Spiritual journey of a scientist through the lens of A.P.J Abdul Kalam’s ‘Transcendence’

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All through human history, the impact of books on society is remarkable. The Bhagvad Gita by Veda Vyas has brought solace to millions of restless and depressed souls. Shri Krishna’s message of karma yoga, raj yoga and bhakti yoga to Arjun forever provides a panacea to a wide range of human issues. Similarly, the Vachanamrut, the spiritual discourses of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, provides inspiration, guidance and solutions to countless spiritual aspirants. It contains the essence of the Upanishads, Gita and Purans, and other principles propagated by Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

Many other books in the fields of philosophy, religion, literature and education have also influenced and shaped the lives of people all over the world.

Dr APJ Abdul Kalam’s book, Transcendence, describes his spiritual experiences with Pramukh Swami Maharaj. The book, published by HarperCollins India, also includes the social and moral contributions of BAPS to society, the co-relation of science and spirituality and creative leadership. The book also discusses higher values, hard work, progress, peace and happiness, which are the urgent needs of humanity today.

This Study endeavours to interpret spirituality in literature through the ‘Transcendence’ by Kalam. Now a days religion is divided in a sect and the whole motif of a sect is different apart from this scandal and evil behind the saint robe misguided people. Spirituality is above religion and sect and this can be proved by APJ Abdul Kalam’s Transcendance. As he is Muslim although former president of India and scientist too. When he writes about spiritual journey his work of literature is important because it throws lights on the approach of a scientist – world of spirituality and how it reflects in literature.

A Historic book – Shantanu Chaudhri, the chief copy editor of HarperCollins India, spoke eloquently about his experiences in publishing Transcendence at the Convention Centre in Ahmedabad. He said, “It is indeed a great privilege and honour to be with you all this evening, and it is a great privilege and honour for HarperCollins to have been given the opportunity to publish the book. This is indeed a historic book, and I don’t use the word lightly. It is historic for many reasons. For one, in all my experiences in publishing I have never come across an example of an ex-President of a nation, a brilliant scientist writing about his experiences about a brilliant spiritual leader. That alone makes it a historic book. Apart from that the numbers that we have printed of the book are record-making. I can say this with some authority that the hardback original edition of a book in India never goes beyond 5 to 10,000 copies in the first print. We have printed close to 100,000 copies of this book. And the book came out in the middle of June, and in the last fifteen days we have negotiated rights for as many as seven languages editions of the books.
But beyond these material elements of success of a book I think it is a book that is important for its message. All of us here have spoken about how the book brings together science and religion in a wonderful blend in today’s world of materialism and consumerism. I think any book that talks about religion and spirituality is important. But more important, it talks about religion and spirituality working in the everyday life of people. A language which is not used in everyday life dies. Likewise, religion and spirituality if not applied to everyday life will make no sense. And this book actually does that through the experiences that Dr Kalam had with Pramukh Swami Maharaj. He says how BAPS and Pramukh Swami Maharaj have been working to make religion and spirituality a part and parcel of the everyday life of the nation.

The book itself suggest the spirituality but the strange thing is even the co author, Dr. Kalam himself and even publisher felt the divine grace not only they felt but also confess their experience. As Shantanu Chaudhry said-

‘I’d like to narrate a very personal experience in the course of our work in publishing. We take about eight to ten months on average to bring out a book. There are so many books that are done at a time. Incredibly this book came out in just two months. I remember Prof. Tiwari coming to our office and giving us the manuscript on 8 April. By 15 May the book had been edited, proofread, designed, cover done, everything worked out. And by 15 June we had copies of the book. All of us might be aware of the exceptional manner in which some of the magnificent Akshardham mandirs have come up in New Delhi, Toronto, London. Those mandirs, let me tell you, are examples of divine grace at work. And I personally feel, because I know the impossibility of bringing out a book in two months, that while editing and working on the book there was a divine grace – the grace of Swami Pramukhji working with us in making the book happen. (Swaminarayan Bliss- Julyaugust 2015).

Transcendence documents a 14-year journey between Dr APJ Abdul Kalam – former president of India and world-renowned missile scientist of India – and Pramukh Swami Maharaj – one of the most inspiring spiritual leaders of modern times, the fifth spiritual successor of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, and inheritor of a legacy of enlightened gurus that goes back to the early nineteenth century.

