



# Mentorship And Its Impact On The Life And Leadership Of Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam: Insights From *Wings Of Fire*

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**Abstract:** One of the salient features of Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam's autobiography *Wings of Fire* is the theme of mentoring. In this book, the author narrates his journey from childhood to becoming the 'Missile Man of India' and eventually the President of the nation. He highlights the contributions of several mentors who significantly shaped his personality, values, and outlook on life. These mentors include his father Jainulabdeen, mother Ashiamma, cousin Jalaluddin, Samsuddin, Pakshi Lakshmana Shastry, Rev. Fr. Eudurai Solomon, Father T.N. Sequeira, Prof. Srinivasan (then Director of MIT), Prof. Vikram Sarabhai, Dr. Brahm Prakash, among others. Their guidance, combined with his own perseverance and hard work, played a crucial role in his rise to become an eminent aerospace scientist.

**Keywords:** personality, outlook, life, character, career, guidance, hard work

## **Introduction:**

In *Wings of Fire*, Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam highlights several key mentors who played crucial roles in shaping his life, personality, and career. Each of them influenced him in unique ways, helping him rise from humble beginnings to become a pioneering aerospace scientist and eventually the President of India. His family members encouraged him to pursue higher goals, and he acquired valuable life lessons from his father, mother, siblings, and cousins. Through their conduct and values, they instilled in him principles such as hard work, simplicity, truthfulness, and service to humanity.

Pakshi Lakshmana Shastri influenced his multicultural outlook and fostered in him a deep respect for religious tolerance. Teachers like Rev. Fr. Eudurai Solomon and Sivasubramania Iyer nurtured his belief in universal brotherhood and spirituality. At St. Joseph's College, Tiruchirappalli, he received both formal and informal guidance from dedicated educators such as Rev. Father T.N. Sequeira, Prof. Chinna Durai, and Prof. Krishnamurthy.

During his time at the Madras Institute of Technology (MIT), professors such as Prof. Sponder, Prof. K.A.V. Pandalai, and Prof. Narasingha Rao helped him develop a strong foundation in aerospace engineering. Later, at the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), Prof. Satish Dhawan provided both technical and moral support during the SLV-3 project. Most notably, Prof. Vikram Sarabhai recognized Kalam's hidden potential and played a pivotal role in shaping his career by involving him in major national projects like SLV-3 and the Integrated Guided Missile Development Programme (IGMDP).

### What is mentoring?

According to the Oxford Learner's Dictionary mentoring means "the practice of helping and advising a less experienced person over a period of time, especially as part of a formal programme in a company, university, etc." (Oxford "Mentoring") The Cambridge Dictionary defines mentoring as "the act or process of helping and giving advice to a younger or less experienced person, especially in a job or at school." (Cambridge "Mentoring") In the Collins Dictionary mentoring is defined as "the practice of assigning junior members of staff to the care of more experienced people who assist them in their careers." (Collins "Mentoring") The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines mentor as "a trusted counselor or guide". (Merriam Webster "Mentoring") The Britannica Dictionary defines mentor as "someone who teaches or gives help and advice to a less experienced and often younger person." (Britannica "Mentoring")

### The Theme of Mentoring in *The Wings of Fire*

Dr. Kalam spent his childhood in Rameshwaram. His father, **Jainulabdeen**, instilled in him values such as simplicity, faith in God, the importance of hard work, and service to the poor and needy. From his mother, Ashiamma, he learned the significance of feeding the hungry, unconditional love, and dedication to hard work.

Dr. Kalam's first cousin, **Samsuddin**, was the sole distributor of newspapers in Rameshwaram. As a young boy, Abdul occasionally helped him with the distribution. This gave him the opportunity to glance at the images and headlines in the newspapers. Through this exposure, he became familiar with the developments of the Indian freedom struggle, which helped broaden his vision and understanding of the world beyond his small town.

**Ahmed Jalaluddin**, Dr. Kalam's cousin, often spoke about spiritual matters. Although he had limited formal education, he possessed great wisdom. He taught young Abdul the value of gratitude and was the only person on the entire island who could write in English. Jalaluddin frequently spoke about educated people, scientific discoveries, contemporary literature, and advances in medical science. In doing so, he introduced young Abdul to the brave new world that lay beyond the narrow confines of island life. He also impressed upon him the power of positive thinking.

