



WINGS OF FIRE - AN OVERVIEW OF ABDUL KALAM'S UNFLINCHING DEVOTION TO THE MOTHER COUNTRY

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ABSTRACT

Abdul Kalam is an inspiring personality whose immense affection for the ordinary people of India is matchless. Both as a laudable scientist and great humanist, he has carved a niche for himself in an unusual way on the scientific and spiritual landscape of India. He had tremendous vitality, and his range of ideas mesmerize even the scholars. His very life is an open book and one can learn a lot from it. His simplicity and spirituality stuns people and makes them rethink about their attitude towards leading a simple life. Kalam's book, Wings of Fire, an autobiography, is "worth its weight in gold", says Bhawani Prasad Chattopadhyay. In fact, nothing could be more inspiring in one's life than reading this invaluable book. It gives me an immense pleasure to touch upon the greatest qualities that one can draw from his life as expressed in his autobiographical book Wings of Fire.

INTRODUCTION

"...a warm and intensely personal, deeply passionate story of a common boat-owner's son who has become India's most distinguished living technocrat---the book is "all-Kalam" in feel...Kalam's personal story is a valuable document that ...Indians can be world beaters....with no foreign training or degree. For this upbeat message alone, his autobiography is worth a100 management tomes." ----- Anand Parthasarathy.

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For the successful growth of an individual, the parents play a key role. Abdul Kalam owes a lot to his mother whose “strong piety is your children’s strength with kneeling and bowing five times for the grace of the Almighty only” (*My Mother*). Her caring hands, her love and faith gave him enough strength to face the world without fear. Being born in a humble family in Rameswaram, the temple town, Kalam rose to the status of the President of India. He led a hard life during his childhood days, collecting and distributing newspapers to the citizens of Rameswaram. In spite of these hardships, he never neglected his studies. His tribulations and triumphs, his strained circumstances of his schooldays, the odd jobs he did to pay his school fee and other financial constraints did not deter his progress. He acquired discipline, courage, confidence and simplicity from his revered parents. His teachers gave an impetus for creative thinking. It is strange to think about his becoming a rocket engineer against his dream of becoming an Air Force pilot. Fortunately, Kalam had received a triangular help. He had caring and pious parents, supporting colleagues with unflagging enthusiasm, and eminent Indian scientists like Vikram Sarabhai, Satish Dhawan and Brahm Prakash who had influenced upon him and steered his career towards the path of success and glory. The book *Wings of Fire* deals with not only his personal triumphs and tribulations, but of the “successes and setbacks of the science establishment in modern India, struggling to establish itself in the technological forefront. It is the story of national aspiration and of co-operative endeavour” (*Wings of Fire-XV*). It is actually the saga of India’s search for scientific self-sufficiency and technological competence. We have seen how the wars occur now, not for food and shelter but for economic and technological supremacy. In such circumstances, unless we become technologically stronger and prove our strength, we will be at the beck and call of other nations.

Childhood Musings:

Abdul Kalam was born into a middle-class Tamil Muslim family in Rameswaram on 15th Oct, 1931 and died in Shillong on 27th July, 2015. His parents Jainulabdeen and Ashiamma were an ideal couple who possessed unique qualities like generosity, simplicity and austerity. Kalam inherited honesty and self-discipline from his father and faith in goodness and deep kindness from his mother. His friendship with Jallaluddin and Samsuddin has contributed to the uniqueness of his childhood. They were self-reliant, positive, optimistic men who guided Kalam during his childhood days. From them, Kalam drew the core creative power of his mind. Their inspiring words helped him a lot when he was in a dejected mood during his school days. His was a “very secure childhood, both materially and emotionally” (*Wings of Fire-Pg-4*). His father maintained friendship with even Hindus with whom he would discuss spiritual matters and share common concerns. Regarding prayers, his father held that one could become a part of the cosmos with prayer and “every human being is a specific element within the whole of the manifest divine”. He had such an unflinching faith on God that troubles were no troubles at all for him because in his view “adversity always



presents opportunities for introspection-.....Every recurrent anguish, longing, and desire finds its own special helper” (Pg-5).

