



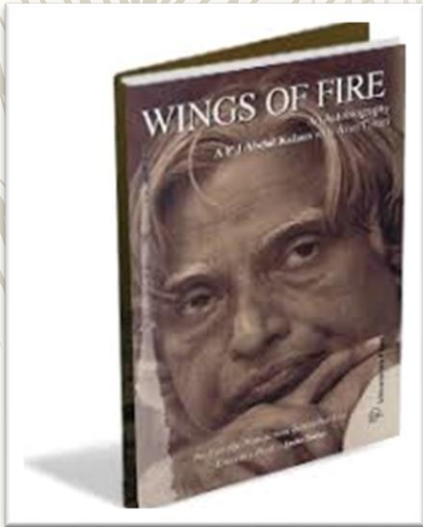
My Childhood

by A. P. J. Abdul Kalam

Explanation Material

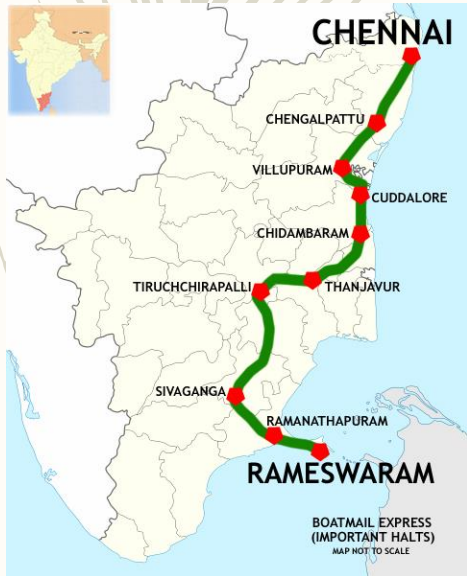
by Indrani Bhattacharyya

Source and Content



- *Abdul Kalam's biography is titled "Wings of Fire".*
- *The chapter 'My Childhood' is a significant chapter in the autobiography.*
- *It talks about the childhood of A.P.J Abdul Kalam.*
- *He was not only the President of India but also a great scientist.*
- *In this chapter, Kalam recollects several aspects of his upbringing, his parents and siblings.*
- *He tells us about his friends and all those people and experiences that influenced his childhood.*

Hometown



- *A.P.J Abdul Kalam was born into a middle-class Tamil family in Rameswaram.*
- *Rameshwaram is an Island town in the state of Tamil Nadu, in the Bay of Bengal.*
- *Today, we know this state as Tamil Nadu but when he was born, at that time the state was known as Madras state.*

Parents



- *APJ Abdul Kalam's father's name was Jainulabdeen.*
- *Kalam mentions that his father was not very rich, he did not have wealth, he was not highly educated.*
- *In spite of these disadvantages, he had some other qualities- he was naturally very wise and was generous too.*
- *Kalam's mother was called Ashiamma.*
- *She used to help his father. She was a great support and help to him.*
- *Kalam's mother was generous and kind hearted too. Every day she used to feed a lot of people not only from her family but even from outside.*



