

The Aesthetics of Atmospheres in A. P. J. Abdul Kalam's The Power of Prayer

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Abstract— This paper examines A. P. J. Abdul Kalam's autobiographical essay "The Power of Prayer" through the theoretical lens of Gernot Bohme's aesthetics of atmospheres. While Kalam's narrative has conventionally been read as a testament to interfaith harmony or spiritual secularism, this paper argues that the essay's deeper significance lies in its representation of how atmospheric spaces, rather than formal instruction or abstract ideology, shape ethical subjectivity. Drawing on Bohme's concept of atmosphere as an "in-between" phenomenon that mediates between objective environments and bodily feeling, the analysis demonstrates how Kalam's childhood in Rameswaram unfolds across multiple atmospheric registers: the domestic atmosphere of generosity and spiritual wisdom fostered by his parents; the sacred atmospheres of the mosque and the Shiva temple, which dissolve religious boundaries through shared affective experience; the communal atmosphere of a locality where Muslims and Hindus live amicably; the elemental atmosphere of the sea and cyclone, which instills humility and resilience; and the pedagogical atmospheres created by teachers who challenge social hierarchies. The paper contends that Kalam's identity does not emerge despite his environment but through it, the atmospheres of Rameswaram produce an ethical self that transcends religious and caste divisions long before Kalam can articulate such principles intellectually. This reading positions Bohme's atmospheric aesthetics as a productive framework for understanding how lived environments, rather than doctrinal teachings, cultivate pluralistic consciousness in South Asian autobiographical narratives.



Keywords— Gernot Bohme, atmospheres, A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, "The Power of Prayer," religious pluralism, lived religion, aesthetic theory, Indian writing in English

Situating Kalam's Narrative

A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, India's eleventh President and one of its most beloved scientists, occupies a legendary place in the nation's imagination. His autobiography *Wings of Fire* traces his journey from a modest childhood in Rameswaram to leading India's missile program and eventually the presidency. But tucked within its pages is a chapter, "The Power of Prayer", that offers something rare: an intimate look at the early years that shaped him. What makes it distinctive is how Kalam steers away from the usual focus on solo achievement. Instead, he turns outward, to the community that embraced him, the everyday

connections that enriched him, and the environments that quietly molded him.

For many, this essay celebrates interfaith harmony and the spiritual grounding Kalam received from his father. Growing up in a middle-class Tamil Muslim family, Hindu and Muslim traditions wove together seamlessly into daily life. His father was close friends with the Hindu high priest; his family participated in Hindu ceremonies; his closest friends were orthodox Brahmin boys; his mother and grandmother told stories from both the Ramayana and the Prophet's life. This was pluralism lived, not preached. Yet scholarly conversations often filter this textured reality through labels like 'secularism' or 'tolerance', useful, but

flattening. What gets lost is the sensory, emotional quality of Kalam's world, where coexistence wasn't a principle to uphold, but simply the air he breathed.

This paper proposes a different approach, one drawn from German philosopher Gernot Böhme's *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*. Kalam's story makes more sense when read through the atmosphere: those emotionally charged, place-bound forces that shape us before we consciously think about them. His ethical and spiritual growth wasn't the product of formal religious teaching or abstract moral codes. It emerged organically from immersion in Rameswaram's everyday atmospheres, the quiet warmth of his parents' home, the sacred pull of mosque and temple, the easy rhythm of a mixed neighborhood, the raw power of the sea, and the inspiring spaces his teachers created. These weren't backdrops; they shaped him from the inside out, cultivating a self that was instinctively open and spiritually alive, long before he had words for it.

Gernot Bohme and the Aesthetics of Atmospheres

Gernot Bohme (1937–2022) was a student of Jurgen Habermas, he shifted aesthetics away from art and beauty, planting it firmly in the everyday sensory world we actually live in. Bohme cared deeply about ecology. In his hometown of Darmstadt, people complained about a bad smell. Scientists found nothing toxic, yet everyone felt unwell. It wasn't a chemical problem but an aesthetic one. The atmosphere was making them uneasy. He described atmospheres as 'in-between' or 'quasi-objective', not purely in our heads, yet not existing without someone to feel them. We can agree a room feels oppressive or joyful, which proves their real presence. But they're also deeply personal. We can approach atmospheres in two ways: how we perceive them, and how we produce them. Stage designers master the latter manipulating light, sound, and space to generate specific moods.

Drawing on Schmitz's work on the 'felt body,' Bohme showed how light, silence, and color physically affect us. He even used temple spaces to illustrate the 'sublime' how light, shadow, and vastness captivate the body. This focus on sacred space makes his theory perfect for understanding Kalam's world, steeped in such atmospheres from the very beginning.