Dr Kalam, with co-author Prof. Arun Tiwari, writes that what “began as a chance introduction” in June 2001, blossomed into a deep friendship and “became a divine destiny”. Spirituality complicated to explain but Dr Kalam wrote his experience in a very simple and profound language even reading of this book also gives some spiritual elevated thoughts. Prologue throws lights on the purpose of writing the book Transcendence. In the prologue Dr Kalam mentioned,

“That the world has lost its smile and locked itself in the knots of “I” and “Mine”. Your world has become a world of barriers and fences and the “I” creates the poles and the barbs that divided them. Humanity is suffering and shredding itself. Kalam write to break the barriers, overcome the fences and dissolve the divisions created by the “I”. Write Transcendence .”

The book reveals that Dr Kalam, at heart, is a genuine seeker of truth, progress and spirituality. He narrates his visits to famous places – religious and secular – worldwide and recollects his spiritual and other experiences there. But it is in the presence of Pramukh Swami that his spirituality truly flourishes. Dr Kalam describes Pramukh Swami as “my ultimate teacher”
and records, “How do I summarize Pramukh Swamiji’s effect on me? He has indeed transformed me. He is the ultimate stage of the spiritual ascent in my life, which started with my father, was sustained by Dr Brahma Prakash and Prof. Satish Dhawan; now, finally, Pramukh Swamiji has put me in a God-synchronous orbit.”

Dr Kalam resolved to write this book centred around Pramukh Swamiji despite the background differences between the two: Dr Kalam is an eminent scientist, Pramukh Swamiji is a religious leader; and Dr Kalam was India’s most popular president involved with the unpredictable world of politics, while Pramukh Swamiji has had no such exposure and is little known outside his native Gujarat. What is especially remarkable about their profound friendship is that Dr Kalam is not conversant in Gujarati – Pramukh Swamiji’s native language – and Pramukh Swamiji is not conversant in English – Dr Kalam’s main medium of communication. This testifies to the inner spiritual bond they share, which has sustained and enhanced their rapport with each other.

Dr Kalam expressed his doubts about the appropriateness of such a book to his brother, 14 years his senior. His brother encouraged him to “share with everyone details of the pious and virtuous life of Pramukh Swamiji.”

Transcendence is divided into four parts. The first describes Dr Kalam’s interactions with Pramukh Swamiji. For over a decade, Dr Kalam has interacted on numerous occasions with Pramukh Swamiji, in person and by phone. The second part highlights some of the outstanding work and values of BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, as inspired by Pramukh Swamiji. The third discusses the co-relation between science and spirituality through the anecdotes and thoughts of leading scientists, and the fourth reflects on the ideals of creative leadership based on the lives of leading historical luminaries.

In Part One, Dr Kalam recalls some of the inspiring messages he has learnt through his interactions with Pramukh Swami Maharaj. For example, during their first meeting in June 2001, Dr Kalam presented the plans of his vision for India 2020. Pramukh Swami then guided, “Along with your five areas to transform India add a sixth one – faith in God.” At that time, Dr Kalam describes, “I felt I was in the Divine Presence... There was a light radiating through Pramukh Swamiji which illuminated my inner self. I felt I had acquired a sixth sense.”

Dr Kalam is deeply touched by Pramukh Swami’s stability of mind in testing circumstances. He admires his ability to forgive and preserve peace in the aftermath of the tragic Akshardham terrorist attack in 2002, commenting, “His ardent prayers were that... such tragedies should never afflict any community or any nation, anywhere in the world... Swamiji encouraged his followers to pray, not punish... Pramukh Swami’s life is an example of how to love peace, have peace and possess peace.”

He further states, “Pramukh Swamiji is a great bridge in the vast archipelago of humanity. An archipelago is an island group. Humanity has divided itself into hundreds of islands. These islands are religions. Each island is a beautiful territory, full of flora, fauna and inhabitants, and yet disconnected from the others. Pramukh Swamiji is connecting these different islands by making bridges of love and compassion.”
After the opening ceremony of Swaminarayan Akshardham in New Delhi in 2005, Dr Kalam said to Pramukh Swami Maharaj, “When I see Akshardham and your work… ‘I feel anything is possible in the world. I want to work with you for a better India.’”

During one meeting, Dr Kalam asks, “How does one connect to God’s consciousness?” Pramukh Swami replied, “You are a rocket scientist… As long as there is the pull of gravity, whatever we throw up always comes down. Likewise, as long as we are attracted and attached to the material world, we are consigned to the cycle of births and deaths. But as your worldly desires decrease, you transcend and eventually connect to God.” Dr Kalam concludes, “Pramukh Swamiji uses simple terms to convey complex truths.” This is the Spirituality in Transcendence.

