

## ***'Vedanta Brain and Islam Body': Dr A P J Abdul Kalam***

**Swami Narasimhananda**

*At the Temple at Ramakrishna Mission, New Delhi*

SITTING AT THE DOOR OF HIS HOUSE, that little boy would watch his father going out on his daily morning walk to visit his coconut grove. Walking alongside a mosque and a temple, his father would go through narrow lanes into the broader roads leading to the grove. In the calm and serene settings of the morning hours, walking amidst birds flying from the seashore, his father used to probably silently tell his prayers. He used to go to the grove and bring some coconuts home and that little boy had delicacies prepared by his mother with lots of coconut put in them.

That boy also saw many people come to his father for help. Apparently, he cured the sick, allayed the fears of the worried, and brought

succour to the lives of many. Intrigued, the boy asked his father once: 'Why do these people come to you? And what do you really do for them?'<sup>1</sup> His father replied: '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. ... 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 ward off demonic forces with prayers and offerings' (ibid.).

That boy grew to become Dr A P J Abdul Kalam and the words of his father were etched in his heart. He brought help and solace to



*Morning Walk As the President of India*



countless across the world. At the ripe age of eighty-two, Kalam used to begin his days with a walk. He tells about his mornings:

Every morning I savour the sight of the new sun, the benign light in the sky before the sun appears, the cool breeze and the sweet call of the birds. I understand how this short time of the day binds us to nature. Each morning is different in the way the elements come together for that day. It is a little drama nature puts up only for us, and I can't stop marvelling at it. ... I often find myself in different cities and towns in the mornings because of my travels, but the early morning peace and calm is the same everywhere. Wherever I am, I can find a tree that is great with age, where birds dwell and go busily about their day with the new dawn, whose leaves wave gently to me in the morning breeze. It may be a warm day or a bitterly cold misty morning when my breath fogs the air in front of me, but this time away from the cares and worries that the rest of the day will invariably bring means so much to me.

At my home in Delhi there is a grand old Arjuna tree. Somehow my feet always pull me towards it when I walk in my garden. It is usually laden with honeycombs and is home to hundreds of birds, especially parrots. The dignity, beauty and stature of this tree brings memories of my father to mind and I even have silent conversations with it (7–8).

A son had truly learnt from his father.

### **Early Years**

Avul Pakir Jainulabdeen Abdul Kalam was born on 15 October 1931 in a middle-class Tamil family to Avul Pakir Jainulabdeen Marakayar and Ashiamma, in Dhanushkodi in Rameswaram District of Tamil Nadu, famous for the temple of Lord Shiva. His father had a small boat-building business and a coconut grove. He also used to own a ferry for transporting Hindu pilgrims to and from between Rameswaram and Dhanushkodi. He was the imam of the local mosque and did not have much formal education. Kalam's mother was a homemaker. Kalam's ancestors were wealthy traders and landowners owning large tracts of lands and numerous properties. Their main business was trading supplies between the mainland and the island and to and from Sri Lanka. This led to the family title 'Mara Kalam Iyakkivar' meaning 'wooden boat steerers', which title changed form to 'Marakier' or 'Marakayar'.

Kalam was the youngest of five siblings. The eldest was a sister, Asim Zohra. She was followed by Kalam's three elder brothers, Mohammed Muthu Meera Lebbai Marakayar, Mustafa Kamal, and Kasim Mohammed. We get a glimpse of Kalam's childhood from the following account:

Abdul had a materially and emotionally secure childhood. Being the youngest in the family he was pampered a lot. His neighbours remember him as an introvert interested in reading. In the environment that he grew up books were a scarce commodity. Mr S T R Manickam, his neighbour who encouraged him to read books, says, 'I used to have a library and Kalam was always there. He used to read everything he could lay his hands on.'

He always used to eat, with his mother sitting on the floor. His decision to become a vegetarian was partly due to his financial constraints—but later on, he cultivated it as a habit. Kalam believes that he has inherited honesty and self-discipline from his father, while faith

in goodness and kindness is the trait inherited from his mother. ...

