

Shades of Spiritualism in Kalam's Wings of Fire

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Abstract :

"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."

- A P J Abdul Kalam

Most of the luminaries of the world have asserted to have gained their inspiration and extraordinary energy from the Almighty. A P J Abdul Kalam also in his autobiography *Wings of Fire* has, at many places, revealed his faith in the Supreme Being. Born to religious parents as he was, the seeds of spirituality were sown in him from the infancy itself

The atmosphere of Rameshwaram was conducive to spiritual discussion. Walking towards the sandy shores of the island with Ahmed Jallaluddin, Kalam used to halt at the temple of Lord Shiva. Circling around the temple they felt a flow of energy pass through them. He had firm faith that the prayers in the temple reached the same destination as the ones offered in the mosques. His family used to arrange boats for carrying idols of the Lord from the temple to the Rama Tirtha. He had heard the stories from the Ramayana from his mother and grandmother. When he arrived at St. Joseph's College, Trichi, to study for the Intermediate examination, Prof. Chinna Durai and Prof. Krishnamurthy made him realise science and spirituality to be closely related. For him, science has always been the path to spiritual enrichment and self-realisation

He had firm belief that God, our creator, has stored great potential and ability which could be tapped and developed through prayer. He claims himself to be a religious person maintaining a working partnership with God. Whenever he needed more ability than he possessed he used to put himself in God's hands to receive all the power that was needed. In his autobiography he teaches us to renounce materialism and go in the shelter of spiritualism. The present research paper attempts to seek the shades of spirituality in his autobiography *Wings of Fire*.

Key words - Spiritualism, science, self-realisation, success, strength, prayer.

"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. 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."

- A P J Abdul Kalam

Most of the luminaries of the world have asserted to have gained their inspiration and extraordinary energy from the Almighty. A P J Abdul Kalam also, in his autobiography *Wings of Fire*, has at many places revealed his faith in the Supreme Being. Born to religious parents the seeds of spirituality were sown in him from the infancy itself. His father, a person with 'great innate wisdom and a true generosity of spirit', used to take him to a nearby mosque for evening prayers. Though as a child he could not grasp the meaning of the Arabic prayers then but he says, 'I was totally convinced that they reached God.' Answering to a question by Kalam about the relevance of prayer his father replied, "When you pray you transcend your body and become a part of the cosmos, which knows no division of wealth, age, caste, or creed."(1) At some other time, his father told him, "...every human being is a specific element within the whole of the manifest divine Being."(1) Throughout his life he tried to emulate his father in his world of science and technology. He endeavoured to understand the fundamental truths revealed to him by his father and felt 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." (2)

The atmosphere of Rameshwaram was conducive to spiritual discussion. Walking towards the sandy shores of the island with Ahmed Jallaluddin, who later married his sister Zohra, Kalam used to halt at the temple of Lord Shiva. He recollects, "Circling around the temple with the same reverence as any pilgrim from the distant part of the country, we felt a flow of energy pass through us... I never doubted that the prayers in the temple reached the same destination as the ones offered in our mosques." (2) His family used to arrange boats for carrying idols of the Lord from the temple to the Rama Tirtha. Besides the other stories his mother and grandmother used to tell them the stories from Ramayana also.

When Kalam was to leave Rameswaran and study at the district headquarters in Ramanathapuram his science teacher Sivasubramania Iyer quoted Khalil Gibran to his hesitant mother, "Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself."(4)

When he arrived at St. Joseph's College, Trichi, to study for the Intermediate examination, the lessons on subatomic physics at St. Joseph's by his physics teachers, Prof. Chinna Durai and Prof. Krishnamurthy made him realise science and spirituality to be closely related. He says, "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-realisation." (7) Commenting on the fact that everything solid contains much empty space within and everything stationary contains great movement within, he says, "It is though the great dance of Shiva is being performed on earth during every moment of our existence."(7)

After completing his B.Sc. degree course at St. Joseph's he got admission in MIT for Engineering. His last year at MIT was a year of transition. He had to test his belief in God for according to the accepted view a belief in scientific methods was the only valid approach to knowledge. He says:

I wondered, was matter alone the ultimate reality and were spiritual phenomena but a manifestation of matter? Were all ethical values relative, and was sensory perception the only source of knowledge and truth? I wondered about these issues, attempting to sort out the vexing question of "scientific temper" and my own spiritual interests. The value system in which I had been nurtured was profoundly religious. I 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. (17)

When he became a graduate aeronautical engineer a career in the Air Force and a job at the Directorate of Technical Development and Production, DTD&P (Air), at the Ministry of Defence were before him. In the interview at the Air Force Selection Board he could only finish ninth in the batch of 25 examined where eight officers were to be selected. Deeply disappointed he trekked down to Rishikesh and then to the Sivananda Ashram to seek the answers to the doubts that troubled him. The answer that he got from the swami will remain a perennial source of faith in divinity for humanity:

"Desire, when it stems from the heart and spirit, when it is pure and intense, possesses awesome electromagnetic energy. This energy is released into the ether each night, as the mind falls into the sleep state. Each morning it returns to the conscious state reinforced with the cosmic currents. That which has been imaged will surely and certainly be manifested... 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. Become one with yourself, my son! Surrender yourself to the wish of God." (19)

Next day he was given his appointment letter for the post of Senior Scientific Assistant at the DTD&P (Air). Three years passed there. Then the Aeronautical Development Establishment (ADE) was started at Bangalore and he was posted there. A project team was formed there to design and develop an indigenous hovercraft prototype as a ground equipment machine (GEM). After one-year defence minister Krishna Menon flew in the hovercraft Nandi.

