



**ignited
minds**

unleashing the power within India

APJ ABDUL KALAM

help link up primary health centres, area hospitals, district hospitals and speciality hospitals in the state capitals. To me it was fascinating to see how it brought together engineering and medical science to treat a patient irrespective of distance, using advances in satellite communication and transmission of data.

It was in 1990, on a recommendation of a friend of mine, that I visited Aravind Eye Hospital at Madurai for an eye check-up and treatment. Upon entering I saw an orderly queue of patients awaiting their turn and joined it. The queue was a long one but it was moving fast and within half an hour I was being examined by Dr G. Natchiar and recommended treatment. That done, I went to deposit the money for admission to the hospital. However, I had trouble paying at the counter as the girl there refused to accept a cheque, and I had no cash. I went to Dr Natchiar again and told her my predicament. She considered briefly and agreed to admit me. I was treated and discharged after a few days. A few days later,

I received a letter from Dr Natchiar apologizing for not having recognized me. She came to know only when my security personnel enquired about me at the hospital after my discharge.

I have visited the hospital often after that first visit. Dr G. Venkataswamy, brother of Dr Natchiar, is a good friend, and I make it a point to meet him every time I visit Madurai. Let me tell you a little more about Dr Venkataswamy and his commitment to his work. The Aravind Eye Hospital handled more than 1.3 million outpatient visits in 2001. It conducted 190,000 surgeries and held about 1,500 eye screening camps. No wonder then that Dr Venkataswamy's hard work has achieved recognition from WHO. The hospital provides training to students from leading universities abroad, including Harvard and Johns Hopkins.

Dr Venkataswamy has become a superb surgeon despite what to many in his position would be a crippling handicap: his fingers are twisted and frozen by arthritis that struck him while he was a student in medical school.

One day, as we were talking he narrated this incident to me. An industrialist from Delhi came to Dr Venkataswamy and said, 'I need to build a hospital, and I am very much impressed with your hospital. Will you come and start a hospital in Delhi for me?'

Dr Venkataswamy asked him 'What is it that you want? You have the money; it is not difficult for you to put up a hospital in Delhi. Why don't you just do it?'

The industrialist said, 'No, I want a hospital with the Aravind culture, people are cordial here. They seem to respect people more than money. There is a certain empathy or compassion that seems to flow from them.'

My own experience at the hospital bore this out. In the Aravind experience I see the path that we need to take—a transformation of life into a powerful instrument of right action.

As with medicine, in the same way, we shall see technology allied to different fields, such as agriculture. But the overall purpose has to be to help the people and meet their needs.