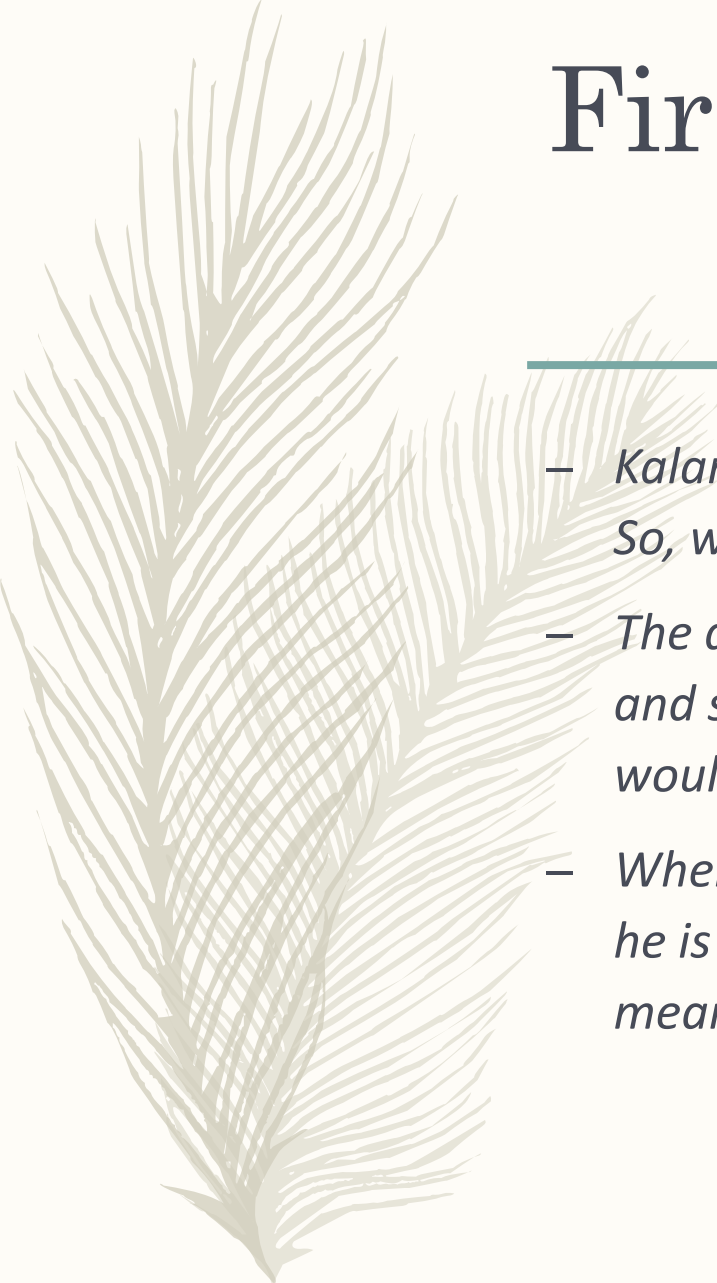
Upbringing

- *Abdul Kalam had many siblings.*
- *He describes himself as having short height and common looks.*
- *On the contrary, his parents were very tall and handsome. Kalam did not inherit their physical qualities.*
- *APJ Abdul Kalam's ancestral house was very old, having been built in the nineteenth century. It was a pucca house, which was made of bricks and limestone, located on the Mosque Street in Rameswaram.*