He began his schooling at 'Samiyar' school in Rameshwaram. Sivasubramania Iyer, his science teacher, was a Brahmin with a very conservative wife. The rebel in Iyer, tried to break social barriers for people of varying backgrounds to mingle easily. One day, he invited Kalam home for a meal. His wife was horrified by the idea of a Muslim boy being invited to dine in her ritually pure kitchen. She refused to serve Kalam in her kitchen. Sivasubramania Iyer didn't get angry nor was disturbed. Instead, he himself served Kalam and sat beside to eat his meal. His wife watched the conduct standing behind the kitchen door. While Kalam was to leave, Iyer invited him to join for dinner again the next weekend. When Kalam visited his house next week, his wife took Kalam inside her kitchen and served him food there itself.<sup>2</sup>

Just like the morning walks and the rising birds, Kalam was influenced by the sea. Probably that was where he got his broadness from. He recounts:

Living on the island of Rameswaram while I was growing up, the sea was an important part of our lives. Its tides, the lapping of the waves, the sound of trains passing on the Pamban Bridge, the birds that always circled the town and the salt in the air are sights and sounds that will always remain linked with my memories of childhood. Apart from its sheer presence around us, the sea was also a source of livelihood for our neighbours and us. Almost every household had some connection with the sea, whether as fishermen or as boat owners.<sup>3</sup>

Kalam had his first lessons in engineering through his father's boat-building business:

My father, looking to supplement his not very substantial income, decided to start a ferry business. He started building the boat that we needed for this himself, on the seashore.

Watching the boat come to life from pieces of wood and metal was perhaps my first introduction to the world of engineering. ... Long pieces of wood were cut into the required shape, dried, smoothed and then joined together. Wood fires seasoned the wood that made up the hull and the bulkheads. Slowly the bottom, then the sides and the hull began to form in front of our eyes. Many years later, in my work, I would learn how to make rockets and missiles. Complex mathematics and scientific research would be the bedrock of those engineering marvels. But that boat coming up on a seashore, which would take pilgrims and fishermen back and forth ... who is to say it was not as important or momentous in our lives then? (14-5).

Young Kalam's childhood was not without phases of tribulation. One fateful year, the boat Kalam so lovingly saw coming up, was washed away in a fierce cyclone. His father's resilience motivated him:

My father's stoicism is what saw us through this crisis too. ... Cyclones and storms struck us again and again. I even learnt to sleep through them. Many years later, in 1964, when I was no longer living in Rameswaram, a massive cyclone struck. This time, it carried away a part of the landmass of Dhanushkodi. A train that was on Pamban Bridge at the time was washed away with many pilgrims inside. It altered the geography of the area, and Dhanushkodi became a ghost town, never really recovering its former character. ...

My father lost his ferry boat once more in that storm. He had to rebuild his business yet again. I could not do much to help him practically, for I was far removed from that world. But when I struggled to give shape to the Satellite Launch Vehicle (SLV) rocket, or the Prithvi and Agni missiles, when countdowns and take-offs were disrupted, and our rocket launch sites situated by the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal in Thumba and Chandipur were rained upon, I always remembered the look on my father's face the day after the storm. It was

an acknowledgement of the power of nature, of knowing what it means to live by the sea and make your living from it. Of knowing that there is a larger energy and force that can crush our ambitions and plans in the blink of an eye, and that the only way to survive is to face your troubles and rebuild your life (17–8).

During the Second World War, eight-year old Kalam contributed his mite to the family income by distributing newspapers. After studying for five years in Rameswaram Panchayat Primary School, he went to the Schwartz High School, Ramanathapuram. In 1950, he joined St Joseph's College, Tiruchirappalli in the Intermediate class. He graduated in science from this college and entered Madras Institute of Technology, from where he graduated in aeronautical engineering in 1958. It was his dream to become a fighter pilot in the Indian Air Force. He missed the selection just by one rank and this was a great disappointment. However, he did later fly an Indian Air Force Sukhoi 30 MKI fighter aircraft as the President of India, in his seventies, in June 2006.

### ***Unfolding of the Career***

Kalam was a man made in India. He went abroad for studies only once in 1963–4 to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) in the US. In 1958, he joined the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and served as a senior scientific assistant. In 1962 he joined the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO). From 1963 to 1982 he worked in the satellite launch vehicle team at Thumba near Trivandrum and became the project director for Satellite Launch Vehicle (SLV) 3. In 1980 he put the satellite Rohini into orbit and in 1981 he was awarded the Padma Bhushan. In 1982 he became the director of DRDO and took charge of India's integrated guided missile development program. In 1990 he was awarded the Padma Vibhushan.

