

Spirituality, science and achievements of APJ Abdul Kalam in *Wings of Fire*

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Abstract

Wings of Fire is an autobiography of APJ Abdul Kalam. It depicts the life of APJ Abdul Kalam who grew up as a renowned scientist to lead India's space research and missile development programmes. This paper throws light on the spirituality, science and achievements of APJ Abdul Kalam. The spirituality protects us from depression while achieving our goals and gives us patience against failure and difficulties. Kalam sees science and technology as ideology-free areas and emphasises the cultivation of scientific temper and entrepreneurial drive. Besides being an eminent scientist, APJ Abdul Kalam is also a thought provoking writer. The rare confluence of scientific brilliance and wisdom in him is truly unique. Apart from his technological accomplishments, his writings are a great contribution to humanity. APJ Abdul Kalam became the 11th President of India from 2002 to 2007. Kalam, a recipient of India's three highest civilian awards – the Padma Bhushan, the Padma Vibhushan and the Bharat Ratna, was well known across India and abroad.

Keywords: Spirituality, Science, Achievements, Humanity, and Religion

1. Introduction

Autobiographies written in modern India are very remarkable. In *Autobiography*, Anderson defined autobiography by quoting Philip Lejeune's words found in *Autobiographical Pact* as:

“a retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life in particular on the development of his personality.”¹

Mahatma Gandhi's *My Experiments with Truth*, Jawaharlal Nehru's *An Autobiography*, Srinivasa Sastri's *My First Meeting with Gokhale*, Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan's *My Search for Truth*, Vijayalakshmi Pandit's *So I Became a Minister*, and APJ Abdul Kalam's *Wings of Fire* are some of the famous Indian autobiographies.

Wings of Fire is an autobiography of APJ Abdul Kalam, former President of India, known as a missile man and rocket engineer. It deals with the story of Kalam's own rise from obscurity and his personal and professional struggles as well as the story of *Agni*, *Prithvi*, *Akash*, *Trishul* and *Nag*. He was born in a middle-class Tamil family in the island town of Rameshwaram. His father had neither much formal education nor much wealth. Kalam's great strength lies in his understanding on himself, society and the nature of work. He has a mind which can practically accept anything. He is spiritually bound and was not affected by the ordinary events of the world. He practically applied the idea of single-minded devotion to his goal throughout his life. Kalam discussed the major aspects of his personality that transformed him from a humble and rural person to an extraordinarily talented scientist, spiritual guru and the President of India.

1.1 Spirituality

The genesis of all greatness in humanity depends in their nurture and it is very true in case of Abdul Kalam. As a child he was very inquisitive and always questioned his father about divine power, human suffering and spirituality. The spirituality

protects us from depression while achieving our goals and relieves us from stress, as well as gives us patience against failure and difficulties. It gives us hopes of achieving our dreams. APJ Abdul Kalam started *Wings of Fire* as the seeds of spirituality was rooted and ended it as if he attained spiritual fulfillment. Initially Kalam narrated as if he started to attain spiritual maturity with the companionship and observation of spiritually matured people who explained the mystic spiritual concepts and thoughts in an easy understandable language. Kalam closed *Wings of Fire* with the words:

“I am a well in this great land
 Looking forward at its millions of boys and girls
 To draw from me
 The inexhaustible divinity
 And spread His grace everywhere
 As does the water drawn from a well.”²

Throughout the novel we may trace the various spiritual beliefs of Kalam that have tempered him into the person that he is. An indomitable spirit, replete with enthusiasm and hope, mark most of his literary expressions. He is a visionary who ushers in fresh ideas for a better tomorrow. His scientific explorations do not dissuade or dislodge his faith in God. In the words of Abdul Kalam:

“I wonder why some people tend to see science as something which takes man away from God. As I look at it, the path of science can always wind through the heart. For me, science has always been the path to spiritual enrichment and self-realization.”³

Kalam's multiple identities are constructed on his spiritual belief, which is based on the universal philosophies of major religions like Christianity, Hinduism and Islam. For example, “trials” are the basis for Christians, “karma” is the basis for Hindus and “prayer” is the basis for Muslim religion. Karma is

a belief which explains that a person's actions cause certain effects in the current life or in future life positively or negatively depending upon the actions involved. Prayer is considered as one of the five pillars of Islam. Kalam's narration proves that he overcame many trials with patience and dedication. He felt that he has a working partnership with God. In his early childhood, he learnt about the significance of prayer from his father. He narrated his life as if his spiritual belief helped him to overcome dilemma, failure and to contribute his best, which required more ability than he possessed. He also showed another quality that man should possess in order to get the blessing of God.

