



ISSN Print: 2394-7500
ISSN Online: 2394-5869
Impact Factor: 8.4
IJAR 2021; 7(3): 106-108
www.allresearchjournal.com
Received: 28-01-2021
Accepted: 30-02-2021

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Concept of knowledge in Dr. A.P.J Abdul Kalam's wings of fire

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Abstract

A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, the 11th President of India, published his autobiography, Wings of Fire in 1999. In this seminal book the author celebrates the power and wonders of knowledge and its enriching effects. This paper aesthetically appreciates and examines the autobiography from epistemological point of view. The central theme proposed in the book is the ultimate triumph of knowledge. On the surface the book seems to be simply a narration of the various events that take place in Kalam's life but the deeper implication manifests the importance of knowledge and the attitude to use that knowledge for the welfare of the country and mankind as a whole. Himself an avid reader and researcher Kalam favours the pursuit of knowledge and rational thinking. It is knowledge which leads to the path of spiritual enrichment and self-realisation. Kalam gave the message of striving with diligence and being enthusiastic to gain knowledge in all forms for personal good as well the progress of the society as a whole.

Keywords: Knowledge, diligence, rational thinking, self-realisation

Introduction

The value system in which Kalam was nurtured was replete with intellectual fervour and spiritualism. This manifested in the form of his intellectual integrity and scholarship. He propelled the youth to focus their minds and embrace persistence and commitment in their everyday pursuits. In the book, Wings of Fire, Kalam deals with the concepts of knowledge of self, of the world and that of the Almighty. Tremendous emphasis has been placed on the power of knowledge in the autobiography. The deep structure of the book reveals a spiritual dimension as well. He talks not only of his personal tribulations and triumphs but also of the success of knowledge and science in 21st century India. He believes that self-sufficiency and competence in the technological field is the parable of modern world. As he says in his introduction:

“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.” (Introduction xvi)

Though Kalam's father, Jainulabdeen, did not receive much formal education but he was a wise and generous man and had a positive influence on his son. He wanted his son to become a Collector by profession. His childhood was comfortable and secure. His father inspired him to always extend his capacities and comprehend the world with a broad perspective. He said: “When troubles come, try to understand the relevance of your sufferings. Adversity always presents opportunities for introspection.”(5)

He wanted Kalam to have a fearless version and to seek fulfilment within himself. Kalam tried to understand the fundamental taught to him by his father and emulate him. The road to freedom passes through happiness and knowledge. Although books at the time of Kalam were a rare commodity but he was always encouraged to read more and more by his family and friends.

Kalam was highly influenced by his friend Ahmed Jallaluddin, who later married his sister. Jallaluddin was the only person in Rameswaram who could write English. He had an unflagging enthusiasm and a good level of education. He talked to Kalam about educated people, literature, achievements in the health sector and very scientific discoveries. Kalam admits:

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“It was he who made me aware of a ‘brave, new world’ beyond our narrow confines.”(7)

Kalam owed his creativity to Jallaluddin and his cousin, Samsuddin. They filled his heart and mind with unprecedented optimism and taught him to control his thoughts and minds, visualising a bright future. This could be achieved by realising the benefits of education and by the awareness of possibilities of knowledge and a pragmatic bend of mind.

Under the influence of various adroit teachers Kalam gained knowledge in different fields and a fruitful amalgamation of all this information took place in his mind slowly. Trying to sort out various vexing questions of science, he realised that science and spiritualism are not opposed to each other, but in fact are complimentary.

“I wonder why some people tend to see science as something which takes man away from court. As I look at it, the path of science can always wind through the heart.”(15)

Kalam believed that learning without wisdom is worthless. He appealed to the students to feed their intellectual hunger by an untiring diligence, concentration and by the display of their brilliance and capacities. He believed that true knowledge could be obtained by experience. And that it is knowledge that makes a human being free in the true spirit and sense. Knowledge is our true treasure. An empowered society can be raised and built only harnessing the essence of knowledge. This should be everyone’s guiding spirit. Spirit of enquiry and curiosity has been celebrated by Kalam. Kalam also had the distinguished ability to patiently listen to others and learnt by observing them and by their experiences and their teachings. Remembering the advice of Prof. Dhawan, Kalam says:

“You have to dream before your dreams can come true. Some people strive towards whatever it is the bond in life; other shuffle de feat and never get started because they do not know what the phone – and do not know how to find it either.”(112)

Kalam has emphasised the importance of both formal and informal forms of getting knowledge. He appreciated his father’s wisdom and foresightedness who received little formal education. It was his teachings which helped him to get through difficult times. Experimentation and innovation were his encouraged by him. He always desired to be true to his life. For this he considered it essential to visualise our goals and channelise our energy. He valued an unorthodox thinking and approach towards life like that of Prof. Sarabhai who

“Had a strange magnetism about him which derailed the train of my thoughts on innovation.”(50).

Knowledge and innovation unfolds new paths of success for an individual as well as for the nation. It is important to explore all available possibilities but what is more essential is to use one’s wisdom to mould old principles according to new situations and hone one’s skills and talents to negotiate towards the way forward. An inner urge to seek more within us is a drive to be pursued.

In Kalam’s opinion the youth should utilise their inner resources like creativity and imagination. Self-reverence and self-confidence are the keywords to realise the full potential of the mind. One should have knowledge of his own capabilities and should try to improve and grow. He recognises the role of his teachers in school and college like Iyadurai Solomon of Schwartz High School who instilled in him a sense of self-worth and self-respect since the age of fifteen years. We should draw sustenance from within. Trusting our inner signals, we should take control of our lives in our own hands. If external pressures try to pull us back or manipulate us, we must learn to defeat them. By following this principle life can be improved and the entire nation will be benefitted by having strong, inward-looking people.

“Your willingness to use your own inner resources to invest in your life, especially your imagination, will bring you success.”(176).

Kalam has also proposed true qualities of a good leader in his autobiography. Leadership can be effective when his basic tenets are proper planning, orientation and organisation. Freedom and flexibility of action should be provided by him to his subordinates. Rigidity of opinion by leaders can be detrimental to the creativity of the group as a whole. The importance of leaders lies in providing effective work directions and promoting understanding amongst group members. There has to be an unflinching belief in one’s worth and achievement. Involvement of more and more willing people has to be encouraged.

Above all is the power of the Almighty and prayer. God and human beings are inseparable. God has given us unfathomable strength and capability. It is prayer which stimulates the oblivious ideas into action. With his blessings alone can our powers be tapped and developed. Thus, spiritual knowledge has to be assimilated with the creative aptitude to scale new heights.

Kalam’s *Wings of Fire* is an autobiography which has the capability of igniting the young minds into right thinking, co-operation, team work, and right action. As a successful scientist, administrator and an amicable person he inspired youth to make continuous efforts to gain knowledge and be work hard. Love towards one’s country and towards humanity have been mentioned in the book. It evokes the readers to dream high and identify with the immense potential which God has blessed them with. With the example of his own journey of progress and technological and spiritual pursuits Kalam propagates his belief that the quest for knowledge in this vast cosmos is the ultimate guide to transform the world into a better place and for India to become self-sufficient.

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