“Jalaluddin always spoke to me about educated people, of scientific discoveries, of contemporary literature, and of the achievements of medical science. It was he who made me aware of a “brave, new world” beyond our narrow confines.” (Kalam 07)

**Pakshi Lakshmana Shastry** was the head priest of the Shiva temple in Rameshwaram and a close friend of Dr. Kalam's father, Jainulabdeen. Kalam often accompanied his father during visits to the temple, where he observed the deep bond between the two men. Their friendship was unique, as they belonged to different religions, yet shared mutual respect and understanding. They often discussed spiritual, moral, and philosophical matters, as well as issues concerning the well-being of the people of Rameshwaram.

“The high priest of Rameswaram temple, Pakshi Lakshmana Sastry, was a very close friend of my father's. One of the most vivid memories of my early childhood is of the two men, each in his traditional attire, discussing spiritual matters.” (Kalam 04)

The dialogues on diverse spiritual matters between Pakshi Lakshmana Shastry and Jainulabdeen deeply influenced young Abdul. Dr. Kalam narrates an incident that shows Pakshi Lakshmana Shastry's strict adherence to religious tolerance. When a new teacher at the school displayed religious discrimination, it was Pakshi Lakshmana Shastry who confronted him and upheld the values of mutual respect. Shastry strongly believed in multiculturalism, religious tolerance, coexistence, and pluralism. His actions and beliefs strengthened Abdul Kalam's faith in unity in diversity and the secular fabric of India.

In 1946, after completing his primary education in Rameshwaram, Dr. Kalam was admitted to **Schwartz High School** in Ramanathapuram. There, he received valuable mentorship from an ideal teacher named Rev. Fr. Eudurai Solomon. As Kalam settled into his new environment, the enthusiasm of his fifteen-year-old self re-emerged. Rev. Solomon opened his mind to future possibilities and encouraged him to think beyond his present circumstances. With a warm and open-minded attitude, he taught Kalam to master three powerful forces—desire, belief, and expectation. He emphasized that anything a person truly wanted could be achieved, but it required intense desire and unwavering belief in its realization.

“Simple, provincial boy though I was, I was convinced that one day I, too, would soar up into the skies. Indeed, I was the first child from Rameswaram to fly. He instilled in all the children a sense of their own worth, raised my self-esteem to a high point.” (Kalam 13)

Sivasubramania Iyer was Dr. Kalam's science teacher and a man of broad and progressive outlook. He strongly opposed class and caste discrimination and believed in equality and inclusiveness. From him, young Abdul learned the values of religious tolerance, a secular mindset, and social equality. Iyer not only taught science but also inspired Kalam with a sense of purpose and reminded him of the larger mission in life. His guidance left a lasting impression on Kalam's character and worldview.

“He told me as if thinking aloud, “Abul! I know you have to go away to grow. Does the seagul not fly across the Sun, alone and without a nest? You must forego your longing for the land of your memories to move into the dwelling place of your greater desires; our love will not bind you nor will our needs hold you.” (Kalam 10)

At **St. Joseph's College**, Tiruchirappalli, Dr. Kalam met Rev. Father T.N. Sequeira, who taught English and also served as the hostel warden. His energy and patience were remarkable, and he was known for being a very considerate person. Kalam also admired the way Prof. Chinna Durai taught subatomic physics. Prof. Krishnamurthy introduced him to important concepts such as the half-life period and radioactive decay. Both professors were experts in their respective fields. It was during his time here that Kalam began to perceive the unity between science and spirituality.

“I wonder why some people tend to see science as something which takes man away from God. As I look at it, the path of science can always wind through the heart. For me, science has always been the path to spiritual enrichment and self-realisation.” (Kalam 15)

Prof. Sponder was Dr. Kalam's technical mentor at the Madras Institute of Technology (MIT). Under his guidance, Kalam learned the values of precision, discipline, and hard work. Along with Prof. K.A.V. Pandalai and Prof. Narasingha Rao, these three teachers shaped his comprehensive knowledge, influenced his thinking, and laid the foundation for his professional career.

“Each one of them had very distinct personalities, but they shared a common impulse—the capacity to feed their students' intellectual hunger by sheer brilliance and untiring zeal.” (Kalam 17)

Prof. Srinivasan, then Director of the Madras Institute of Technology (MIT), initially reprimanded Dr. Kalam for delays in the project, testing his diligence and ability to meet deadlines. In response, Dr. Kalam committed himself to intense effort and meticulous work, ultimately delivering results that satisfied Prof. Srinivasan. In recognition of his dedication and achievement, Prof. Srinivasan expressed his appreciation warmly, acknowledging Kalam's perseverance and success.