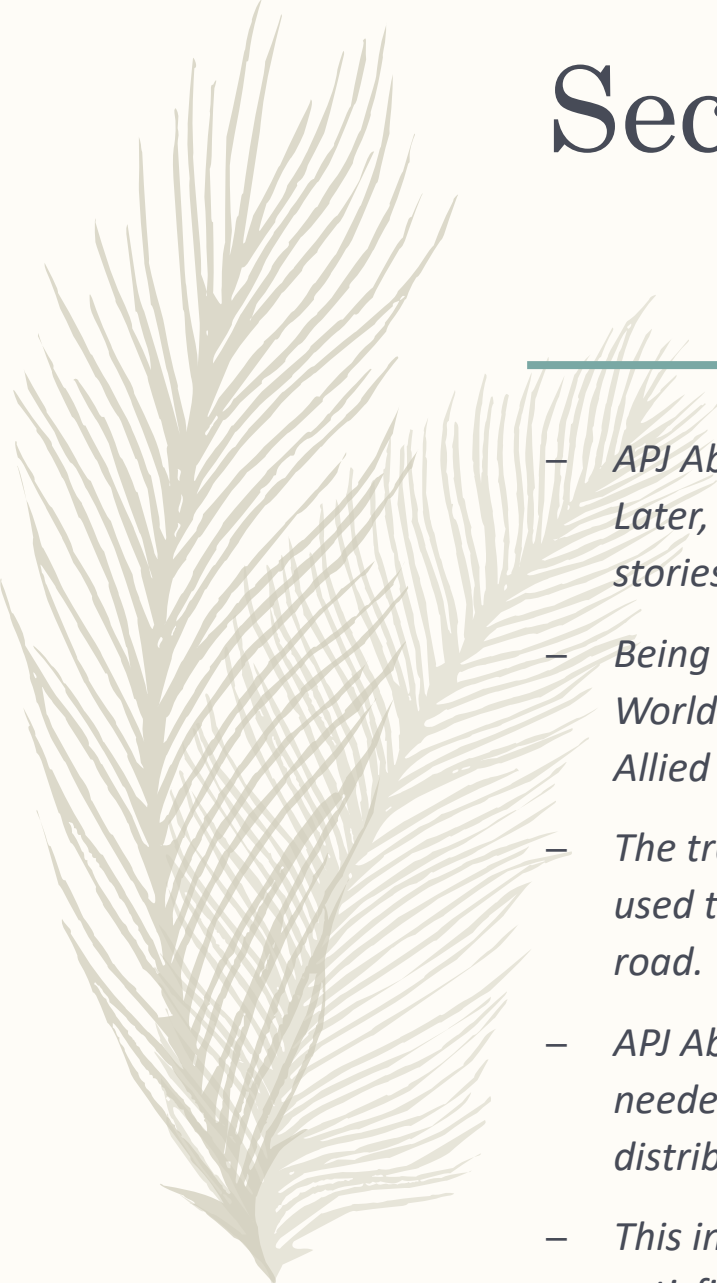
Upbringing

- *Kalam's father was very simple and at the same time he was strict.*
- *He wanted to live his life in a simple way and used to teach his children not to waste money on unnecessary things.*
- *Kalam recalls that his father used to avoid any kind of inessential comfort and luxuries. He provided them with all the necessary things like food, clothes and medicines.*
- *Kalam says that his parents fulfilled all his needs - whether it was any tangible thing, or through their love and affection.*
- *This shows that he has the quality of gratitude. Kalam is thankful to his parents for whatever they did for him.*