As Kalam himself says that he has always been a religious person in the sense that he maintains a working partnership with God. He believes that the best work requires more ability than he possesses and therefore he needs God's help. In this partnership, he has always received all the power he needed and felt it flowing into him. He affirms that the kingdom of God is within us in the form of this power. This power helps to achieve your goal and realize your dreams. He may not be an example to others, but a few souls may draw inspiration and come to balance that ultimate satisfaction which can only be found in the life of the spirit. Kalam's father could convey complex spiritual concepts in very simple, down-to-earth Tamil. He once told Kalam:

"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."⁴

1.2 Science

Kalam's belief in the power of science is to resolve society's problems and his views of these problems as a result of inefficient distribution of resources is modernistic. He also sees science and technology as ideology-free areas and emphasises the cultivation of scientific temper and entrepreneurial drive. Besides being an eminent scientist, APJ Abdul Kalam is also a thought provoking writer.

Abdul Kalam graduated from Madras Institute of Technology majoring in Aeronautical Engineering. There were disappointments and distractions but his father's inspiring words anchored him in the periods of nebulous drift. In the words of Kalam:

"He who knows others is learned, but the wise one is the one who knows himself. Learning without wisdom is of no use."⁵

Kalam was heavily involved in the development of India's first indigenous Satellite Launch Vehicle (SLV) while he was the Project Director. Since he was the Chief Executive of Integrated Guided Missile Development Programme (IGMDP), he also played a major part in developing many missiles of India including *Agni* and *Prithvi*. He has also served as the Chief Scientific Adviser to Defence Minister and Secretary, Department of Defence Research & Development. Pokhran-II nuclear tests were conducted during this period, led by him.

APJ Abdul Kalam visited NASA's Langley Research Center in Hampton, Virginia and Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt, Maryland. Kalam made an effort to develop the Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV) and SLV-3 projects, both of which proved to be successful. *Agni*, *Prithvi*, *Akash*, *Trishul* and *Nag*- the missiles that raised India's repute to international reckoning as a missile power.

1.3 Achievements

Everything is possible to be achieved for anyone and every human being has got the capability and competency of doing something. The things an achiever requires are: first the desire of doing something within him, second the belief that he can achieve it and the last but not the least is the expectation from whatever the achiever does. In the words of Kalam:

"To succeed in life and achieve results, you must understand and master three mighty forces- desire, belief, and expectation."⁶

On Wednesday April 29, 2009, he became the first Asian to be bestowed the Hoover Medal, America's top engineering prize, for his outstanding contribution to public service. Kalam has received honorary doctorates from several universities, including the Carnegie Mellon University and the Nanyang Technological University of Singapore. The Government of India has honoured him with the Padma Bhushan in 1981 and the Padma Vibhushan in 1990. In the words of Kalam:

"On Republic Day 1990, the nation celebrated the success of its missile programme. I was conferred the Padma Vibhushan along with Dr. Arunachalam."⁷

Kalam is the Third President of India to have been honoured with the nation's highest civilian honour- the Bharat Ratna in 1997 for his work with ISRO and DRDO and his role as a scientific advisor to the Indian government- before being elected to the highest office, the other two being Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Zakir Hussain. Kalam says about his personal achievements:

"If someone asks me about my personal achievements in Indian rocketry, I would pin it down to having created an environment for teams of young people to put their heart and soul into their missions."⁸

Many politicians and scientists appreciated Kalam for his remarkable achievements. After the success of *Agni* launch, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi said that *Agni* launch is:

"a major achievement in our continuing efforts to safeguard our independence and security by self-reliant means. The technology demonstrating through *Agni* is a reflection of our commitment to the indigenous development of advanced technologies for the nation's defence. The country is proud of your efforts."⁹

Every individual creature on this beautiful planet is created by God to fulfill a particular role. Whatever Kalam has achieved in life is through God's help, as an expression of His will. He showered His grace on Kalam through some outstanding

teachers and colleagues and whenever Kalam pays a tribute to these fine people, he is merely singing His glory. Kalam says:

“We are all born with a divine fire in us. Our efforts should be to give wings to this fire and fill the world with the glow of its goodness.”¹⁰

Unlike *Wings of Fire*, Kalam started *Turning Points* with the climax of his presidential period and proceeded to narrate the story where *Wings of Fire* ends. The publisher of *Turning Points* wrote that:

“*Turning Points* takes up the incredible Kalam story from where *Wings of Fire* left off. It brings together details from his career and presidency ... It offers insight not only into an extraordinary personality but also a vision of how a country with a great heritage can become great in accomplishment, skills and abilities through effort.”¹¹

Kalam has an astounding memory capacity that helped him to complete the scientific projects. In *The Kalam Effect: My Years with the President*, P. M. Nair expressed his admiration for Kalam’s memory in these words:

“memory was amazing – photographic and with plenty of films to register information.”¹²

Apart from his technological accomplishments, his writings are a great contribution to humanity. Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan says in *My Search for Truth*:

“Science helps us to build up our outer life, but another discipline is necessary to strengthen and refine the living spirit”.¹³

2. Conclusion

Wings of Fire reveals a great imaginative power, looking ahead and grasping the truth that underlies facts. It delineates a vision incorporating spirituality, science, and achievements of APJ Abdul Kalam. What Kalam observed from his experience is that people analyze the problems and failures instead of dealing with them. His life teaches many strategies to face challenges to lead a successful and fruitful life.

3. References

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