The Domestic Atmosphere: Generosity and Spiritual Wisdom

Kalam's essay opens with a tender portrait of his parents, and right away we feel the atmosphere of his childhood home. His father, Jainulabdeen, had little formal education and modest means, but was rich in 'innate wisdom' and 'true generosity of spirit.' His mother, Ashiamma, was his perfect partner Kalam recalls that 'far

more outsiders ate with us than all the members of our own family put together.' This detail invites us into a home where generosity was simply how things were. Strangers and family shared the same space, the same food, dissolving boundaries without a second thought.

There was quiet spiritual depth too. Kalam describes his father as austere, avoiding luxuries yet covering every necessity. This was not deprivation, it was a discipline that valued inner richness over outer show. The home felt 'very secure, both materially and emotionally,' an atmosphere of steady nourishment. The most vivid moment comes when Kalam recalls eating with his mother: 'I normally ate with my mother, sitting on the floor of the kitchen. She would place a banana leaf before me, on which she then ladled rice and aromatic sambhar, a variety of sharp, home-made pickles and a dollop of fresh coconut chutney.' This is not just a meal, it is a sensory world. The banana leaf, the steam, the sharpness of pickle, the cool chutney, all radiate warmth and care. These small things, in Bohme's language, carry an 'ecstatic' quality; they fill the space with mood. This atmosphere, I believe, was the quiet foundation of Kalam's ethical self. The generosity he witnessed wasn't taught, it was absorbed through participation, in a home where giving felt as natural as breathing, and the line between self and other gently blurred.

Sacred Atmospheres: Mosque, Temple, and the Dissolution of Boundaries

The sacred spaces of Rameswaram lie at the heart of Kalam's story and here, Böhme's framework shines. The Shiva temple was just 'a ten-minute walk from our house,' and the mosque where his father prayed stood close by. These aren't mere locations; they're atmospheric facts. Kalam lived within their reach, their moods seeping into his everyday life. His father's prayers left a deep mark. Kalam had not the faintest idea of the meaning of the Arabic prayers chanted, but he was totally convinced that they reached God. He didn't understand a word, yet he was utterly certain. That certainty came from the mosque's space, his father's presence, the collective hush the atmosphere convinced him in ways language never could.

After prayers, people of different faiths waited with bowls of water. His father would dip his fingertips, pray, and the water went home for the sick. The sacred atmosphere spilled beyond the mosque, carried in simple bowls. His father explained: "When you pray, you transcend your body and become a part of the cosmos, which knows no division of wealth, age, caste, or creed." Prayer wasn't a request, it was expansion, a dissolving of self.

His father's friendship with the Hindu high priest Pakshi Lakshmana Sastry deepened this. Kalam recalls the

two men, each in his traditional attire, discussing spiritual matters and quiet mutual respect he absorbed effortlessly. His visits to the Shiva temple with Ahmed Jallaluddin were equally profound: "Circling around the temple with the same reverence as any pilgrim... we felt a flow of energy pass through us." Kalam didn't understand the rituals, yet participated fully. The temple welcomed a Muslim boy into its embrace. His reflection says it all, he never doubted that the prayers in the temple reached the same destination as the ones offered in our mosque. This is not theology; it is lived experience. The atmosphere did what doctrine never could.

The Communal Atmosphere: Lived Pluralism

Rameswaram wasn't just tolerant, it was woven together. His locality was predominantly Muslim, but there were quite a few Hindu families too, living amicably with their Muslim neighbours. The harmony was so natural it barely needed mention. This ease sharpens through a classroom incident. A new teacher, unable to stomach a Hindu priest's son sitting with a Muslim boy, ordered Kalam to the back bench. In one move, he introduced segregation into a space where friendship had always trumped difference. Kalam recalls he felt very sad, and so did Ramanadha Sastry. He looked utterly downcast as I shifted... The image of him weeping left a lasting impression on him.

Both boys wept, Muslim and Brahmin alike. Shaped by the same environment, they felt the violation together. Lakshmana Sastry's response was swift. He told the teacher not to spread the poison of social inequality and communal intolerance in the minds of innocent children. Intolerance wasn't an idea to him, it was a contaminant. He demanded the teacher apologize or quit the school and the island. This reveals something vital: Rameswaram's atmosphere required guarding. Lakshmana Sastry, the Hindu high priest, became its protector not for Muslims alone, but for the whole community, and especially for the children whose innocence needed shielding.

Elemental Atmospheres: The Sea and the Cyclone

Kalam also draws powerful atmospheres from the natural world. He watched his father build a wooden sailboat on the seashore—a scene of quiet labor and purpose. Then came the cyclone, which destroyed it. Until then, he had only seen the beauty of the sea, Kalam writes, 'now its uncontrollable energy came as a revelation to me.' The sea shifted from serene to terrifying, teaching him humility in the face of forces beyond human control.