In 1992 Kalam became the Scientific Advisor to the Union Defence Minister of India. In 1994 he became a distinguished fellow of the Institute of Directors in India. In 1997 he was awarded the Bharat Ratna, India's highest civilian award. In the same year he was awarded the Indira Gandhi Award for National Integration. In 1998 he directed India's underground nuclear tests and was awarded the Veer Savarkar Award. In 2000 he received the Ramanujan Award. On 25 July 2002 he became the eleventh President of India. In 2007 he was awarded an honorary doctorate of science by University of Wolverhampton, UK; the King Charles II Medal by the Royal Society, UK; and an honorary doctorate of science and technology by Carnegie Mellon University. In 2008 he was awarded an honorary doctorate of engineering by the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore; and an honorary doctorate of science by Aligarh Muslim University. In 2009 he was awarded an honorary doctorate by Oakland University; the Hoover Medal by ASME Foundation, US, and the International von Kármán Wings Award by California Institute of Technology, US. In 2010 he was awarded a doctorate in engineering by the University of Waterloo. In 2011 he received an honorary membership of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE). In 2012 he received an honorary doctorate in law from Simon Fraser University. In 2013 he received the Von Braun Award from the National Space Society, US and in 2014, a doctorate of science from Edinburgh University, UK.

Kalam was an accomplished writer and has written many books: *Developments in Fluid Mechanics and Space Technology, India 2020: A Vision for the New Millennium, Wings of Fire: An Autobiography, Ignited Minds: Unleashing the Power Within India, The Luminous Sparks, Mission India, Inspiring Thoughts, Indomitable Spirit, Envisioning an Empowered Nation, You*

*Are Born To Blossom: Take My Journey Beyond, Turning Points: A Journey Through Challenges, Target 3 Billion, My Journey: Transforming Dreams into Actions, A Manifesto for Change: A Sequel to India, Forge your Future, Reignited: Scientific Pathways to a Brighter Future, and Transcendence: My Spiritual Experiences with Pramukh Swamiji.*

Kalam had a vision of India becoming a superpower by the year 2020: 'Five areas have been identified, based on India's core competence, for integrated action: 1. Agriculture and agro-food processing ... 2. Education and healthcare ... 3. Information and communication technology ... 4. Infrastructure, including electric power ... 5. Strategic industries and critical technology.'<sup>4</sup> He wanted to meet and talk to more and more youth and share and discuss his vision.

Kalam had a simple lifestyle and woke up at 6.30 or 7.00 a.m. and went to bed at 2 a.m. He remained a bachelor and a teetotaler all his life. He used to play the Indian classical stringed musical instrument *rudra veena*.

### **Glimpses of Divinity**

Kalam had a divine spark within him that manifested brightly and 'ignited' the minds of millions. His contemplative self often manifested and people near him were awestruck by the ease with which he could plunge into the depths of his mind and probably beyond. Two incidents of such manifestation are recounted here. The first is a memoir by his secretary, when he was the President of India:

Once the President [A P J Abdul Kalam] called a former Chief Justice of India, Justice M N Venkatachaliah, from Bangalore for a consultation. They were together

in the Study for a few minutes, sitting side by side on a sofa. I was called in at the end of this meeting and took Justice Venkatachaliah to his room. We sat in silence for a while, and then he said, 'Mr Nair, this was an experience of a lifetime. I was sitting so close to Dr Kalam and I could feel sensations of godliness and divinity reverberating within me. I was nervous. He is really God's own man.'

It was something I had begun to feel at times myself, but I did not say anything.<sup>5</sup>

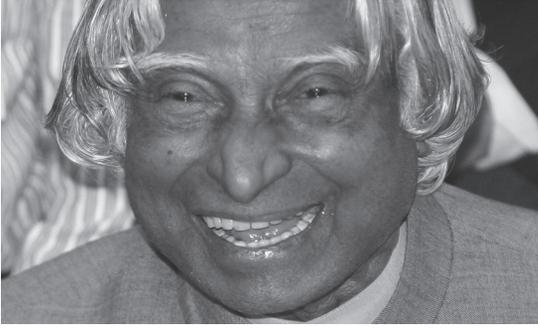
Another incident occurred during his visit to a centre of the Ramakrishna Mission:

I was at Christ College, Rajkot, getting ready for a function there when there was a call from Swami Nikhileswarananda of the Ramakrishna Mission. Swamiji requested me to visit his ashram and I had to agree. After the function at Christ College, I rushed to the ashram. It was the time for the evening bhajan and so touched was I by the singers' serene invocation that I sat down with them for nearly fifteen minutes, lost in meditation. Here too I felt the same vibrations as I did while meditating at Swami Vivekanand Hall, Porbandar, the birthplace of Mahatma Gandhi.<sup>6</sup>

Kalam had absorbed the essential elements of the major world religions and his life and

*Playing the Rudra Veena*





message are a reflection of his assimilation and synthesis of these spiritual truths:

