

“Ignited Minds: Unleashing the power within India”, by APJ Abdul Kalam, Viking (Penguin Books India), 2002, Rs. 250/-.

“From Rameswaram to Raisina” might soon replace “From Log cabin to White House”. A poor fisherman’s son has risen to become the President of India, along the way adorned the mantle of being the “undisputed father of India’s Missile and Nuclear Program”(as a full page advertisement in a South Indian newspaper recently claimed) and awarded all possible honors including the Bharat Ratna. But prior to moving to Raisina Hill, Mr. Kalam spent almost a year meeting with thousands of school children all over the country and trying to “ignite their minds so that India turns into a developed nation by 2020”. This book is a chronicle of his thoughts and ideas in this period.

The year 2020 comes from his earlier book, “India 2020: A Vision for the New Millennium”, based on a report prepared by the Technology Information, Forecasting and Assessment council (TIFAC) which gave a blueprint for achieving a developed nation status by 2020. The report was essentially a technocratic vision of development without any reference to societal and political constraints. The report’s (and the book’s) prescriptions were totally devoid of any realistic assessment of our polity and society. It is to this that Mr. Kalam now turns with his new book.

Recently there was a bit of controversy when the latest Human Development Report ranked India slightly above sub-Saharan Africa. The venerable Minister for Human Resource Development, Prof. M.M. Joshi rubbished the report saying that it only measures material well being, while we Indians are far superior spiritually! If this had not come after 4 years of similar idiotic statements by functionaries of this government, it would have provoked some reaction. But by now, we are so used to politicians and bureaucrats, especially in the field of education saying bizarre things that such pronouncements pass unnoticed.

Let us face it: by any measure that one can think of, we as a nation fare poorly in the global community of nations. Our GDP per capita is pathetic, our infant mortality rates are alarming, and we have the largest number of illiterates in the world and so on. But if one were to read Mr. Kalam’s latest book, one would think that all that is missing for us to vault into the community of developed nations is an aspiration to do so and confidence in ourselves. In his amazingly simplistic understanding, he suggests that “there is nothing mysterious about the abundance in developed nations. The historic fact is that the people of these nations believed over many generations that they must live a good life in a strong and prosperous nation and the reality became aligned with their aspirations”. How wonderfully simple! Alas, the reality is a bit more complex.

Mr. Kalam is of the opinion that we Indians have a unique characteristic of belittling our achievements and this trait may even be genetic! (an appalling statement coming from the most well known scientist in the country) In reply to an innocent question asked by a child about whose weapons are stronger, India’s or Pakistan’s he asserts “India can design, develop and produce any type of missile and any type of nuclear weapon. You remove all doubts from your mind”. At this, the child gave a very satisfied look, as he reports!

What is one to make of such a statement? Notwithstanding the self congratulations and paeans sung to our new-found scientific heroes, the recent expose in a newspaper of

the terrible state in which India's missile programme is in, is illustrative of the kind of self delusion we are capable of. At one point, Mr. Kalam talks about "Transparency being the cornerstone of development". This coming from a person who spearheaded projects, the accounts of which were not even disclosed in the Parliament, leave alone a public debate on accountability!

This is not to say that everything that he says is superfluous. Mr. Kalam talks about the necessity of role models for a child, something which is obviously important. He also talks about the need for self reliance and a search for solutions which are specific to our conditions rather than imported or transplanted from other countries. He discusses the need for improvements in agriculture, education, health etc. He also warns against becoming a provider of cheap labor in areas of high technology and the pitfalls of getting carried away with the success of a few in the software industry. No one can quarrel with him on these issues.

But there are other themes which are more controversial. For instance, in a long chapter on "Learning from Saints and Seers", he talks about his meetings with holy men of various hues. All of them, including Mr. Kalam are of the opinion that spirituality must be integrated with education. Then follows the inevitable singing of paeans to the knowledge contained in our ancient scriptures (including constructions of airplanes!), in a way which will certainly gladden the hearts of the likes of Mr. Rajput and Mr. Joshi. No critical understanding here of the nuances of integrating spirituality in a multicultural, multiethnic society such as ours. Just the proffering of "gyan" by charlatans who produce Seiko watches out of thin air or Swamis with immense political clout who use it to play politics with emotive issues like Ayodhya.

There is also a strange naiveté with which Mr. Kalam writes. Take for instance his statement that we could "easily accomplish three times what we do, in half the time we normally take, if we were to operate in mission mode with a vision for the nation". Missions to develop missiles may be successful (or not, if the Times of India is to be believed) but missions for social and political problems are a different ball game. Think of the National Literacy Mission; was it an unqualified success? Did it achieve the results which were commensurate with the expense and the hoopla? Or did it only generate pretty reports made by high powered consultants? All these are issues which one needs to grapple with before pontificating on the solutions to our complex and interrelated problems.

Or take his solution of creating a ring of villages, connecting them with high quality transport and communication systems, giving them Internet connectivity, encouraging reputed specialists to locate schools and hospitals and marketing this to attract industry and commerce! As he puts it, high bandwidth rural connectivity is the minimum requirement to transform India into a knowledge superpower! In a country where the rural telephone penetration is so abysmal and the rural literacy rates are so low, it can only be naiveté which makes a distinguished and experienced person like Mr. Kalam to make such statements.

Another theme repeated in the book is his obsession with making India strong militarily. The old argument of some countries having the Bomb and hence we need to have one is repeated. But what provides insight into the mind of our President is his pontification to an anti-nuclear activist that "he should first go and demonstrate in front of the Kremlin

and White House before he protests in front of the Parliament House". Surely a dangerous mindset for a Head of State.

The constant use of first person singular throughout the book is another irritant. Mr. Kalam might be "the father of our missile programme" but it is certainly a bit much to say "when I first launched a rocket it failed". Surely he is not suggesting that he launched the rocket single-handedly?

No one doubts the need for a vision for a people. Especially so in times like now when the world is changing so rapidly. But the vision has to be rooted. It is irresponsible to talk of knowledge superpower to the child laborer in a "dhaba" who never had a chance to go to school. The vision must connect with the reality of the people for it to take hold of a nation's psyche. Without that, it might sell books, or get some school children excited and may even be good for presentations, but it will never motivate the people. For that we need someone who is prepared to ask uncomfortable questions and have the courage to confront the political class and the rapacious elite which is looting the nation. Unfortunately, this book shows no signs that Mr. Kalam is such a person.