

Text

Jainulabdin

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Text B

## WINGS OF FIRE

A. P. J. Abdul Kalam

**Avul Pakir Jainulabdeen Abdul Kalam** (1931–) was the twelfth President of India serving from 2002 to 2007. He was born into a middle-class family in Rameshwaram. He is known as the Missile Man of India. His work as a defence scientist is unparalleled. He is a recipient of the Bharat Ratna and his life is truly awe-inspiring.

Given below is an excerpt from the autobiography of Abdul Kalam titled Wings of Fire that he wrote in association with Arun Tiwari. In these excerpts he talks about his early childhood, his village, his parents, the friends who influenced him, etc. He gives a detailed sketch of his life which makes it possible for us to feel an intimate relationship with him. His associate author, Arun Tiwari, who worked with Abdul Kalam for over a decade, says in the preface to the book, 'Many of you may never meet Dr Kalam in person, but I hope you will enjoy his company through this book and that he will become your spiritual friend.'

I was born into a middle-class Tamil family in the island town of Rameswaram in the erstwhile Madras state. My father, Jainulabdeen, had neither much formal education nor much wealth; despite these disadvantages, he possessed great innate wisdom and a true generosity of spirit. He had an ideal helpmate, in my mother, Ashiamma. I do not recall the exact number of people she fed every day, but I am quite certain that far more outsiders ate with us than all the members of our own family put together.

My parents were widely regarded as an ideal couple. My mother's lineage was the more distinguished, one of her forebears having been bestowed the title of 'Bahadur' by the British. discent

I was one of many children—a short boy with rather undistinguished looks, born to tall and handsome parents. We lived in our ancestral house, which was built in the middle of the 19th century. It was a fairly large pucca house, made of limestone and brick, on the Mosque Street in Rameswaram. My austere father used to avoid all inessential comforts and luxuries. However, all necessities were provided for, in terms of food, medicine or clothes. In fact, I would say mine was a very secure childhood, both materially and emotionally.

I normally ate with my mother, sitting on the floor of the kitchen. She would place a banana leaf before me, on which she then ladled rice and aromatic sambhar, a variety of sharp, home-made pickles and a dollop of fresh coconut chutney.

The famous Shiva temple, which made Rameswaram so sacred to pilgrims, was about a ten-minute walk from our house. Our locality was predominantly Muslim, but there were quite a few Hindu families too, living amicably with their Muslim neighbours. There was a very old mosque in our locality where my father would take me for evening prayers. I had not the faintest idea of the meaning of the Arabic prayers chanted, but I was totally convinced that they reached God. When my father came out of the mosque after the prayers, people of different religions would be sitting outside, waiting for him. Many of them offered bowls of water to my father who would dip his fingertips in them and say a prayer. This water was then carried home for invalids. I also remember people visiting our home to offer thanks after being cured. My father always smiled and asked them to thank Allah, the benevolent and merciful.

The high priest of Rameswaram temple, Pakshi Lakshmana Sastry, was a very close friend of my father's. One of the most vivid memories of my early childhood is of the two men, each in his traditional attire, discussing spiritual matters. When I was old enough to ask questions, I asked my father about the relevance of prayer. My father told me there was nothing mysterious about prayer. Rather, prayer made possible a communion of the spirit between people. "When you pray,"

he said, "you transcend your body and become a part of the cosmos, which knows no division of wealth, age, caste, or creed."

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My father could convey complex spiritual concepts in very simple, down-to-earth Tamil. He once told me, "In his own time, in his own place, in what he really is, and in the stage he has reached—good or bad—every human being is a specific element within the whole of the manifest divine Being. So why be afraid of difficulties, sufferings and problems? When troubles come, try to understand the relevance of your sufferings. Adversity always presents opportunities for introspection."

"Why don't you say this to the people who come to you for help and advice?" I asked my father. He put his hands on my shoulders and looked straight into my eyes. For quite some time he said nothing, as if he was judging my capacity to comprehend his words. Then he answered in a low, deep voice. His answer filled me with a strange energy and enthusiasm:

Whenever human beings find themselves alone, as a natural reaction, they start looking for company. Whenever they are in trouble, they look for someone to help them. Whenever they reach an impasse, they look to someone to show them the way out. Every recurrent anguish, longing, and desire finds its own special helper. For the people who come to me in distress, I am but a go-between in their effort to propitiate demonic forces with prayers and offerings. This is not a correct approach at all and should never be followed. One must understand the difference between a fear-ridden vision of destiny and the vision that enables us to seek the enemy of fulfilment within ourselves.