Kalam’s father had left a deep spiritual mark on his mind by making him understand the fundamental truths of divine power. He has understood that great assets like happiness, freedom and peace of mind come to an individual only when he severs his physical and emotional bondage. An incident that occurred on the sea during the cyclonic winds, when their boat was carried away and the Pamban Bridge collapsed, had made Kalam comprehend the uncontrollable energy of the sea. Kalam’s association with Jallaluddin made him realize that prayers offered whether in temple or in mosque would reach the same Almighty. In this way, Kalam has got universal outlook of all religions. His company with Jallaluddin, who always spoke to him about scientific discoveries and the achievements of medical science, had also made him think about “brave, new world” (Pg-7). Moreover, STR Manickam, who gave access to his personal library, encouraged Kalam to read well. In his childhood, Kalam saw segregation of social groups but luckily, he was guarded by teachers like Sivasubramania Iyer and others.

The highly philosophical words of his father at the time of Kalam’s leaving for Ramanathapuram for study left an indelible impression on his mind. He remembered these words for life to grow into a true patriot. His father asserted,

“You must forego your longing for the land of your memories to move into the dwelling place of your greater desires; our love will not bind you nor will our needs hold you.....This land (Rameswaram) may be housing your body but not your soul. Your soul dwells in the house of tomorrow which none of us at Rameswaram can visit, not even in dreams. “ (Pg-11)

Education: School Days-A Turning Point:

In Ramanadhapuram High School, Kalam saw an excellent teacher in the form of Iyadurai Solomon, an ideal guide with open-minded attitude. In his company Kalam learnt that one could exercise enormous influence over the events of one’s own life. To raise his self-esteem, the teacher said, “To succeed in life and achieve results, you must understand and master three mighty forces—desire, belief, and expectation....With faith, you can change your destiny.”(Pg-12, 13). Kalam became self-confident and acquired a practical bent of mind. Though earlier Kalam loved English literature, his leanings towards physics were more gradually established. For him, “Science has always been the path to spiritual enrichment and self-realisation” (Pg-15). Though he was not against astrology, he could not understand how the star constellations, and even satellites might exercise power on human beings. He believed that they are all subjective conclusions and they appear illogical. In his view the



earth is the most powerful and energetic planet. He learnt that every solid contains a lot of empty space within and every stationary contains great movement within. Kalam finally selected Aeronautical engineering to realize his dreams. He joined Madras Institute of Technology (MIT) where he was attracted towards various subsystems of flying machines. He had earlier been fascinated by the thought of man's will to fly like a bird freely in the sky. Notwithstanding the setbacks, disappointments and distractions, he proceeded forward by recollecting his father's inspiring words. He improved his communication skills with effort and untiring zeal. His intellectual hunger was amply satisfied by three MIT professors that include Prof. Sponder, Prof. KAV Pandalai and Prof. Narasingha Rao, with their distinct personalities. Through their meticulous teaching, they created an excitement about the subject.

Career days:

When Kalam failed to get a job as an Air Force pilot, he was distressed and had almost gone astray. Then Swami Sivananda's assuaging words gave him confidence and courage.

"Accept your destiny and go ahead with your life. You are not destined to become an Air Force pilot. What you are destined to become is not revealed now but it is predetermined. Forget this failure, as it was essential to lead you to your destined path. Search, instead, for the true purpose of your existence." (Pg-25)

Kalam's life was not a cake walk. With his rural, middle-class background, he thought he had to create his own opportunities. As he was an optimist, he believes that "once your mind stretches to a new level, it never goes back to its original dimension" (Pg-28). With new surge of hope, he would go forward. Whenever Kalam was disappointed and disillusioned, his childhood memories would give him relief. He would recall his teacher's quote, "Seek the truth, and the truth shall set you free" (Pg-30). He strongly believed that one could accomplish the best performances when one is relaxed and free of doubt. His belief in the words of the Gita, made him strong forever. He believes in Benjamin Franklin's quote, "Those things that hurt, instruct" (Pg-38).

