable Spirit", went into 11 translations. He is known for his love for students and youth, he travels widely; but how does he manage to write so much? "Spirit of India" is his 30th book, and seventh with Rajpal publishers.

"Writing is my love. If you love something you find a lot of time," he says with a glint in his eye. As he surveys his aesthetically maintained study which has room for a handful of mementos and thousands of books, he adds, "I write for two hours a day, usually starting at midnight; at times I start at 11."

Much of the research for his latest book came via his interaction with millions of youngsters aged below 17. So, what did he notice in his talks with students?

"They are very open to discussion, very free with their opinions. One of the very important characteristics of a student is to question. Let the students ask questions. A teacher should have a creative mind. He or she should encourage questions. At times I find teachers are in a hurry to finish the syllabus. But discussion should always be there. Let the students ask questions, even if some of them are obvious."

Get buttered, not battered!



Amul
Better halved

Creative classrooms

The man who distributed newspapers in Rameswaram during World War-II — back then, as he writes in the book, as a little boy he used to get up at four in the morning, go for his tuitions, perform his Namaaz, learn the Quran Sharif, then go to the railway station to collect the newspapers — feels strongly that the future of the country is in the hands of its teachers. "Teachers are the driving force of change. We need creative classrooms. The classrooms should be rooms for discussion and debate. Every subject is important for studies. Science has its place, just as there have to be specialists of finance, commerce. We cannot have everybody as a scientist. We need to make teaching interesting."

He provides an example in the book. On page 72, while answering a question from a student in Aligarh, he writes, "Science has revealed that the human body is made up of millions and millions of atoms... For example I am made up of 5.8×10^{27} atoms."

Then he calls for an Indian Science Service on the lines of Indian Administrative Service. "Scientists should be in a cadre, like the IAS."

However, before all that we need a healthy primary education system.

"Before higher studies we have to think of primary education. We need more reforms in primary education. There are many good recommendations in the Prof. Yashpal Committee report. Classrooms should not be

structured, they should be creative. Our literacy rate is 66 per cent. Education is a must for 100 per cent literacy. Seven million students do 10+2. Three million go for higher studies. We need to address the skills of the dropouts."

Complete literacy, he feels, can be attained with the Right to Education Act, which is "going to change the education profile of the youth because it is free and compulsory".

He, however, cautions, "To complete the success of achieving universal education, it is also essential that the programme of PURA (Providing the Urban Amenities in Rural Areas) should be in position throughout the country."

That is certainly the way ahead. But how do you explain the disparity in English language skills between those from city-bred and urban education and those whose medium of instruction is an Indian language?

"I studied in a regional language too as a young boy. Everything is fine till one comes to class 10. In places like Delhi where we have a large number of people from smaller towns and villages, we need special classes for such students. A student who goes up to 10+2 spends roughly 25,000 hours in the classroom. It gives one plenty of time for attaining knowledge, to gauge one's learning capacity."

Kalam feels it is important for a teacher to read in order to teach. "A teacher should not go by notes in the classroom. To teach for an hour, a teacher should prepare for three hours."