**Prof. Satish Dhawan**, then Chairman of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), oversaw the development of the Satellite Launch Vehicle-3 (SLV-3), the organization's first major project. The initial launch, however, failed due to technical issues. During this challenging period, Prof. Dhawan provided Dr. Kalam with invaluable guidance on coping with failure and maintaining resilience. He also emphasized the importance of humility in both success and failure, taking sole responsibility for the SLV-3's initial setback.

From Prof. Dhawan, Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam learned essential lessons in leadership and the art of navigating both failure and success.

“Prof. Dhawan was a man with a mission. He would effortlessly pull together all the loose ends to make work move smoothly. At VSSC the review meetings presided over by Prof. Dhawan used to be considered major events.” (Kalam 78)

**Prof. Vikram Sarabhai** recognized the latent potential in Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam during his interview for the Indian Committee for Space Research (INCOSPAR). Prof. Sarabhai was particularly interested in how candidates could contribute to the larger vision of space research in India. He motivated young technicians with dynamism and demonstrated strong faith in their abilities. Possessing keen wisdom and judgment, he knew when to intervene and when to step back. His visits to the Thumba Equatorial Rocket Launching Station inspired the technicians to work tirelessly. Dr. Kalam admired Prof. Sarabhai’s innovative strategy of assigning multiple tasks to a single individual, a novel approach at the time. As a pioneering experimenter and innovator, Prof. Sarabhai exemplified leadership founded on trust and empowerment.

“In fact, Prof. Sarabhai took a series of decisions that were to become the life-mission of many. We would make our own rockets, our own Satellite Launch Vehicles (SLVs) and our own satellites.” (Kalam 44)

Prof. Vikram Sarabhai passed away in 1971, and **Dr. Brahm Prakash** was subsequently appointed Director of the Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre (VSSC). A renowned metallurgist, Dr. Prakash granted Dr. Kalam full autonomy in leading the SLV-3 project. He provided valuable insights into managing large-scale projects and coordinating multidisciplinary teams of scientists and technicians. Following the failure of the SLV-3 launch in August 1979, Dr. Kalam experienced significant nervousness. During this difficult period, Dr. Brahm Prakash offered counsel and support, helping him overcome his distress and regain his resolve.

“The company of Dr Brahm Prakash filled me with a new confidence. He made light conversation during the meal, carefully avoiding the SLV-3, but gently providing me solace.” (Kalam 94)

Dr. Brahm Prakash stood by Dr. Kalam during a particularly challenging period, imparting the crucial skill of maintaining calmness and focus under pressure. He introduced Dr. Kalam to the principle of frontline damage control, which was instrumental in managing the SLV project effectively. As a wise counselor, Dr. Brahm Prakash provided invaluable guidance that significantly influenced Dr. Kalam’s approach to leadership and crisis management.

Dr. Kalam had the conviction that one can learn from the people working at any position in the project hierarchy. He believed in the principle of collaborative which is based on the idea that different members in a team can contribute insights and inputs to carry out a task. Here, he cites the example of Gp Capt

Narayanan who had expertise in airborne system in the field of Rocketry. It shows that the success of a complex project like the SLV-3 depends on the open mindedness of the team members to learn from others.

“While working together on RATO motors and on the Missile Panel, Narayanan and I played the roles of student and teacher interchangeably wherever required. He was very eager to learn about rocketry and I was very curious to know about airborne weapon systems. The depth of Narayanan’s conviction and his force of application were inspiring.” (Kalam 54)

## Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is evident that mentoring is a central theme in *Wings of Fire*. The author expresses profound gratitude toward his family members, spiritual guides, school teachers, college professors, and senior technocrats throughout his autobiography. The book underscores the critical role of both formal and informal mentoring in shaping his life and career. Dr. Kalam’s belief in continuous, informal learning meant that even seemingly minor incidents offered valuable insights. His eagerness to learn from people, events, and circumstances continually transformed his vision and outlook on life and the world. *Wings of Fire* beautifully chronicles the lifelong learning journey that shaped Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam—from his childhood experiences to his emergence as the ‘Missile Man of India’.

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