After some time, he received a call from the Indian Committee for Space Research (INCOSPAR), to attend an interview for the post of Rocket Engineer. He had to face the interview and he didn't have time to read up or talk to any experienced person. At once Lakshmana Sastry's voice quoting from the Bhagwad Gita echoed in his ears:

“All beings are born to delusion...overcome by the dualities which arise from wish and hate...But those men of virtuous deeds in whom sin has come to an end, freed from the delusion of dualities, worship Me steadfast in their vows.”(22)

He reminded himself that “the best way to win was to not need to win. The best performances are accomplished when you are relaxed and free of doubt.” (22)The next day he was told about his selection. Very soon, he was sent to America for a six month training programme on sounding rocket launching techniques, at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). Before going to America he went to Rameshwaram where his father organized a special *namaz* for him. Kalam expresses had profound faith in the elevating power of prayer:

One of the important functions of prayer, I believe, is to act as a stimulus to creative ideas. Within the mind are all the resources required for successful living. Ideas are present in the consciousness, which when released and given scope to grow and take shape, can lead to successful events. God, our Creator, has stored within our mind and personalities, great potential strength and ability. Prayer helps us to tap and develop these powers. (23)

As soon as he returned from NASA, India’s first rocket launch took place on 21st November 1963. It was called Nike-Apache and was made in NASA. After the successful launch of Nike-Apache Prof. Sarabhai shared with Kalam and his team his dream of an Indian Satellite Launch Vehicle (SLV). Kalam was also asked to take up studies on rocket-assisted take-off system (RATO). Two Indian rockets Rohini and Menaka were also born at Thumba.

Kalam calls himself to be a religious person. His autobiography is littered with incidents from his life when he got sustenance from the Supreme Soul. He observes:

“I have always been a religious person in the sense that I maintain a working partnership with God. I was aware that the best work required more ability than I possessed and therefore I needed help that only God could give me. I made a true estimate of my own ability, then raised it by 50 percent and put myself in God’s hands. In this partnership, I have always received all the power I needed, and in fact have actually felt it flowing through me. Today, I can affirm that the kingdom of God is within you in the form of this power, to achieve your goals and realise our dreams.” (30)

Prof. Sarabhi unfolded his plan of developing a rocket- assisted take-off system (RATO) for military aircraft. When the news of it was made public Kalam was overwhelmed. In 1968, Indian Rocket Society was formed. Prof. Sarabhi had already selected a team for making his dream of an Indian SLV true. Kalam was chosen to be the project leader. Kalam felt as if he had discovered the path he was meant to follow “...God’s mission for me and my purpose on His earth. (48-49) They had scheduled the first experimental flight trail of SLV-3 for 10 August 1979. On the appointed date stage first performed perfectly but the second stage went out of control and the remains of the vehicle splashed into the sea. Dr Brahm Prakash helped him in enduring this crisis.

On 18 July 1980 the SLV-3 was launched successfully. It was the beginning of a very important phase in Indian history. After a month Kalam was to meet the Prime Minister, Mrs Indira Gandhi. Being a spiritual man he never cared for his dress. On the of appointment also he was dressed in very simple clothes and was wearing slippers. When he told Prof. Dhawan about this problem, he asked Kalam not to worry about it and equipped, “You are beautifully clothed in your success.”

After the completion of the SLV-3 Project Kalam took the position of Director, Aerospace Dynamics and Design Group. The next SLV-3 flight took off on 31 May 1981. Kalam had to witness it from the visilors’ gallery. This was the first time that he witnessed a launch from outside the Control Centre. The truth was that by becoming the focus of media attention, he had aroused envy among some of his colleagues all of whom had equally contributed to the success of the Project. Kalam was naturally hurt by the changed attitude of his colleagues. On the evening of 25 January he was informed about the Home Ministry announcement about the conferment of the Padma Bhushan. This time also some of his close associates turned envious but being an ‘*sthithpragya*’ he never had any malice for his colleagues. For his envious colleagues he quotes the following lines by Lewis Carroll:

*You may charge me with murder-
Or want of sense
(We are all of us weak at times):
But the slightest approach to a false pretence*

Was never among my crimes! (56)

As a true pilgrim on the road of spirituality he writes:

*Let craft, ambition, spite,
Be quenched in Reason's night
Till weakness turn to might,
Till what is dark be light,
Till what is wrong be right! (57)*

After working eighteen years at ISRO he got a proposal to join DRDL and shoulder the responsibility of shaping Guided Missile Development Programme (GMDP). Kalam joined DRDL on 1 June, 1982. The Defence Minister suggested them to launch an integrated guided missile development programme later abbreviated to IGMDP. The proposed projects were christened as Prithvi, Trishul, Akash, Nag and Agni.

