



7

MY CHILDHOOD



7.1 Think before you read

We hear a lot about our national heroes and often wonder if they were born great! Have you ever tried to know how they were in their childhood? Were they different from others? Here is an excerpt from A.P.J. Abdul Kalam's autobiography which tell you about his childhood days. Let's read and find out how this person achieved greatness both as a scientist and as a nice human being.

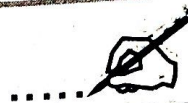


7.2 Objectives

After reading this lesson, you will be able to

- read and understand an autobiographical piece of writing
- describe your own reminiscences
- talk about respected people
- use vocabulary to describe characters
- learn subject-verb agreement

7.3 Now read and enjoy this autobiographical piece of writing



SECTION - I

I was born in 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; in spite of these disadvantages, he possessed great innate wisdom and a firm generosity of spirit. He had an ideal help in my mother, Ashiamma. I do not recall the exact



number of people she fed every day, but I am quite certain that more outsiders ate with us than all the members of our own family put together.

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.

**Test Yourself 1**

7.3.1 Tick the correct answer from the options given below;

1. Dr A.P.J. Abdul Kalam was born in a/an
 - a) Upper class Oriya family
 - b) Middle class Tamil Family
 - c) Middle class Gujrati family
 - d) Lower class Bengali family
2. Jainulabdeen, father of Dr. Abdul Kalam was
 - a) very miser
 - b) extremely orthodox
 - c) highly educated
 - d) always ready to give things freely
3. An ancestral house is
 - a) The house made by the owner
 - b) The house inherited from forefathers
 - c) The house of father-in-law
 - d) A fairly large pucca house
4. Kalam's childhood was secured because
 - a) He had all comforts at his disposal
 - b) His father was very influential
 - c) He had all supports that he needed
 - d) He enjoyed all supports and had no anxiety

Section - II

In this section you will learn how during the Second World War, Kalam earned some money by doing petty jobs and how he expresses his feelings towards his family members as well his friends.

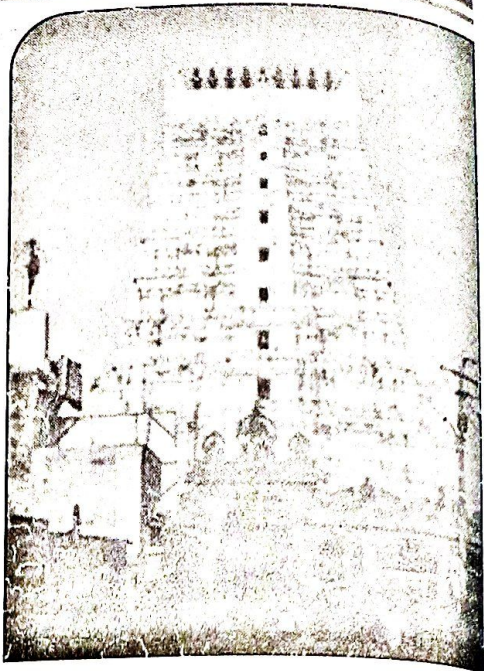


The Second World War broke out in 1939, when I was eight years old. For reasons I have never been able to understand, a sudden demand for tamarind seeds erupted in the market. I used to collect the seeds and sell them to a provision shop on Mosque Street. A day's collection would fetch me the princely sum of an anna. My brother-in-law Jalaluddin 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 that halt at Rameswaram Station. The newspapers now had to be bundled and thrown out from the morning train on the Rameswaram Road between Rameswaram and Dhanus Rodi 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.

Every child is born, with some inherited characteristics, into a specific socio-economic and emotional environment and trained in certain ways by figures of authority. I inherited honesty and self discipline from my father; from my mother, I inherited faith in



goodness and deep kindness and so did my three brothers and sisters. I had three close friends in my childhood- Ramanadha Sastry, Arvindan and Sivaprakasan. All these boys were from orthodox Hindu Brahmin families. As children none of us ever felt any difference amongst ourselves because of our religious differences and upbringing. In fact Ramanadha Sastry was the son of Pakshi Luxamana Sastry, the highest priest of the Rameswaram temple. Later, he took over the priesthood of the Rameswaram temple from his father; Arvindan went into the business arranging transport for visiting pilgrims; and Sivaprakasan became a catering contractor for the Southern Railways.