Team Work & Crisis Management:

Kalam says that he has always considered the price of perfection prohibitive and allowed mistakes as a part of the learning process. He has always supported learning on the part of his team members by paying vigilant attention to each of their attempts. What he learnt in life was that leaders exist at every level. He has also learned from visionaries like Prof. Vikram Sarabhai that errors also could be used as opportunities to promote the development of new ideas. Mistakes are imperative in development, but each mistake should be used for modification and betterment. Kalam says that problems are part of life and

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suffering is the essence of success. He learnt that talent could be revealed in the handling of the crises. From Dr. Brahm Prakash, he learnt to have a tremendous amount of tolerance and patience in times of crisis. Kalam praises the greatness of teamwork in achieving success. He visualized his team as a group in which every one worked to enrich the others in the team and experience the enjoyment of working together. He believes that hard work without proper coordination results in zero.

Abdul Kalam says that freedom with responsibility is the only sound basis for personal happiness and satisfaction. Total commitment to work and single-minded devotion to the goal are the things needed to reach the top of one's profession. To be a great leader, one has to engage oneself in continuing education to emerge better equipped. One has also to develop a passion for personal responsibility and work for the things one believes in.

Belief in God & Prayers:

Abdul Kalam strongly believes that prayers act as a stimulus to creative ideas. God has stored great potential abilities and strengths in our minds and personalities, and only the prayers can help us tap and develop these powers. Kalam's professor Mr. Sponders' words are encouraging when he said, "Let God be your hope, your stay, your guide and provide the lantern for your feet in your journey into the future" (Pg-21). His father often says, "When you pray, you transcend your body and become a part of the cosmos, which knows no division of wealth, age, caste, or creed." (Pg-4). Kalam believes the fact that the love for fellowmen is the love of God.

Linguistic Devices & Wonderful Expressions:

Kalam has used some linguistic devices in this text. Using a simile, he says that he enters the assembly shop in Bangalore leaving his other problems outside, just as his father used to enter the mosque for prayer, leaving his shoes outside. Some wonderful expressions used by him in his text include, followed **suit**, people **down the line**, my curiosity **got better of** me, the most **commonplace** thing, I could **feel the mist** of tears, their faith broke my **last defenses**, we were **under the spell of** prayer, take things **as they come**, **patronizing** attitude, feel a new **surge of hope**, **untiring** efforts, country **bumpkin**, opened the **windows** of my mind, by any **standards**, **ubiquitous** presence, the opportunity **slipped through** my fingers, most **touching memory**, to meet the impossible **deadline**, my scholarship is my **lifeline**, I was **dumbstruck**, intellectual **fervour**, to **keep abreast of** the latest technology, father's inspiring words **anchored me** in those periods of **nebulous drift**, share a **common impulse**, MIT is the **crown jewel of** technical education, **smoke away** their **hard-earned** money, enjoy the **action of giving**, father **invested great hope** in my success, **come to terms with** new environment, **uniqueness** of my childhood **made all the difference** in my later life, to **fill the slot**, the **most sought after** newspaper, tried to **emulate** my father, **discuss** the



matter **threadbare**, a **round peg in a square hole**, **put heart and soul** into work, eyes that radiated intelligence, dreams **crystallized** within their hearts, a **unique blend** of intellect and dedication, throw a **cursory glance** at, face was **beaming with promise**, **soundness of proposition**, **all rolled into one** and so on.

CONCLUSION:

Abdul Kalam, the former president of India and the recipient of Bharat Ratna award, says that the biggest problem that the Indian youth faced was the lack of clarity of vision and lack of direction. With this thought in mind, he attempted his autobiography highlighting certain aspects of his life to encourage the youth. He believes that collapse of education is the collapse of the nation. He thinks that collective understanding of the problem is the main attribute of effective leadership. Scientific experiments and inventions elevate the nation to great heights. So research should go on and the students should be inclined to do research. He believes that sky is the limit for earning knowledge. He says that students should have enthusiasm and passion for the field of study they have chosen. Discriminating between disciplines and rationalizing their choices are very crucial for them. They must know whether the choice they made articulates their inner feelings and aspirations or not. The value system in which Kalam had been nurtured was profoundly religious. He had been taught that “true reality lay beyond the material world in the spiritual realm, and that knowledge could be obtained only through inner experience” (Pg-19). He says that if theoretical knowledge be accompanied by hands-on experience, it certainly creates a strange sense of excitement among the students. While explaining the commitment that one needs, Kalam says that if a teacher acts as businessman, his instructions will meet but half the need for the knowledge of his students. It means that those who cannot work wholeheartedly, cannot achieve anything fully.

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