

THE POWER OF PRAYER



I was born in 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.

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, homemade 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. 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.”

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.”

Each individual creature on this beautiful planet is created by God to fulfil a particular role. Whatever I have achieved in life is through His help, and an expression of His will. He showered His grace on me through some outstanding teachers and colleagues, and when I pay my tributes to these fine persons, I am merely praising His glory. All these rockets and missiles are His work through a small person called Kalam, in order to tell the several-million mass of India, to never feel small or helpless. Yes! 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.

May God bless you!

- **A. P. J. Abdul Kalam**

About the Essay

The present extract is from Kalam’s autobiography, *Wings of Fire* which describes his life story and how his teachers, parents and mentors played a powerful role in shaping his mind, character and ambitions. The power of spirituality and religion plays a powerful role in his life and attitudes.

Born in 1931 in the family of a boat owner at Rameswaram in Tamil Nadu, Avul Pakir Jainulabdeen Abdul Kalam has had an unparalleled career as a defence scientist. He is also the recipient of the highest civilian award of India, the *Bharat Ratna* and was the President of India for five years. As chief of the country’s defence research and development programme, Kalam has demonstrated the potential for dynamism and innovation that exists in seemingly moribund research establishments.

GLOSSARY

innate	:	inborn, natural
lineage	:	family line, ancestry
ancestral	:	belonging to or having come from a person's ancestors
austere	:	severe or strict in appearance or manner
dollop	:	a shapeless mass of food
amicably	:	peacefully, in a friendly way
chanted	:	a repeated rhythmic phrase, sung aloud
benevolent	:	kind and helpful
attire	:	dress
communion	:	exchange of thoughts and feelings
transcend	:	go beyond the range of something
cosmos	:	the universe

Activity 1: COMPREHENSION

A. Tick the correct alternative:

- 1) Kalam felt that he had a very.....
 - a) secure childhood
 - b) insecure childhood
 - c) peaceful childhood
 - d) disgusted childhood

- 2) Kalam's house was made of.....
 - a) brick
 - b) limestone and brick
 - c) stone and brick
 - d) red stone and brick

- 3) Prayers make a..... of the spirit between people possible.
 - a) communion
 - b) transcendence

- c) recurrence
- d) communication

B. Answer the following questions in not more than 30-40 words each:

- 1) What used to happen when the writer's father came out of the mosque after prayers?
- 2) Why does Kalam suggest not to feel small or helpless?
- 3) Why, according to Kalam, has God created an individual creature?
- 4) How does prayer affect an individual?
- 5) What did Kalam's meal in childhood normally consist of?
- 6) What, according to the author, is God's purpose in creating each individual being?

C. Answer the following questions in 60-80 words each:

- 1) Describe the house in which Kalam lived during his childhood.
- 2) What did Kalam learn from his father about the power of prayer?
- 3) Why does the writer regard his father to have been austere?
- 4) Why does Kalam say that one should not be afraid of difficulties, sufferings and problems?

D. Say whether the following statements are True or False. Write 'T' for true and 'F' for False in the bracket:

- 1) A.P.J Abdul Kalam was born in Shimla. []
- 2) The high Priest of Rameswaram temple, Pakshi Lakshaman Sastry, was a close friend of Kalam's father. []
- 3) A.P.J Abdul Kalam is known as the missile man of India. []
- 4) *The Wings of Fire* is an autobiographical work of A.P.J Abdul Kalam. []

Activity 2: VOCABULARY

A. Find out one word for the following group of words –

- 1) Severe or strict in appearance or manner _____
- 2) Family line _____
- 3) A shapeless mass of food _____
- 4) Willingness to give someone money, gifts, time freely _____
- 5) A building in which Muslims worship _____
- 6) Done in a friendly way and without arguing _____
- 7) The situation of being greater in number _____

B. Change the following words into adverbs by adding a suitable affix –

- 1) wide
- 2) fair
- 3) normal

- 4) predominant
- 5) vivid
- 6) real
- 7) individual

C. The word ‘invalid’ used in the lesson can be used as an adjective, noun, and verb. Study the following sentences –

- 1) People with invalid papers are deported to another country (adjective).
- 2) Her parents had treated her as an invalid (noun).
- 3) He was invalided out of the army in 1975 (verb).

Find out five words from the Dictionary which express different meaning when used as different word category, such as noun, adjective, verb or any other.

Activity 3: GRAMMAR

1. Read the following sentence underlined in two different ways. In the single sentence numbered (i) and (ii) the underlined smaller parts are different. Can you guess what they are? And how the marked elements in (i) differ from that of (ii)

(i) My parents were ideally regarded as an ideal people.

1 2 3 4 5

(ii) My parents were ideally regarded as an ideal people.

1 2 3 4

In sentence (i) the underlined elements are noun(1), adverb(2), verb(3), adjective(4) and noun(5) respectively whereas in sentence (ii) the underlined elements are possessive(1) auxiliary(2) preposition (3) and determiner (4).

The clue to the question how the marked elements in (i) differ from that of (ii) is to find answer to the following question-

Have you ever thought why the number of words in a Dictionary increases over the years?

The answer to the question is that the type of words underlined in the sentence (i) increases as our needs increase. This, however, is not true about the words underlined in (ii). Their membership is fairly fixed.

Nouns are the naming words, such as the words parents and people in the sentence (i); they answer the question ‘who is it?’ or ‘what is it?’ Adjectives are the words that describe or qualify the nouns that come after them such as the word ideal. Ideally is an adverb. An adverb modifies a verb; it can also

modify an adjective. The word regarded is a verb. Verbs are called doing words.

In sentence (ii) the underlined words my, were, as, an, are a determiner, an auxiliary, a preposition and a determiner respectively. Besides, the words whose membership is fairly fixed also include the words like the following underlined ones-

2. (i) I normally ate with my mother.....
- (ii)but I was totally convinced that they reached God.
- (iii) Yes! We are all born with a divine fire in us.

The underlined words in the sentence 2(i) (ii) and 2(iii) are called a pronoun, a conjunction and an interjection respectively. A pronoun is a replacive for noun; a conjunction is a joining word and an interjection is a marker of our sudden and strong feeling of emphasis, joy, fear, sadness, etc.

Now choose as many sentences as you wish from the lesson 'The Power of Prayer' or any other lesson/s and identify the category of each word used in the sentence. Also enlist the words belonging to different categories like the ones illustrated in the sentences 1(ii) and 2(i),(ii),(iii)

Activity 4: SPEECH ACTIVITY

Divide your class among groups and discuss the contribution of A.P.J Abdul Kalam as a Missile Man.

Activity 5: COMPOSITION

Kalam considered youth, the architect of India. Have you ever heard Kalam's speech on the role of youth in nation building? In the light of any of Kalam's speech you have read, organize a discussion/debate related to the 'Importance of Youth' in the making of a nation.

OR

Kalam believed in 'Work is Worship'. He, therefore, told the nation not to observe a holiday on his death. The genuine tribute to him, he said, would be to work one day extra. In the light of the maxim and Kalam's belief, enlist ways which enable you to execute the saying. Your list must be as long as possible.