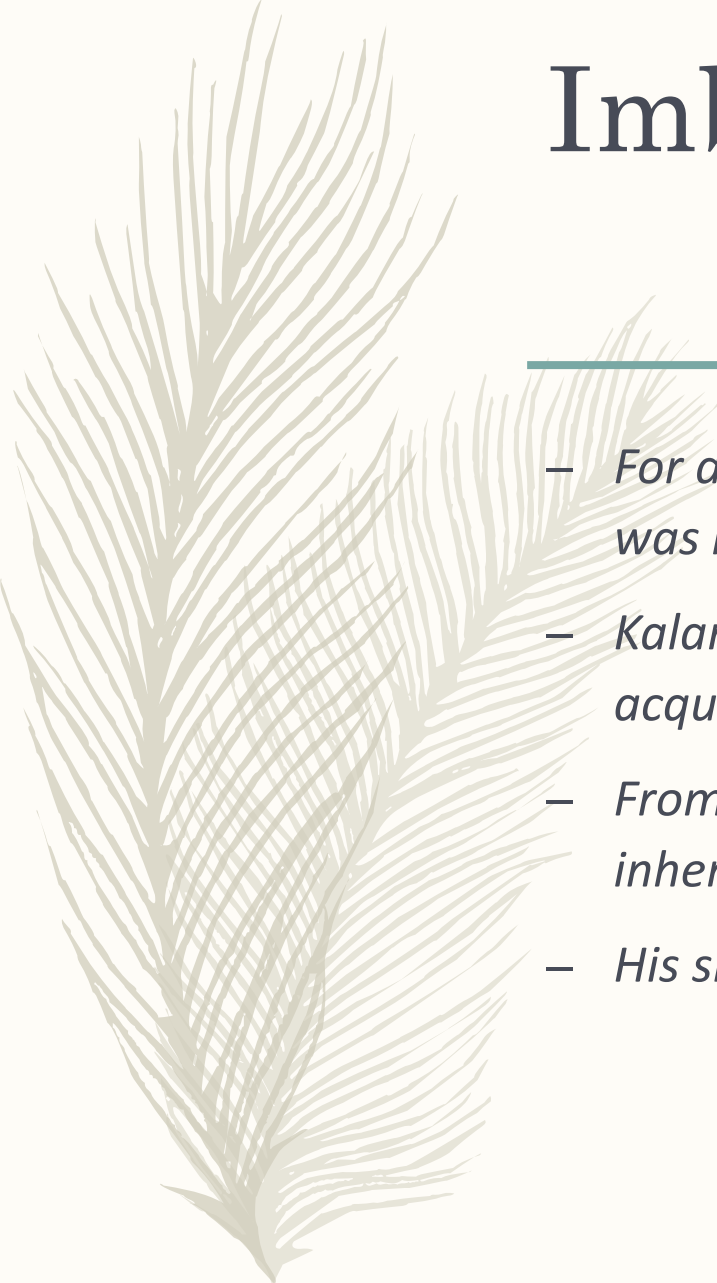
First Earnings

- *Kalam was eight years old when the Second World war broke in the year 1939. So, we can calculate that he was born in the year 1931.*
- *The demand for tamarind seeds increased in the market. Kalam used to collect and sell the tamarind seeds to a provision shop located on Mosque street. He would earn a mere sum of one anna which equals six paise.*
- *When he addresses it as a ‘princely sum’ – something very great and valuable, he is being ironic as the amount was very meagre. At that time, this one anna meant a lot of money to him.*



Second World War and First Job

- *APJ Abdul Kalam's brother –in-law Jallaluddin used to tell him the stories of the ongoing World War. Later, Kalam would read the newspaper 'Dinamani' and used to look for the news of the same stories.*
- *Being a small island town, far away from the main land, Rameshwaram was not affected by the World War in the beginning. But after some time, when India joined the war and combined with the Allied Forces, a state of emergency was declared in the country.*
- *The train stoppage at the Rameswaram station was cancelled. Hence, the newspaper bundle which used to come for Rameswaram, was thrown out of the moving train as it reached Rameswaram road.*
- *APJ Abdul Kalam's cousin Samsuddin used to distribute the newspapers in Rameswaram and now needed someone to help him catch it. Kalam helped Samsuddin by catching the bundle and distributing the newspapers. In return, Samsuddin paid him a salary which was Kalam's first earning.*
- *This incident happened almost 50 years ago. Even now, i.e. when he wrote the book, he could feel satisfied and proud of himself. Kalam says that whenever someone earns his own money with his hard work, he feels it the same way as he did.*