His father's response deepened this lesson. When Kalam asked why he didn't simply explain suffering to those who sought his help, his father called himself 'a go-between' and warned against a 'fear-ridden vision of destiny.' True prayer, he said, wasn't about manipulating

fate but about seeking fulfilment within oneself, a quiet, atmospheric wisdom that Kalam carried for life.

Pedagogical Atmospheres: Teachers Who Transformed

Kalam's essay also shows how teachers created atmospheres of learning and transformation. His science teacher, Sivasubramania Iyer, was something of a rebel who did his best to break social barriers so that people from varying backgrounds could mingle easily. He wasn't just teaching, he was actively reshaping the atmosphere of the community. The dinner invitation episode is especially powerful. Iyer's wife, an orthodox Brahmin, was horrified at the idea of a Muslim boy eating in her ritually pure kitchen. She refused to serve him. But Iyer stayed calm; he did not argue or get angry. Instead, he "served me with his own hands and sat down beside me to eat his meal." This was an atmosphere in action: he did not lecture; he just created a new reality through his own behavior.

His wife watched from behind the kitchen door, observing Kalam. He wondered whether she had observed any difference in the way I ate rice, drank water or cleaned the floor after the meal. He knew he was being watched and his presence was disrupting the usual order. When Iyer invited him again the next weekend, his wife served him herself. She hadn't been convinced by argument, but by exposure to a different atmosphere—one her husband had quietly built.

Iyer told Kalam once he decided to change the system, such problems had to be confronted. Changing the system meant shifting the taken-for-granted atmosphere, the hidden rules, the silent habits. Iyer understood that the kitchen's ritual purity was part of a larger caste system. By simply inviting Kalam to dine, he introduced something new into that space, forcing a quiet transformation.

The Atmosphere of Departure: Leaving Rameswaram

The essay closes with Kalam's departure from Rameswaram to study in Ramanathapuram, a shift from one atmosphere to another. His father, recognizing that his son must leave to grow, quotes Khalil Gibran: "Does the seagull 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."

His father understood that Kalam had to leave behind the land of memories the atmosphere of Rameswaram to enter a new space. Love, in this understanding, was not a chain but a release. Yet Ramanathapuram felt different. Kalam writes:

"Somehow, I did not take to the new setting. The town of Ramanathapuram was a thriving, factious town of some fifty thousand

people, but the coherence and harmony of Rameswaram was absent."

The 'coherence and harmony' was precisely Rameswaram's atmosphere, the fabric of belonging and pluralism he had taken for granted. He missed home intensely and grabbed every opportunity to visit Rameswaram. The pull of educational opportunities at Ramanathapuram was not strong enough to nullify the attraction of poli, the South Indian sweet my mother made. The attraction of poli was not just about taste, it was the atmosphere of home: his mother's care, the kitchen floor, the banana leaf, the aromatic sambhar. He was drawn back not by nostalgia but by the memory of an atmosphere that had nourished him.

Despite his homesickness, Kalam was determined to come to terms with the new environment because he knew his father had invested great hopes in his success. That determination itself came from the atmosphere of his childhood, his father's hope, his mother's sacrifice, the community's support all propelling him forward, even when he longed to return.

Conclusion: Atmospheres and the Production of the Ethical Self

Kalam's "The Power of Prayer" is more than nostalgia or a tribute to interfaith harmony. Through Böhme's lens, it becomes a meditation on how environments shape who we are. The atmospheres of Rameswaram: domestic, sacred, communal, elemental, pedagogical did not just surround him; they formed him, creating a self that was generous, spiritually open, and resilient long before he could put those qualities into words. This reading offers a few takeaways.

First, 'atmosphere' gives us a richer way to understand religious pluralism than tired terms like 'tolerance' or 'secularism.' Kalam didn't tolerate the difference he was shaped by it. Mosque and temple, Muslim and Hindu weren't external facts to manage; they were absorbed into his very being.

Second, it reminds us that sensory details matter: the taste of poli, the feel of the banana leaf, the sound of Arabic prayers. These are not embellishments; they are the building blocks of atmosphere, the small things that carry mood and meaning.

Third, Bohme's framework has real potential for reading South Asian life-writing. While no one seems to have applied it to Kalam before, it could open up other narratives where environment, not ideology, does the quiet work of shaping identity. Finally, this reading affirms Bohme's larger point: our everyday spaces, our kitchens,

temples, classrooms, neighborhoods aren't just backdrops. They are the very medium through which we become ourselves. Kalam's story is proof of that.

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