Rameswaram is one of the holiest pilgrimage spots for many Indians, and the town was almost always full of pilgrims and cousins. The small local population consisted of mostly Hindu households, with a sprinkling of Muslims like us, and Christians too. Each community lived in healthy contentment next to the other. ... My father loved to tell us the story of our great-great-grandfather, who once saved the idol of the Ramanathaswamy Temple. The story went that on a certain festival day, the *vigraha*, or idol, would be taken out of the sanctum sanctorum and carried in a procession around the temple precincts. The temple has a number of tanks dotting it, and the idol was taken around the periphery of these tanks too. During one such procession, in a sequence of events ... the *vigraha* fell into the tank. ... People stood rooted in horror, imagining the wrath of the gods falling upon them very soon. One person, however, did not lose his presence of mind—my great-great-grandfather. He leapt into the tank and retrieved the idol in no time. The gratitude of the priests and other temple officials was overwhelming. Yes, he was a Muslim. And yes, caste and religious purists would be horrified at the most sacred element of the temple being handled by someone not authorized to do so, but none of these feelings were articulated. Instead, my great-great-grandfather was treated like a hero. ... on each such festival day, the temple would first honour ... my great-great-grandfather. This tradition went on for

years and years and the ... [honour] would be given to my father too.

My father was the imam of the Rameswaram mosque. ... One of his closest friends was the priest of the Ramanathaswamy Temple, Pakshi Lakshmana Sastry. ... Father Bodal, the priest of the lone church in the town ... was as involved in the welfare of the churchgoers of Rameswaram as my father and Sastrygal, and as concerned about the need for harmony and peace in Rameswaram. ... these three learned men ... met every Friday evening, at around four-thirty, and discussed matters of religion and the happenings of the town. ... the three men kept each other apprised of anything that could potentially threaten the peace among the people and together, they tried to work out ways of clearing miscommunication or scorching rumours before they assumed dangerous proportions. ... I was then about eight years old, and studying in the third standard. My best friends were Ramanadha Sastry, Aravindan and Sivaprakasan. All of them were Brahmins, and Ramanadhan, in fact, was Pakshi Lakshmana Sastry's son. ... we had a new teacher at school. ... He walked to the front of the class and the first people his eyes settled on were Ramanadhan and I. ... he demanded to know my name. When I told him, I was peremptorily told to gather my things and move to the back row, for reasons known only to him. I felt sad, even humiliated. ... Ramanadhan was in tears. ...

The next Friday ... [the] teacher had been summoned, and presented himself. ... my father and Sastrygal told him in no uncertain terms that the scourge of religious divisions, which was disturbing India's fabric in other parts of the country, would not be allowed to grow here. ... [The teacher] promised to rectify the wrong he had done the very next day. And he did so. ...

As far as the fact of my religion is concerned, from Rameswaram I followed my destiny that took me into the world of science and technology. I was always a believer in science, but the

spiritual atmosphere of my youth has stayed with me. I well understand different points of view, particularly about God. I have read and assimilated the knowledge contained in different religious texts—from the Koran to the Gita to the Holy Bible. Together they have made me a product of this unique land of ours, a syncretic creation of the best of our diverse traditions. And if ever I am asked what it is like to be a Muslim in the country, I can point to the people I grew up with—my father, Sastrygal and Father Bodal, indeed many others like them whom I met later—who have upheld the religious and moral standards of our nation. In their own ways they have contributed to make ours a country we can justly proclaim to be a multi-religious, multi-ethnic nation, where there is space for each of us to breathe. Yes, we have deep problems and fissures being created daily, but if the generations to come remember the stories of people like my great-great-grandfather and the imam and priest of the Rameswaram of long ago, I am sure we will continue to survive and thrive as a secular democracy forever.<sup>7</sup>

### **Association with the Ramakrishna Math and the Ramakrishna Mission**

Kalam had associated with the Ramakrishna Math and the Ramakrishna Mission and was keen to visit its centres and participate in various programmes. He visited the centre of Ramakrishna Math at Rajkot on 25 December 2001. He visited Porbandar centre of the Ramakrishna Mission on 13 February 2002 and spoke in the youth convention organised by the centre.

As the President of India he visited the Ramakrishna Mission Chennai Students' Home on 19 June 2003 and interacted with the students for about one hour. As the President of India, he visited Belur Math on 1 October 2004, and met the Revered President Maharaj then, Srimat Swami Ranganathanandaji. On the same day he inaugurated the cultural complex adjacent to

Swami Vivekananda's Ancestral House in Kolkata and addressed the audience.

As the President of India, he inaugurated Vivekananda Institute of Value Education and Culture (VIVEC) at the Porbandar centre of the Ramakrishna Mission on 12 January 2006. The Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, awarded Nirmal Gram Puraskar to Lokasiksha Parishad of the Narendrapur centre of the Ramakrishna Mission in recognition of the exemplary work done by it for the promotion of rural sanitation in the country. This award was handed over by Kalam, the erstwhile President of India, on 23 March 2006 at New Delhi.

