

My Childhood

Introduction

This lesson is an extract from Abdul Kalam's autobiography 'Wings of Fire'. He speaks of his childhood. It embodies the themes of harmony and prejudice, traditions and changes.

Summary

Abdul Kalam was born in Rameswaram in the former Madras (Chennai) state. He belonged to a middle class Tamil family. His father, Jainulabdeen was an austere and religious man. His mother Ashiamma was a hospitable lady. They lived in their ancestral house on the Mosque Street in Rameswaram. He had three brothers and one sister.

The Second World War broke out in 1939. Abdul Kalam was then eight years old. During that time there was a sudden demand of tamarind seeds in the market. Abdul Kalam collected the seeds and sold them to a provision shop for one *anna*. He also helped his cousin Samsuddin in catching the bundles of the newspapers dropped from the moving train. This helped him to earn his first wages. Abdul Kalam had three close friends in his childhood, namely Ramanadha Sastry, Aravindan and Sivaprakasan. All these boys were from orthodox Hindu Brahmin families and moreover Ramanadha was the son of high priest of the Rameswaram temple. As children, they never felt any difference amongst themselves because of their religious differences and upbringing.

One day a new teacher came to Kalam's class. Kalam always sat in the front row next to his friend Ramanadha Sastry. The new teacher could not tolerate a Hindu priest's son sitting with a Muslim boy. Abdul Kalam was asked to go and sit on the back bench. He felt very sad and so did Ramanadha Sastry. The image of Ramanadha weeping when he shifted to the last row left a lasting impression on Kalam. Later, on the intervention on Ramanadha's father, the teacher regretted his behaviour and apologised.

There was another teacher named Sivasubramania Iyer in the school. He was a rebel who did his best to break social barriers. One day, he invited Abdul Kalam to his home for a meal. His orthodox wife, refused to serve Kalam in her kitchen. Iyer served Abdul with his own hands and sat down beside him to eat his meal. His wife watched them from behind the kitchen door. When Abdul Kalam was leaving the house, Mr Iyer invited him to join him for dinner again. When he visited his house the next week, Mrs Iyer took Abdul Kalam inside her kitchen and served him food with her own hands.

When the Second World War was over, Abdul Kalam asked his father's permission to leave Rameswaram and study at the district headquarters in Ramanathapuram. His father's agreed, knowing that it was important to go for one's growth and development but his mother was hesitant. His father convinced her by quoting Khalil Gibran's following words, "your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself. They come through you but not from you. You may give them your love but not your thoughts. For they have their own thoughts."

Message

This story conveys the message of communal harmony. It also acquaints us with the childhood of one of the greatest scientists of our time. It also brings forth the fact that greatness is achieved through hard work and dedication.

Extract Based Questions

1. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow:

I was born into 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.

(a) Abdul Kalam's mother was generous and kind-hearted and every day she used to:

- (i) support the villagers
- (ii) feed a lot of people
- (iii) educate him about his deeds
- (iv) help the poor people

(b) Abdul Kalam's father was not very rich, he did not have wealth but was very

(c) Choose the word which is similar in meaning to the word 'generosity'.

- (i) Selfishness
- (ii) Meanness
- (iii) Liberality
- (iv) Greed

(d) State whether the given statement is True or False. Abdul Kalam was born in a middle class Tamil Family.

Answers

- (a) (ii) feed a lot of people
- (b) wise and generous
- (c) (iii) Liberality
- (d) True

2. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow:

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 19th 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.

- (a) A character trait of Abdul Kalam that is highlighted in this extract is:
- (i) strict and severe (ii) love and affection
(iii) quality of gratitude (iv) simple and ordinary
- (b) Abdul Kalam's ancestral house was a *pucca* house which was made of
- (c) His austere father used to avoid all:
- (i) Inessential comforts and luxuries
(ii) essential things
(iii) tea and coffee
(iv) bed and sofa
- (d) The word 'ancestral' means the same as

Answers

- (a) (iii) quality of gratitude
(b) brick and limestone
(c) (i) inessential comforts and luxuries
(d) familial/inherited

3. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow:

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) APJ says that whenever someone earns his own money with his hard work, he feels:
- (i) satisfaction with it
(ii) it the same way as he did
(iii) proud in doing this
(iv) as if he has achieved everything
- (b) APJ helped Samsuddin by catching the bundle and distributing the newspapers against which he got his
- (c) The antonym of 'surge' is:
- (i) rise (ii) decline
(iii) swell (iv) rush
- (d) Complete the analogy with a word from the extract.
forced : compelled :: salary :