I remember my father starting his day at 4 a.m. in the morning by reading the *namaz* before dawn. After the *namaz*, he used to walk down to a small coconut grove we owned, about 4 miles from our home. He would return, with about a dozen coconuts tied together thrown over his shoulder, and only then would he have his breakfast. This remained his routine even when he was in his late sixties.

I have throughout my life tried to emulate my father in my own world of science and technology. I have endeavoured to understand the fundamental truths revealed to me by my father, and feel convinced that there exists a divine power that can lift one up from confusion, misery, melancholy and failure and guide one to one's true place. And once an individual severs his emotional and physical bondage, he is on the road to freedom, happiness and peace of mind.

I was about six years old when my father embarked on the project of building a wooden sailboat to take pilgrims from Rameswaram to Dhanuskodi, (also called Sethukkarai), and back. He worked at building the boat on the seashore, with the help of a relative, Ahmed Jallaluddin, who later married my sister, Zohara. I watched the boat take shape. The wooden hull and bulkheads were seasoned with the heat from wood fires. My father was doing good business with the boat when one day, a cyclone bringing winds of over 100 miles per hour carried away our boat, along with some of the landmass of Sethukkarai. The Pamban Bridge collapsed with a train full of passengers on it. Until then, I had only seen the beauty of the sea, now its uncontrollable energy came as a revelation to me.

By the time the boat met its untimely end, Ahmed Jallaluddin had become a close friend of mine, despite the difference in our ages. He was about 15 years older than I and used to call me Azad. We used to go for long walks together every evening. As we started from Mosque Street and made our way towards the sandy shores of the island, Jallaluddin and I talked mainly of spiritual matters. The atmosphere of Rameswaram, with its flocking pilgrims, was conducive to such discussion. Our first halt would be at the imposing temple of Lord Shiva. Circling around the temple with the same reverence as any pilgrim from a distant part of the country, we felt a flow of energy pass through us.

Jallaluddin would talk about God as if he had a working partnership with Him. He would present all his doubts to God as if He were standing nearby to dispose of them. I

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would stare at Jallaluddin and then look towards the large groups of pilgrims around the temple, taking holy dips in the sea, performing rituals and reciting prayers with a sense of respect towards the same Unknown, whom we treat as the formless Almighty. I never doubted that the prayers in the temple reached the same destination as the ones offered in our mosque. I only wondered whether Jallaluddin had any other special connection to God. Jallaluddin's schooling had been limited, principally because of his family strained circumstances. This may have been the reason, why he always encouraged me to excel in my studies and enjoyed my success gloriously. Never did I find the slightest trace of resentment in Jallaluddin for his deprivation. Rather, he was always full of gratitude for whatever life had chosen to give him.

Incidentally, at the time I speak of, he was the only person on the entire island who could write English. He wrote letters for almost anybody in need, be they letters of application or otherwise. Nobody of my acquaintance, either in my family or in the neighbourhood even had Jallaluddin's level of education or any links of consequence with the outside world. Jallaluddin always spoke to me about educated people, of scientific discoveries, of contemporary literature, and of the achievements of medical science. It was he who made me aware of a "brave, new world" beyond our narrow confines.

In the humble environs of my boyhood, books were a scarce commodity. By local standards, however, the personal library of STR Manickam, a former 'revolutionary' or militant nationalist, was sizeable. He encouraged me to read all I could and I often visited his home to borrow books.