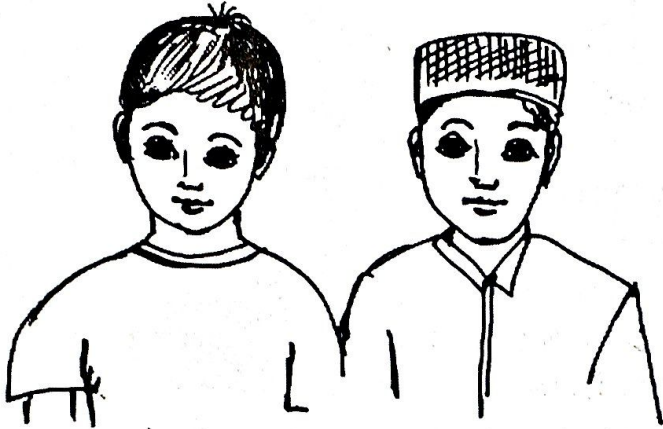
Test Yourself 2

7.3.2 Say whether the statements given below are 'True' or 'False'

- (a) Abdul Kalam used to collect tamarind seeds as a fun.
- (b) He had no interest to know about the Second World War.
- (c) He used to recall the feelings associated with his first earning.
- (d) He inherited all good qualities from his friends.
- (e) All the four friends were very close still they had some communal feelings.
- (f) Rameswaram temple is in Kerala.

Section - III

Kalam's family was full of sense of communal harmony. There was no feeling of caste and creed. Read, when a teacher disliked his intermingling with the Brahmin boys, he had to face the wrath of a guardian.



During the annual Shri Sita Ram Kalyanam Ceremony, our family used to arrange boats with a special platform for carrying idols of the Lord from the temple to the marriage site, situated in the middle of the pond called Ram Tirtha which was near our house. Events from the Ramayana and from the Prophet were the bedtime stories my mother and grandmother would tell the children in our family.

One day when I was in the fifth standard at the Rameswaram Elementary School, a new teacher came to our class. I used to wear a cap which marked me as a Muslim, and I always sat in the front row next to Ramanadha Sastry, who wore the sacred thread. The new teacher could not stomach a Hindu Priest's son sitting with a Muslim boy. In accordance with our social ranking as the new teacher saw it, I was asked to go and sit on the back bench. I felt very sad and so did Ramanadha Sastry. He looked utterly downcast as I shifted to my seat in the last row. The image of his weeping when I shifted to the last row left a lasting impression on me.



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



Test Yourself 3

7.3.3. Answer the questions briefly

- a. How did Ramanadha Sastry react when Kalam was shifted from his side?
.....
- b. Why didn't the new teacher like a Brahmin and a Muslim boy sitting together?
.....
- c. Where was the marriage site of the idol of Sri Sita Ram?
.....

Section - IV

Read how Kalam's Science teacher, who had extreme love for a muslim boy motivated him and how his wife's behaviour changed during Kalam's second visit and how affectionately she served dinner to him.

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 background 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. One day, he invited me to him for a meal. His wife was horrified at the idea of a boy being invited to dine in her ritually pure kitchen. Sivasubramania Iyer was not perturbed nor did he get angry with his wife, but instead served me with his own hands and sat down beside me to eat his meal. His wife watched us from behind the kitchen door. I wondered whether she had observed any difference in the way I ate rice, drank water or cleaned the floor after the meal. When I was leaving his house, Sivasubramania invited me to join him for dinner again the next weekend. Observing my hesitation, he told me not to get upset, saying “once you decide to change the system such problems have to be confronted.” When I visited his house the next week, Sivasubramania Iyer’s wife took me inside her kitchen and served me food with her own hands.

Then the Second World War was over and India’s freedom was imminent. “Indians will build their own India,” declared Gandhiji. The whole country was filled with an unprecedented optimism. I asked my father for permission to leave Rameswaram and study at the district headquarters in Rameswaram.



Test Yourself 4

7.3.4 Fill in the blanks with the right choice given against each sentence.

- The people of Rameswaram could _____ easily. (separate/adjust)
- The wife of Kalam’s science teacher was an _____ lady. (modern/orthodox)
- Sivasubramania Iyer invited Kalam to dinner to teach a lesson to his _____. (wife/neighbor)
- The science teacher wanted to _____ Kalam because he was talented. (promote/discourage)