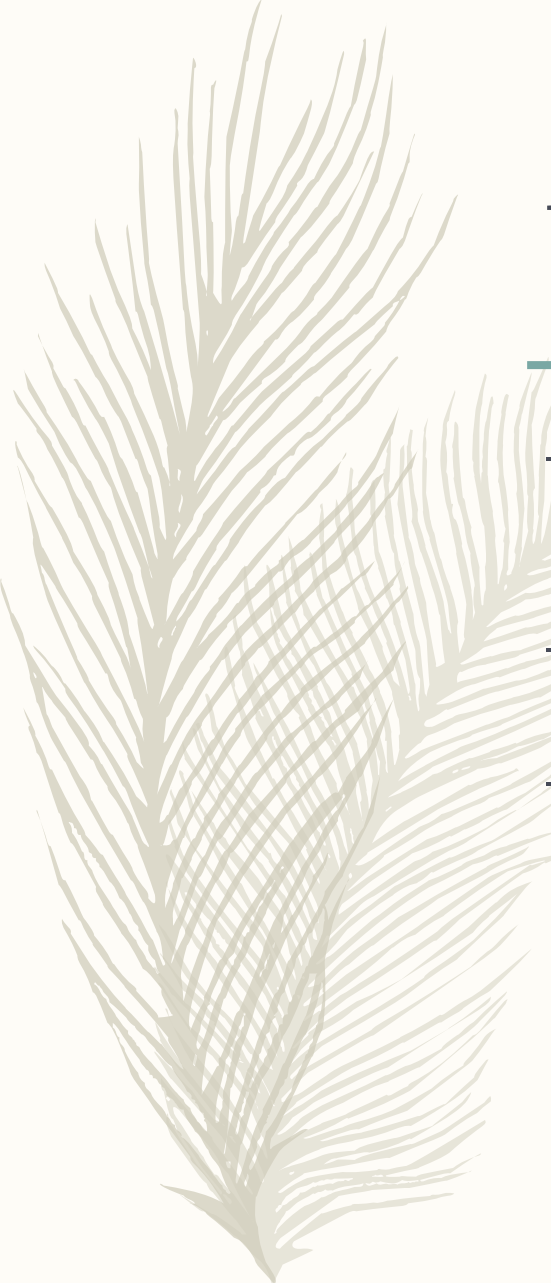
Imbibing Qualities

- *For a child, the figure of authority is his parents and the next figure of authority was his teacher.*
- *Kalam said that whenever a child is born, he has some qualities which he acquired from the elders in his family.*
- *From his father, he inherited honesty and self discipline and from his mother he inherited faith in goodness and deep kindness.*
- *His siblings also inherited these qualities from their parents.*



Friends

- *Kalam had three best friends during his childhood.*
- *Their names are:*
 - *Ramanadha Sastry*
 - *Aravindan and*
 - *Sivaprakasan.*
- *All of them belonged to very strict Hindu Brahmin families and were ardent followers of their religion.*



Friendship overcoming all barriers

- *Being from a Muslim family, he says that during his childhood, all the children were so close to each other, that they never felt they belonged to different religions. Religion was not a barrier in their friendship.*
- *Kalam's best friend Ramanadha Sastry was the son of Pakshi Lakshmana Sastry, the priest of the Rameshwaram temple.*
- *When these three friends grew up:*
 - *Ramanadha Sastry took the priesthood of the Rameswaram temple*
 - *Arvidan started a business of transporting the pilgrims to and from the Rameswaram temple and*
 - *Sivaprakasan became a catering contractor for the southern railway- he was in-charge of the catering for the railways.*