When he was the President, he visited Ramakrishna Math, Bangalore on 31 May 2008 and released the book *A Concise Encyclopaedia of Hinduism*, in three volumes, by Swami Harshananda.

He continued to be actively interested in the programmes of the Ramakrishna Mission even after his term as the President of India. As a part of its silver jubilee celebrations, the Pune centre of the Ramakrishna Math organised a youth convention on 14 and 15 January 2009, addressed by Kalam and several other distinguished persons.

At the Madurai centre of the Ramakrishna Math a devotees' conference was held on 20 May 2010, which was addressed by Kalam. At the Belgaum centre of the Ramakrishna



Mission, Kalam spoke at meetings organised in February 2011.

### **The Humane Leader**

Kalam was always touched by human suffering and he did not rest until he could do something for alleviating the suffering he saw. There are many memorable instances in his life where his love for fellow human beings was displayed in its full force. When he was the President of India, he was concerned about the living conditions of the employees of the Rashtrapati Bhavan, the official residence of the President of India:

It was the morning of 14 July 2003, 8.40 a.m. The RAX in my office rang. It was the President at the other end. ‘Mr. Nair’, the President said, ‘Last night I could not sleep because my bedroom was leaking ...’ I froze. Any other President, and my head would have rolled, though for no fault of mine. Obviously sensing my acute embarrassment, the President continued, as only he could, ‘Don’t worry. I know you will immediately set things right in my bedroom, but I am worried about those houses in the President’s Estate where they may not have a second bedroom to shift to when the only one that is available leaks.’ I hurriedly mumbled a ‘Sorry, sir, I shall act just now.’<sup>8</sup>

On the last day of his life, Kalam was travelling with Srijan Pal Singh, who was his adviser for six years. Singh recounted the happenings of the last day through his posting on a social

networking website that was widely circulated later. Parts of his memoirs are given here:

We were in a convoy of 6–7 cars. Dr. Kalam and I were in the second car. Ahead of us was an open gypsy [a popular brand of jeep] with three soldiers in it. Two of them were sitting on either side and one lean guy was standing atop, holding his gun. One hour into the road journey, Dr. Kalam said, ‘Why is he standing? He will get tired. This is like punishment. Can you ask a wireless message to be given that he may sit?’

I had to convince him, he has been probably instructed to keep standing for better security. He did not relent. We tried radio messaging; that did not work. For the next 1.5 hours of the journey, he reminded me thrice to see if I can hand signal him to sit down. Finally, realizing there is little we can do—he told me, ‘I want to meet him and thank him.’

Later, when we landed in IIM [Indian Institute of Management] Shillong, I went inquiring through security people and got hold of the standing guy. I took him inside and Dr. Kalam greeted him. He shook his hand, said thank you buddy. ‘Are you tired? Would you like something to eat? I am sorry you had to stand so long because of me.’<sup>9</sup>

One day Singh was asked by Kalam:

‘You are young, decide what will you like to be remembered for?’ I [Singh] kept thinking of new impressive answers, till one day I gave up and resorted to tit-for-tat. I asked him back, ‘First you tell me, what will you like to be remembered for? President, Scientist, Writer, Missile man, India 2020, Target 3 billion ... What?’ I thought I had made the question easier by giving options, but he sprang on me a surprise. ‘Teacher’, he said (ibid.).

On 27 July 2015, minutes into his lecture on ‘Creating a Livable Planet Earth’ to the students of IIM Shillong, Kalam collapsed, never to revive. To the last moment, he excelled in his cherished role of a teacher.





Aboard the Fighter Aircraft, Sukhoi 30 MKI

After the nuclear tests in Pokhran, Kalam was called 'The Missile Man' by the daily *Bombay Times*. A journalist who calls him a 'Sadhu of Science' writes: 'He was ... nominated to the nation's highest office where he earned the sobriquet of being the "People's President" with his humility and accessibility. All this made Avul Pakir Jainulabdeen Abdul Kalam a true Indian icon.'<sup>10</sup>

Let us remind ourselves of that glorious vision of Swami Vivekananda: 'I see in my mind's eye the future perfect India rising out of this chaos and strife, glorious and invincible, with Vedanta brain and Islam body.'<sup>11</sup> Was Kalam's life something on the lines of what Swamiji envisioned? We do not know whether Kalam could completely fulfil that dream of Swamiji; only Swamiji would be able to tell that for sure. Nevertheless, the life of Dr A P J Abdul Kalam was a great leap in that direction and a life worthy of being made into a role model and emulated for posterity. 

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