Kalam was invited by United States Air Force to visit USA. Kalam is reminded of the divine words of his favourite author Robert Schuller during his visit to the Crystal Cathedral built by him, "God can do tremendous things through the person who doesn't care about who gets the credit. The ego involvement must go. Before God trusts you with success you have to prove yourself humble enough to handle the big prize." (61)

Challenges in his life could never shake his faith in the Supreme Soul. Kalam says, "A person with belief never grovels before anyone, whining and whimpering that it's all too much, that he lacks support, that he is being treated unfairly. Instead, such a person tackles problems head on and then affirms, 'As a child of God, I am greater than anything that can happen to me. (83)

The first launch of the Missile Programme was conducted on 16 September 1985 followed by the test flight of the Pilotless Target Aircraft. The launching of Prithvi on 25 February 1988 was an epoch-making event in the history of rocketry in the country. Looking back on his days as a young scientist Kalam doesn't forget to express his indebtedness to God :

"This is my belief that through difficulties and problems God gives us the opportunities to grow. So when your hopes and dreams and goals are dashed, search among the wreckage, you may find a golden opportunity hidden in the ruins... In my experience, most people possess a strong inner drive for growth, competence, and self-actualization." (85)

The whole team of scientists was engaged in working for the launch of Agni forgetting their food, sleep and families too. Kalam gives due credit to all the people working with him. He says, "The profiles of these courageous people will never be written about in any history books, but it is such silent people on whose hard work generations thrive and nations progress." (89) Agni was launched on 22 May 1989. For it they had been working hard for five years. For Kalam it was the greatest moments of his life. It washed off their entire fatigue in an instant.

The second flight of Prithvi on September 1988 was again a great success. On Republic Day 1990, Kalam was conferred the Padma Vihushan. Kalam was reminded to his father, Prof. Sarabhai and Dr Brahm Prakash who were now no more to share his joy with them. Kalam says, "I felt the paternal forces of heaven and the maternal and cosmic forces of nature embrace me as parents would hug long-lost child." (94)

On 15 October, 1991 when Kalam became of 60, he decided to write about the circumstances and people who shaped his career and to highlight certain aspects of his life. He wanted to tell the people that nobody should feel disheartened about life. Problems and sufferings are a part of life. He quotes:

God has not promised
Skies always blue,
Flower-strewn pathways
All our life through;
God has not promised
Sun without rain,
Joy without sorrow,
Peace without pain. (97)

He admits very humbly that he is not presumptuous enough to feel that his life can be a role model for anybody but it perhaps can help some poor children from their illusory backwardness and hopelessness:

"Irrespective of where they are right now, they should be aware that God is with them and when He is with them, who can be against them?"

But God has promised
Strength for the day,
Rest for the labour
Light for the way.(97)

In the closing chapter of his autobiography Kalam teaches us to renounce materialism and go in the shelter of spiritualism. He criticizes the ‘social authoritarianism in our society’ with its ‘insidious ability to addict people to the endless pursuit of external rewards, wealth, prestige, position, promotion, approval of one’s lifestyle by others, ceremonial honours, and status symbols of all kinds’ which necessitates the people to ‘learn elaborate roles of etiquette and familiarize themselves with customs, traditions, protocols and so on.’ He, very emphatically, comes to support the life of spirituality:

“The youth of today must unlearn this self-defeating way of life. The culture of working only for material possessions and rewards must be discarded.” (101)

Looking at the wealthy, powerful and learned people struggling to be at peace with themselves he is reminded of people like Ahmed Jallaluddin and Iyadurai Soloman who were so happy without any material possessions:

*On the coast of Coromandel
Where the earthly shells blow,
In the middle of the sands
Lived some really rich souls.
One cotton lungi and half a candle-
One old jug without a handle
These were all the worldly possessions
Of these kings in the middle of the sands. (101)*

He seems to be referring to the dictum of ‘*Aham brahmasmi*’ when he says:

“These great souls drew sustenance from within... Everyone on this planet is sent forth by Him to cultivate all the creative potential within us and live at peace with our own choices...As Pythagoras had said twenty-five centuries ago, ‘Above all things, reverence yourself.’”(101)

Kalam feels that his story will end with him for he had no belongings in the worldly sense. He calls himself a well filled with the water of ‘inexhaustible divinity’:

I am a well in this great land
Looking 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. (102)

He did not wish to set himself as an example to others but he believed that a few readers may draw inspiration and come to experience ‘that ultimate satisfaction which can only be found in the life of spirit.’ Kalam ends the autobiography with following words:

God’s providence is your inheritance. The bloodline of my great-grandfather Avul, my grandfather Pakir, and my father Jainulabdeen may end with Abdul Kalam, but His grace will never cease, for it is Eternal. (102)

References:

- (1) Kalam, APJ Abdul. Wings of Fire, Hyderabad: University Press (India) Private Limited, 2002.
- (2) All subsequent textual references have been given parenthetically.