My association with Dr. Kalam extends to nearly 40 years. Dr. Vikram Sarabhai first told me about him and said that he was an exceedingly capable, competent and concerned professional.

What impressed me with Dr. Kalam from our very first meeting was his determination that India should become a developed country. He didn’t like India to be referred to as a developing nation struggling to feed itself. Like the great freedom poet, Subramania Bharati, Kalam wanted that no child, woman or man should go to bed hungry in our country. That was the reason for his interest in the green revolution and in my own work. When he was President of India he invariably mentioned in every lecture how the green revolution changed our destiny in the field of agriculture and food security.

To Dr. Kalam, religion, caste, language and other criteria that divide Indians and place them in pigeon holes were unacceptable. He was an Indian first and Indian last. Therefore, he wanted all parts of India to progress. The rural-urban divide in access to basic needs like school, drinking water, electricity, roads, healthcare facilities, etc. was a matter of deep concern to him. This is why when he became President, he started advocating “PURA” (Provision of Urban Amenities in Rural Areas). He actively encouraged both government and non-governmental institutions to take to PURA. In fact when Gen. Musharraf, the then President of Pakistan, visited him in Rashtrapati Bhavan, he showed Musharraf on a computer screen the basic elements of PURA and advised him strongly that PURA should be taken up in Pakistan so that the people in rural areas are able to have access to the minimum needs of a human being.

I must also refer to the changes he brought about in Rashtrapati Bhavan. First of all, in the room where the President normally meets visitors, he installed a working table in a corner along with a computer. Whenever he wanted to make a point to an important visiting dignitary, like President Musharraf, he would take him to his working table and make a PowerPoint presentation.

Kalam was a great educationist. Spreading scientific literacy was his passion. Therefore, he gave much importance to young scholars and children. He often used to say that today’s children are tomorrow’s citizens and therefore, we should pay considerable attention to both their education, physical health and their value systems. This was essential to generate the human resource needed for us to become a developed country.

Let me cite an example of his approach to students. In September 2003, Kalam came to Kottakkal in Kerala to inaugurate the Centre for Medicinal Plant Research of the Arya Vaidya Sala, which is the oldest and the most reputed Ayurveda Centre in the world. As usual, the security personnel had put several barricades to keep the audience away from the President. Students were asked to sit in one enclosure surrounded by a fence. Kalam noted it from his seat in the dais. As soon as the meeting was over, he stepped down from the dais and rushed towards the enclosure where the students were seated. He apologised to them for his inaccessibility due to reasons of security and distributed his visiting card containing his email address among the students.

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students. He told them that any doubt they have, they should write to him and he will respond immediately. This was not just an empty promise, since I learnt subsequently from some of the students that he had replied to them and that they were very proud to have a letter from the President of India.

Let me cite another example of Kalam’s concern for building up the self-esteem of the economically and socially underprivileged rural women. I had invited him to deliver the First Convocation of the Jamsetji Tata National Virtual Academy for Rural Prosperity (NVA) and he readily accepted when he came to know that the Academicians were all rural women and men who had studied only upto the 8th or 10th class. He attended the first convocation held at the National Academy of Agriculture Sciences building in New Delhi and was most impressed with their capacity and unrecognised ability. He mentioned in his address that the Academy represents “the Core Competence of Rural India”. At the end of the Convocation he liberally gave time to sit for photographs with the rural women and men who had been elected as Fellows of NVA.

He then asked me where the next convocation was to be held. I mentioned that we planned to have it in Hyderabad in the campus of the Agriculture University. He immediately asked me, “Will you invite me again, for the next convocation?” I told him that it will be a great honour as well as a tribute to the rural academicians, if the President of India would be the Chief Guest at two consecutive Convocations. This was the hallmark of his humility and modesty on the one hand and love for rural families on the other. He never stood on formality or protocol and he is therefore rightly referred to as the “People’s President”.

Being an outstanding scientist and the first scientist to receive the Bharat Ratna, Kalam placed emphasis on chronicling facts and events accurately. His various books including Igniting Minds are a testimony to his desire to record his observations and view point.

He also got several books prepared by eminent scientists on the flora and fauna of the Mughal Gardens of Rashtrapati Bhawan. When he was invited to inaugurate the CMPR at Kottakkal, he requested the Managing Trustee Dr. P. K. Warrier to help him in establishing a Medicinal Plant Garden in Rashtrapati Bhawan. He also established an Astral Garden. Not only did he establish such valuable gardens at Rashtrapati Bhawan, he also advised the Governors of States to establish similar gardens in their Raj Bhavans. I have seen a very good medicinal plant garden established at Raj Bhavan, Kolkata by Shri Gopalkrishna Gandhi the then Governor of West Bengal. Thus, he launched a movement for the conservation and sustainable use of agrobiodiversity.

His work in the field of missile technology as well as his contributions to Pokhran II, jointly with the Department of Atomic Energy, are well known. Probably due to his enthusiasm for science and technology, the then Prime minister, Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee added a “Jai Vigyan” to Lal Bahadur Shastri’s “Jai Jawan Jai Kisan”. He used to make his own PowerPoint presentation and sometimes one could observe him sitting in the podium and quickly modifying some of his presentations according to the audience. The security personnel used to wonder what he was doing. Though a minute-to-minute programme was insisted upon by his Secretariat, he was always generous and gave more time to the organisers than what they had bargained for.

To sum up, Kalam was an unusual human being full of love for fellow human beings and full of concern for the progress and development of India in a secular, democratic and egalitarian manner. The best tribute we can pay him is to work for his vision of India as a developed country where there will be no one below the poverty line and where there will be no child malnourished or illiterate.