In Part Two, Dr Kalam highlights some of the activities of BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, such as the highly effective de-addiction campaigns by BAPS children in India, the family assemblies which continually inspire family harmony, the educational activities which provide both secular and spiritual training, the cultural values imparted by the Swaminarayan Akshardham complexes in New Delhi and Gandhinagar, and other social, cultural and spiritual activities. He also acknowledges the outstanding contributions of BAPS mandirs built by Pramukh Swami outside India, in the USA and UK, in nurturing and sustaining Indian heritage and spirituality among NRIs.

Dr Kalam notes the profound effect Pramukh Swamiji has on common people and his concern for their well-being. He inspires youths to contribute constructively to the progress and harmony of India and the world, by spotlighting the successful approach of Pramukh Swamiji in uniting and advancing families and communities. Further, he advocates the necessity of self-discipline, sacrifice, tolerance, forgiveness and other virtues by demonstrating how Pramukh Swamiji exemplifies them in his life.

Dr Kalam has also given his vision for India 2020 to the nation’s youths by listing the targets that should be met to develop India. And, on a personal level, Dr Kalam reveals, “Pramukh Swamiji often sits in prayer throughout the night for the problems of common people. I have emulated this habit.”

In Part 3 - Fusion Of Science and Spirituality, Dr Kalam selects eminent scientists and thinkers and describes their observations and thoughts on the relationship between science and spirituality: Pythagoras, Galileo Galilei, Albert Einstein, Gregor Mendel, Baruch Spinoza, Srinivas Ramanujan, Jagdish Chandra Bose, Subrahmanyan Chandrashekhar and Francis Collins. He expresses that science has advanced and provided much to humanity, but that spirituality is also an essential component of human life. In the beginning of this chapter there is a quotation of Carl Sagan who is an astronomer and author, “Science is not only Compatible with spirituality; it is a profound source of spirituality.”

The third chapter was very interesting, because co-author Prof. Arun Tiwari founds that Pramukh Swamiji is a great spiritual person, but the way he implemented the Akshardham projects, he’s better than any engineer, he’s superior to any architect and, above all, he is a perfect manager. On the other hand, Dr Kalam is a scientist, and he has depth of spirituality. So, somewhere it struck me that looking at science and spirituality as two separate processes is a big mistake. I think both are the same. Both are two faces of the same coin. So, we did some research and we found about all these great scientists. [They were] very spiritual people.
So, the third part talks about science and spirituality and it is in literature. Literature and spirituality is very close. Through discourse it gives the clarity of spirituality.

About the title Prof. Tiwari Replied, We looked at so many names. Whatever name we thought, we were trying to match it with Pramukh Swami Ji. So, we arrived at ‘Transcendence’, which is *gunatit*. After all, one translation of transcendence is *gunatit*. Somebody who is beyond *guna* – that is Pramukh Swami Ji. So, that *gunatit* we translated to Transcendence.

Dr. Kalam wrote this book to record his experiences with Pramukh Swami Ji, kalam’s reflections on his work and the transformation that he experienced in his fellowship. He sees in Pramukh Swami Ji a true embodiment of transcendence.” *Transcendence* reveals much about the mindset of Dr Kalam – his love for science, his inner spirituality, his constant endeavour to improve and learn, his infectious optimism and enthusiasm, and his world view and vision for India. Pramukhswami Maharaj called Kalam ‘Rishi’. This book’s focus shifts from Pramukh Swami Ji to others, as Dr Kalam substantiates the inspiring values he has learnt through his spiritual experiences with Pramukh Swami Ji by invoking the examples of distinguished spiritual leaders, scientists, thinkers and others. The book will appeal to youths and others who seek guidance on the essential life values necessary to complement their personal skills.

Through the life of Pramukh Swami Ji and the Translation work of the BAPS Swaminarayan sanstha, Dr Kalam Traces the contemporary concerns of the Indian diaspora across the world and the emerging Indian identity of a capable, right thinking and hard working people. Drawing from the lives of great scientists and creative leader, Transcendence captures the essence of all religions and is as much a fountain of inspiration and a treasury of wisdom as it is a tribute to the multi-faith, pluralistic Indian Society.

References

- *Swaminarayan Bliss* - July August 2015