Another person who greatly influenced my boyhood was my first cousin, Samsuddin. He was the sole distributor for newspapers in Rameswaram. The newspapers would arrive at Rameswaram station by the morning train from Pamban. Samsuddin's newspaper agency was a one-man organization catering to the reading demands of the 1,000-strong literate population of Rameswaram town. These newspapers were mainly bought to keep abreast of current developments in the

National Independence Movement, for astrological reference or to check the bullion rates prevailing in Madras. A few readers with a more cosmopolitan outlook would discuss Hindu Mahatma Gandhi and Jinnah; almost all would finally flow into the mighty political current of Periyar EV Rameswaram movement against high caste Hindus. Dinamani was the most sought after newspaper. Since reading the printed matter was beyond my capability, I had to satisfy myself with glancing at the pictures in the newspaper before Samsuddin delivered them to his customers.

The Second World War broke out in 1939, when I was eight years old. For reasons I have never been able to understand, a sudden demand for tamarind seeds erupted in the market. I used to collect the seeds and sell them to a provision shop on Mosque Street. A day's collection would fetch me the princely sum of one anna. Jallaluddin would tell me stories about the war which I would later attempt to trace in the headlines in Dinamani. Our area, being isolated, was completely unaffected by the war. But soon India was forced to join the Allied Forces and something like a state of emergency was declared. The first casualty came in the form of the suspension of the train halt at Rameswaram station. The newspapers now had to be bundled and thrown out from the moving train on the Rameswaram Road between Rameswaram and Dhanuskodi. That forced Samsuddin to look for a helping hand to catch the bundles and, as if naturally, I filled the slot. Samsuddin helped me earn my first wages. Half a century later, I can still feel the surge of pride in earning my own money for the first time.

Every child is born, with some inherited characteristics, into a specific socio-economic and emotional environment, and trained in certain ways by figures of authority. I inherited honesty and self-discipline from my father; from my mother,

Spontaneous

Wings of Fire

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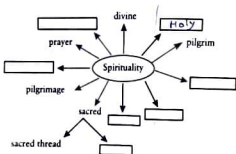
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Samsuddin was so intuitive and responsive to non-verbal messages, that I can unhesitatingly attribute my subsequently manifested creativity to their company in my childhood.

## GLOSSARY

Rameswaram	a holy place for the Hindus in the southern part of India
Bahadur	an honorary term attached to the name of a person
pucca house	a house built with brick and concrete
dollop	a large lump of soft substance
chutney	a hot side-dish made with ground coconut and green chillies
Shiva temple	temple of one of the three principal deities in Hinduism, others being Brahma and Vishnu
high priest	chief priest who performs 'puja' and other religious duties in temples
namaz	prayers offered to Allah by Muslims five times a day
militant nationalism	trying to achieve national independence through violent means
a state of emergency	a situation in which a government empowers itself to take any action, even to do away with the civil liberties of its citizens

MAIN EXERCISES**VOCABULARY ENHANCEMENT****TASKS**

- Find out the contextual meanings of the following words from the text. Make sentences of your own using these expressions.
  - in terms of
  - down-to-earth
  - sought after
  - faintest idea
  - keep abreast of
- Complete the 'vocabulary network' given below, relating to spirituality. Expressions outside the text can also be included.

**COMPREHENSION****Global comprehension**

- Describe the writer's childhood focusing on his relations with his parents.
- Give an account of his spirituality. How does he raise above the narrow religious considerations and reveal his faith in one God?



- Identify those who had influenced him as a young boy and how they helped him become the kind of person he is.

### Local comprehension

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Answer the following:

- I had not the faintest idea of the meaning of the Arabic prayers chanted, but I was totally convinced that they reached God.
- Until then, I had only seen the beauty of the sea, now its uncontrollable energy came as a revelation to me.
- Half a century later, I can still feel the surge of pride earning my own money for the first time.

Briefly describe the place of birth of the writer.

The writer states, "I have throughout my life tried to emulate my father . . . I have endeavoured to understand the fundamental truths revealed to me by my father." Why do you think his father had such an influence on him?

- Write about the writer's relationship with Jallaluddin and Samsuddin. Substantiate your answer with textual evidence.

### CRITICAL TASKS

- Do you think Kalam, as a child, exhibits any signs of the kind of person he would grow up to be?

### SUPPLEMENTARY EXERCISES

### CREATIVE TASKS

- Write about your childhood in about 500 words incorporating details about your parents, other members of the family, relatives and friends. You could also include some unique experiences you have had as a child.
- Select any two paragraphs from the text and change it from autobiographical to biographical style.