A. P. J. Abdul Kalam elected President of the Republic of India

A. P. J. Abdul Kalam was sworn in as the 11th President of the Republic of India by the Chief Justice of India on 25 July 2002 in the Central Hall of Parliament. He succeeded K. R. Narayanan, after the latter completed a five-year term.

Avul Pakir Jainulabdeen Abdul Kalam, born on 15 October 1931 at Rameshwaram, Tamil Nadu had his early education at a village school in Rameshwaram. After graduating with a B Sc degree from St. Joseph’s College, Tiruchirapalli, Tamil Nadu he specialized in Aeronautical Engineering from the Madras Institute of Technology, Madras. During the period 1958–63, Kalam worked in the Defence Research and Development Organization (DRDO), at the Directorate of Technical Development and Production (Air) and at Aeronautical Development Establishment, Bangalore. In 1963 Kalam joined the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO). During the period 1964 to 1980, Kalam worked in a variety of space technology areas in various capacities. Starting as a rocket engineer, he became Head of a number of Divisions at Space Science and Technology Centre (SSTC), named later as Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre (VSSC) at Thiruvananthapuram. During this period, he came to be increasingly associated with the launch vehicles, first as Project Director and later as Director, ISRO Launch Vehicles/Systems at ISRO HQ, Bangalore. As Project Director SLV-III, he contributed to the design, development and management of India’s first indigenous Satellite Launch Vehicle (SLV-III) to inject the Rohini satellite in the near-earth orbit. In achieving this goal, both technology and management systems had to be evolved, creating new facilities along the way. Nearly 10,000 engineers, technicians and logistics staff from multiple technology centres of ISRO were brought together. At ISRO HQ, he was responsible for the evolution of ISRO’s launch vehicles programme and configurations.

Kalam rejoined DRDO in 1982 and conceived the Integrated Guided Missile Development Programme (IGMDP) for indigenous missiles. It is noted that there is a ‘highly neglected sphere of science and technology (S&T) activity – technology management – in which the scientific community is found especially wanting and the country’s S&T apparatus does not facilitate its strengthening either. The paradigm shift in technology development that Kalam helped bring about in the execution of IGMDP as a multi-institutional effort – by proactively identifying skill and expertise from all over the country – resulted in overcoming the inter-institutional barriers and the academia–industry chasm that are characteristic of the Indian S&T system’ (Ramachandran, R., Frontline, vol. 19, 22 June–5 July 2002).

Kalam has held many important posts, including those of Scientific Adviser to Defence Minister and Secretary, Department of Defence Research and Development from July 1992 to December 1999, and Chairman, Technology Information, Forecasting and Assessment Council (TIFAC). Kalam was the Principal Scientific Advisor to the Government of India, in the rank of Cabinet Minister, from November 1999 to November 2001. Kalam was also the Chairman, Ex-officio, of the Scientific Advisory Committee to the Cabinet (SAC-C). Kalam has been conferred with the Degree of Doctor of Science (D Sc honoris causa) by a large number of universities/academic institutions. He is recipient of several awards, including the Indira Gandhi Award for National Integration 1997.

Abdul Kalam was awarded Padma Bhushan in 1981, Padma Vibhushan in 1990 and Bharat Ratna, the highest civilian Award, in 1997. Kalam is a Fellow of the Indian Academy of Sciences and the National Academy of Engineering.

Kalam has been President of the Aeronautical Society of India and also Honorary Fellow of the Institution of Electronics and Telecom Engineers.

President Abdul Kalam, in his address on 25 July 2002 at the Central Hall of Parliament, after being sworn in as the President of India, said “(quoting from Thirukkural): The important elements that constitute a nation are – being disease-free; wealth; high productivity; harmonious living and strong defence’. All our efforts should be focused towards building these five elements at various levels in a coherent and integrated manner. I am convinced that our nation with a strong, vibrant and billion plus population can contribute to realize these elements.

“Today our country is facing challenges such as cross-border terrorism, certain internal conflicts and unemployment. To face these challenges, there must be a vision to ensure focused action of one billion citizens of this great country with varied capabilities.

“What can be that vision? It can be none other than transforming India into a developed nation. Can the government alone achieve this vision? Now, we need a movement in the country. This is the time to ignite the minds of the people for this movement. We will work for it. We cannot emerge as a developed nation if we do not learn to transact with speed. I recall the saintly poet Kabir’s wisdom to us: “Kal kare so aaj kari, aaj kare so ab”. That means, “What you want to do tomorrow do it today, and what you want to do today, do it now”.

“...Along with speedy development aimed at elimination of poverty and unemployment, national security has to be recognized by every Indian as a national priority. Indeed, making India strong and self-reliant – economically, socially and militarily – is our foremost duty to our motherland and to ourselves and to our future generations.

“...The medium for transformation to developed India is the empowerment at various levels with power of knowledge. A road map of realizing this vision of developed India is in front of us.”

This quote echoes Kalam’s sustained efforts to motivate the young, which he has so eloquently set down in his book Ignited Minds.

K. R. Rao