

6. My Childhood

BEFORE YOU READ

- Can you think of any scientists, who have also been statesmen?
- A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, whose projects in space, defence and nuclear technology guided India into the twenty-first century, became our eleventh President in 2002.
- In his autobiography, Wings of Fire, he speaks of his childhood.



1. I was born into 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.

2. 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 nineteenth 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.

3. The Second World War broke out in 1939, when I was eight years old. For reasons I have never been able to understand, a sudden demand for tamarind seeds erupted in the market. I used to collect the seeds and sell them to a provision shop on Mosque Street. A day's collection would fetch me the princely sum of one anna. My brother-in-law Jallaluddin would tell me stories about the War which I would later attempt to trace in the headlines in Dinamani. Our area, being isolated, was completely unaffected by the War. But soon India was forced to join the Allied Forces and something like a state of emergency was declared. The first casualty came in the form of the suspension of the train halt at Rameswaram station. The newspapers now had to be bundled and thrown out from the moving train on the Rameswaram Road between Rameswaram and Dhanuskodi. That forced my cousin Samsuddin, who distributed newspapers in Rameswaram, to look for a helping hand to catch the bundles and, as if naturally, I filled the slot. Samsuddin helped me earn my first wages. Half a century later, I can still feel the surge of pride in earning my own money for the first time.

A.P.J. ABDUL KALAM

[An extract from Wings of Fire]

New words-:

1. Erstwhile: Former
2. Innate: Inborn; (a quality or feeling) in one's nature
3. Generosity of spirit: His soul sought to help others who were needy
4. Undistinguished: Ordinary or common
5. Pucca House :A house made of bricks, cement and limestone.
6. Austere: Simple, strict and severe
7. Secure: Safe
8. Materially: In terms of things like clothes food, medicine
9. Emotionally: In terms of love and affection.
10. Tamarind seeds: Kind of fruit
11. Princely sum: Generous amount (here, ironic)
12. Anna: An old Indian coin, worth about six paise
13. Isolated: Lonely, cut-off
14. Allied Forces: The armies of U.K., U.S.A. and Russia during the Second World War
15. Casualty: Loss
16. Suspension: End
17. Halt: Stop
18. Filled the slot: Fit into a place easily
19. Pride: Sudden increase in the feeling of satisfaction derived from one's own achievements.
20. Half a century later: After a period of 50 years.
21. Figures of authority: A person who had authority over another person; a person who has the power to give orders or make decisions.
22. Inherited: Characteristic, or a quality which you have got from your parents or ancestors.
23. Socio-economic: In terms of money
24. Orthodox: Strict
25. Could not stomach: Could not tolerate
26. Downcast: Sad or depressed
27. Summoned: Called
28. Bluntly: Speaking in a direct and honest way, even if this offends or upsets people.
29. Apologise: Seek pardon
30. Quit: To leave
31. Conviction: A strong opinion or belief
32. Convey: Communicated
33. Rigid: Strict
34. Segregation: Separation
35. Orthodox: One who follows the religion strictly
36. Conservative: Traditional
37. Rebel: In opposition
38. Mingle: Interact with each other.
39. On par: At the same level

40. Ritually pure: Kept protected from all outside influences for the observances of religion
41. Perturbed: Upset
42. Hesitation: Doubt, delay
43. Confronted: Faced, tackled
44. Imminent: About to happen
45. Unprecedented: never done or know before.
46. Optimism: Hope, cheer
47. Longing: Desire

I. Find the sentences in the text where these words occur:

Erupt Surge Trace Undistinguished Casualty

Look these words up in a dictionary which gives examples of how they are used.

Now answer the following questions.

- a) What are the things that can erupt? Use examples to explain the various meanings of erupt. Now do the same for the word surge. What things can surge?

- b) What are the meanings of the word trace and which of the meanings is closest to the word in the text?

- c) Can you find the word undistinguished in your dictionary? (If not, look up the word distinguished and say what undistinguished must mean.)

II. Match the phrases in Column A with their meanings in Column B.

	A	B
1	Broke out	(a) An attitude of kindness, a readiness to give freely
2	In accordance with	(b) Was not able to tolerate
3	A helping hand	(c) Began suddenly in a violent way
4	Could not stomach	(d) Assistance
5	Generosity of spirit	(e) Persons with power to make decisions
6	Figures of authority	(f) According to a particular rule, principle, or system