Friendship overcoming all barriers

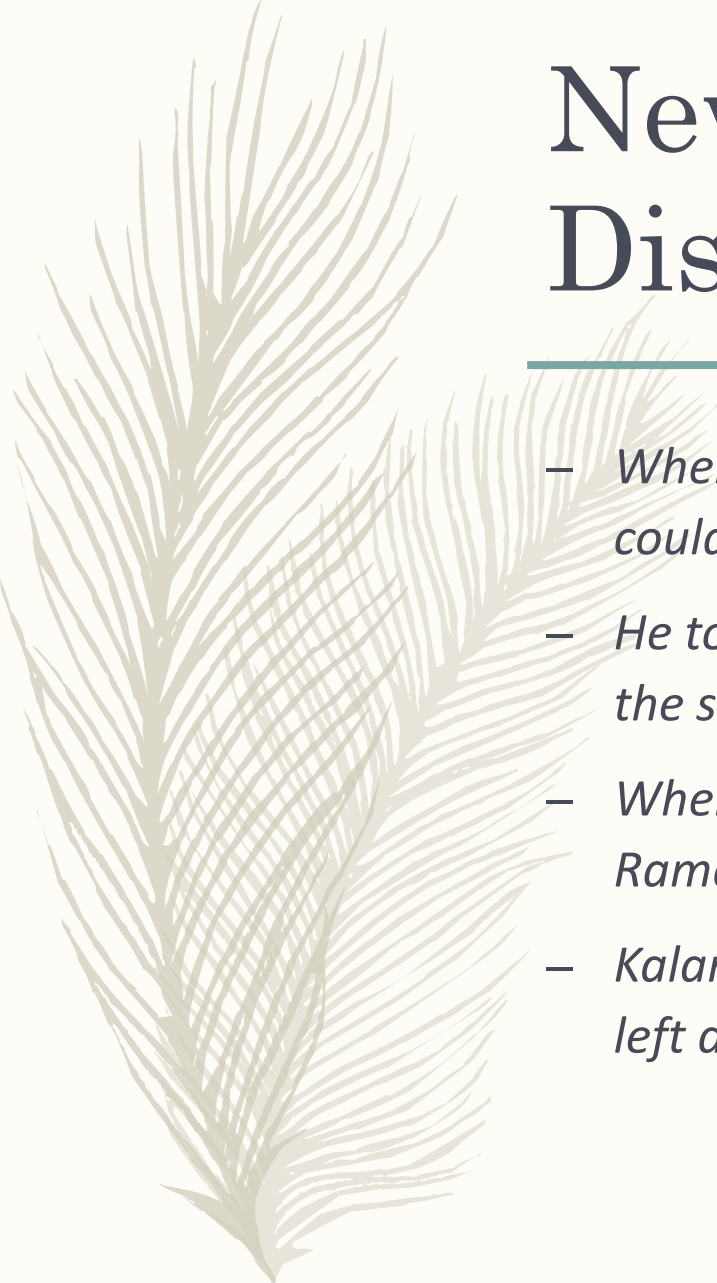
- *Whenever the Shri Seetha Rama Kalyanam ceremony used to take place, Kalam's family also took part in it.*
- *They used to arrange the boats for it.*
- *They used to make a special platform on the boats on which the statue of Ram and Seetha were placed*
- *They transported from the temple to the marriage site which was in the middle of a pond named Rama Tirtha, which pond was near Kalam's house.*
- *When he was growing up, he never thought that there was any difference between Hindus and Muslims as they participated in the Hindu festivals wholeheartedly.*



Friendship overcoming all barriers

- *Kalam says that they listened to stories from the Ramayana and the life of the Prophet from their mother and grandmother as bedtime stories. So, they listened to stories of both Hindu Gods and Muslim Gods. There was no differentiation on grounds of religion.*
- *As APJ Abdul Kalam belonged to a Muslim family, he used to wear a cap on his head, which identified him as a Muslim.*
- *His friend Ramanadha Sastry who was the son of the priest of the Rameswaram temple belonged to a Hindu Brahmin family and used to wear the sacred thread worn by Brahmins.*





New Teacher: A Taste of Distinction

- *When these children were in Class Five, a new teacher came to their class who could not tolerate that a Hindu priest's son was sitting next to a Muslim boy.*
- *He told Kalam to go and sit on the last bench as he belonged to a lower rank of the society. Both the children felt very bad.*
- *When Kalam changed his seat and went back and sat on the last bench, Ramanadha felt very bad.*
- *Kalam still remembers the image of his friend Ramanadha crying. That image left a lifelong impression on Kalam - of his friends' feelings for him.*

Lesson on Equality



- *Both Kalam and Sastry went home and told their parents about this incident.*
- *Ramanadha's father, Lakshmana Sastry called the new teacher and spoke to him clearly to not kill the children's friendship by putting the venomous discrimination of caste and religion into their innocent minds.*
- *Lakshmana Sastry was very clear in himself. He told the teacher- either you ask sorry for the wrong you have done or else leave the school and Rameswaram town also.*
- *The teacher asked apologized for the mistake he had done and due to Lakshmana Sastry's determination, his thoughts about religion and caste changed.*