Answers

- (a) (ii) it the same way as he did
(b) first earning
(c) (ii) decline
(d) wage

4. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow:

After school, we went home and told our respective parents about the incident. Lakshmana Sastry summoned the teacher, and in our presence, told the teacher that he should not spread the poison of social inequality and communal intolerance in the minds of innocent children. He bluntly asked the teacher to either apologise or quit the school and the island. Not only did the teacher regret his behaviour, but the strong sense of conviction Lakshmana Sastry conveyed ultimately reformed the young teacher.

- (a) What was the ultimate effect of the incident on the teacher?
- (i) He left the school
(ii) He was not affected by this incident
(iii) He reformed himself and became a changed person
(iv) He continued his habit of discriminating against the children
- (b) Lakshmana Sastry told the new teacher not to kill the children's friendship by putting the venomous discrimination of caste and religions
- (c) Which part of speech is 'communal'?
- (i) Adverb (ii) Pronoun
(iii) Verb (iv) Adjective
- (d) Complete the analogy with a word from the extract.
bluntly : abruptly :: finally :

Answers

- (a) (iii) He reformed himself and became a changed person
(b) in the minds of innocent children
(c) (iv) Adjective
(d) ultimately

5. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow:

On the whole, the small society of Rameswaram was very rigid in terms of the segregation of different social groups. However, my science teacher Sivasubramania Iyer, though an orthodox Brahmin with a very conservative wife, was something of a rebel. He did his best to break social barriers so that people from varying backgrounds could mingle easily. He used to spend hours with me and would say, 'Kalam, I want you to develop so that you are on par with the highly educated people of the big cities.'

- (a) Abdul Kalam's Science teacher worked very hard to break the:
- (i) status divisions
(ii) social barriers
(iii) distinction based on caste system
(iv) political barriers
- (b) Abdul Kalam's Science teacher Sivasubramania Iyer was a religious person, an orthodox Brahmin but was
- (c) The antonym of 'mingle' is:
- (i) mix (ii) gather
(iii) separate (iv) collect
- (d) State whether the given statement is True or False.
Sivasubramania's wife was a very conservative person.

Answers

- (a) (ii) social barriers
- (b) something of a rebel
- (c) (iii) separate
- (d) True

6. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow:

I asked my father's permission to leave Rameswaram and study at the district headquarters in Ramanathapuram. He told me as if thinking aloud, 'Abdul! I know you have to go away to grow. Does the seagull not fly across the Sun, alone and without a nest?' He quoted Khalil Gibran to my hesitant mother, 'Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself. They come through you but not from you. You may give them your love but not your thoughts. For they have their own thoughts.'

(a) Abdul's father asked his mother about their children to:

- (i) rule over the children
- (ii) put over them their thoughts
- (iii) give them freedom to fulfil their thoughts
- (iv) control them for their desire

(b) Fill in the blank with one word only.

Abdul's father gave the example of a which flies away in the sky all alone and does not have a nest.

(c) The word 'hesitant' means the same as:

- (i) unsure
- (ii) certain
- (iii) doubtless
- (iv) decided

(d) Complete the analogy with a word from the extract. permission : consent :: craving :

Answers

- (a) (iii) give them freedom to fulfil their thoughts
- (b) seagull
- (c) (i) unsure
- (d) longing

Short Answer Type Questions

Q 1. What kind of life did young Kalam lead?

Ans. Abdul Kalam's father was a wise and large-hearted person. He looked after the family well. He provided all necessities like food, medicine and clothes to his family but discouraged the use of inessential comforts and luxuries. So, Abdul Kalam had a very secure childhood, both materially and emotionally.

Q 2. What qualities did Abdul inherit from his parents?

Ans. Abdul's parents were simple but full of wisdom. His father avoided all inessential comforts and luxuries but made sure that his children had access to necessities of life. His mother was a generous and kind lady. Abdul inherited honesty and self-discipline from his father and faith in goodness and deep kindness from his mother.

Q 3. What do you think Dinamani is the name of? Give a reason for your answer.

Ans. Dinamani is the name of a newspaper. This can be inferred from the following line: 'My brother-in-law Jallaluddin would tell me stories about the war which I would later attempt to trace in the headlines of Dinamani'.