An Inspiring Teacher



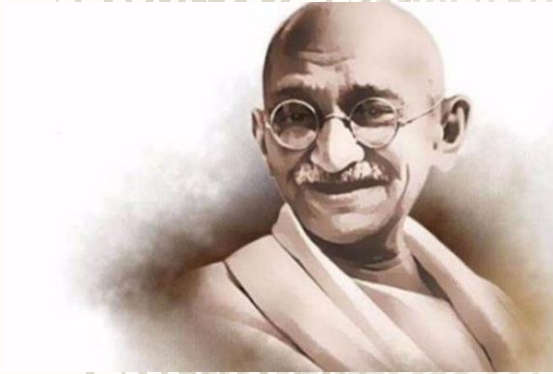
- *The division of society into four groups - Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras was strictly followed in Rameswaram.*
- *Abdul Kalam's Science teacher Sivasubramania Iyer was a religious person, an orthodox Brahmin but was a rebellious type of person.*
- *He did not believe in distinction on the basis of the caste system and worked very hard to break these social barriers.*
- *He wanted that people of different castes should interact with each other. He encouraged APJ Abdul Kalam to work hard so that he could be at the same level as the highly educated people who lived in big cities.*



Another Lesson on Equality

- *Sivasubramania Iyer's wife belonged to a traditional, orthodox Brahmin family and followed the religion very strictly. She believed in keeping the kitchen 'pure', no one from other religion was allowed to enter the kitchen.*
- *When Iyer called Kalam for dinner at his home, his wife feared that a boy from a Muslim family would make her kitchen impure. She refused to serve him food in her kitchen.*
- *Iyer was neither upset nor angry. He himself served food to Kalam and sat down beside him to eat. His wife stood beside the kitchen door and looked at Kalam while he was having food.*
- *Kalam retrospects that he doesn't think that she felt there was any difference in the way he was having his food or the way he was drinking water or in the way he cleaned the floor after the meal. He wants to highlight that religion does not matter as it does not alter the way in which a person eats food.*
- *When Kalam was about to leave Iyer's house, he invited him for dinner once again. When Iyer saw that Kalam was hesitant, he asked him not to be upset. He added that if he had decided to change the system, to go against the norms of the society, he had to be strong and brave and confront the situation.*
- *When he visited Iyer's home for dinner the following week, his wife made him sit in the kitchen and served him food with her own hands. This is the change that happened.*

A New Hope



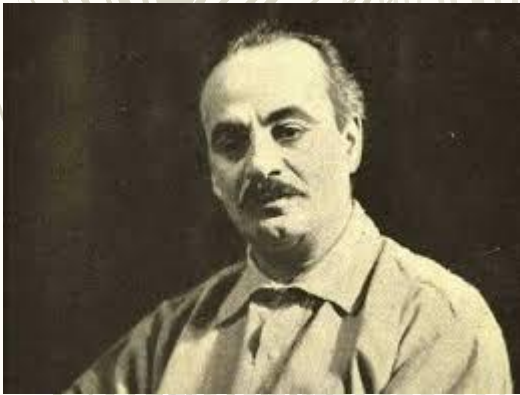
- *When the Second World War got over in the year 1945, India was about to get freedom which happened in the year 1947.*
- *Mahatma Gandhi, the ‘Father of the Nation’ played a crucial part of India’s Freedom struggle.*
- *He said that Indians would build their own India. The entire country was filled with hope and happiness. Everyone was experiencing such a feeling which they had never felt before. Everyone was hoping that now they would get their freedom.*

Flying High



- *Kalam asked his father to allow him to go to Ramanathapuram, which was the district headquarters for higher studies.*
- *In reply, his father told him that he knew that Kalam needed to go away so that he could move ahead in life.*
- *He gave the example of a seagull that flies away in the sky all alone and does not have a nest. It means it does not have a home of its own as it keeps on flying from one place to another.*

Mother's Love



Khalil Gibran

- *When Kalam's Mother came to know that he was about to leave home for Ramanathapuram for higher studies, she got upset.*
- *Kalam's father tried to console her and told her a few lines from a famous Poem titled 'Your Children', written by Khalil Gibran.*
- *He said that your children are not your children, they are the children of life. Don't think that you can rule your children. They are a result of life's desire for itself. They have their own thoughts.*
- *He asked her to give them freedom to fulfill their thoughts.*