Q 4. What were the effects of the Second World War on the town of Rameswaram?

Ans. The following were the effects of the Second World War on the town of Rameswaram:

- (i) The demand for tamarind seeds grew.
- (ii) The train halt at the Rameswaram Station was suspended.

Q 5. Why did Abdul collect tamarind seeds in 1939?

Ans. The Second World War broke out in 1939 when Abdul Kalam was eight years old. During that period there arose a sudden demand for tamarind seeds. Kalam used to collect these seeds. He used to sell them to a provision shop on Mosque Street. A day's collection brought him a good sum of one anna.

Q 6. How did Abdul Kalam earn his first wages?

Ans. During the Second World War, the stoppage of trains at Rameswaram was suspended. So, newspaper bundles were thrown out from moving trains. Kalam's cousin, Samsuddin, distributed newspapers. He needed a helping hand who could catch the bundles at the station. Abdul offered his help and thus earned his first wages.

Q 7. What role did Kalam's family play during the Shri Sita Rama Kalyanam Ceremony?

Ans. During the annual Shri Sita Rama Kalyanam, Kalam's family used to arrange boats with a special platform for carrying idols of the Lord from the temple to the marriage site, which was situated in the middle of the pond called 'Rama Tirth'.

Q 8. Who were Abdul Kalam's school friends? What did they later become?

Ans. Abdul Kalam's friends are:

- (i) Ramanadha Sastry—Later, he took over the priesthood of the Rameswaram temple from his father.
- (ii) Aravindan—He went into the business of arranging transport for visiting pilgrims.
- (iii) Sivaprakasan—He became a catering contractor for the South Railways.

Q 9. What happened when Abdul was in fifth standard?

Ans. When Abdul was in the fifth standard a new teacher came to teach them. He asked Abdul to sit on the back bench due to his caste. The teacher could not tolerate a Hindu priest's son sitting with a Muslim boy.

Q 10. Who was Sivasubramania Iyer?

Ans. Sivasubramania Iyer was Kalam's science teacher. He invited him to have food at his house even though his wife was an orthodox Brahmin. When his wife refused to serve food to Kalam, he himself served him and sat beside him to eat his meal. He invited Kalam for

dinner again. He observed Kalam's hesitation but told him that such problems had to be faced to change the system. He encouraged Kalam to go for higher studies.



Long Answer Type Questions ↘

Q 1. How did Abdul Kalam earn his 'first wages'? How did he feel at that time? Explain.

Ans. When India was forced to join the Allied Forces in the Second World War, a state of emergency was declared. The train halt at Rameswaram station was suspended. The newspapers now had to be bundled and thrown out of the moving train. Abdul Kalam's cousin Samsuddin was the distributor of newspapers in Rameswaram. He appointed Abdul Kalam to help him. Abdul Kalam collected the thrown bundles for him. Samsuddin gave him some money for his service. Thus, Abdul Kalam earned his 'first wages'. He was proud of earning his 'first wages' because he was able to help his family at a time when he was very young.

Q 2. What incident left a lasting impression on Abdul Kalam? Describe in brief.

Ans. The incident which left a lasting impression on Kalam took place when he was in the fifth standard at the Rameswaram Elementary School. One day a new teacher came to his class. Abdul

Kalam used to wear a cap which marked him as a Muslim. He always sat in the front row with his friend Ramanadha Sastry, who wore a sacred thread. The new teacher could not bear a Muslim boy sitting with a Hindu priest's son. He asked Abdul Kalam to go and sit on the back bench. Abdul felt very sad and Ramanadha Sastry started crying. The image of Ramanadha crying left a lasting impression on him.

Q 3. 'Once you decide to change the system, such problems have to be confronted.' What 'system' in this sentence referring to? What are such problems? Does the text suggest that the problems have been tackled?

Ans. This sentence is referring to the system of separation on the basis of caste and creed. This system gives rise to the problems of social inequality and communal intolerance. The text suggests how these problems can be tackled. Abdul Kalam's science teacher Sivasubramania Iyer was something of a rebel. Despite stiff opposition from his conservative wife, he invited Abdul Kalam to his home for a meal. When his wife refused to serve a Muslim boy in her kitchen, he was not perturbed. He served Abdul Kalam food with his own hands. When next time Abdul Kalam visited his teacher's house, his wife took him inside her kitchen and served him food with her own hands, suggesting that these problems can be addressed on a person to person basis.

