

‘Prof Jayant Narlikar believed in nurturing children with love of science from young age’: Educator remembers astrophysicist

Prof Jayant Narlikar, who passed away at the age of 86 on May 20, was a renaissance scientist, said Prof Arvind Gupta.

Astrophysicist Prof Jayant Narlikar believed children should be nurtured with the love of science from a young age, and he realised his dream to set up a children’s science centre at the Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics (IUCAA) in Pune in 2004, said Prof Arvind Gupta, a science educator and toy inventor.

Prof Gupta, 71, a Padma Shri awardee, well known for turning trash into toys that children can make themselves while learning the basic principles of science, recalled his association with Prof Narlikar, who passed away at the age of 86 Tuesday. His mortal remains were kept at the Bhaskara foyer at IUCAA Wednesday morning for the public to pay their final respects.

“He (Prof Narlikar) would often argue that good PhD students did not fall from the sky,” Prof Gupta said on the occasion.

“In 2003, I was invited by JVN (Prof Narlikar) to work in the IUCAA’s children’s science centre (Muktangan Exploratory Science Centre). Initially, I was reluctant to work in a government institute. But JVN assured me that I could help shape the science centre, and if I did not like it, I could quit after six months. So, I initially joined for six months, but ended up working there for 11 years,” he said.

Prof Narlikar was the founder-director of the IUCAA in Pune and was known for his seminal works in cosmology and most importantly, for believing in an alternate model to the popular Big Bang theory for the origin of the universe. In 1988, Prof Narlikar founded the IUCAA within the Savitribai Phule Pune University (SPPU). Professor Narlikar was India’s most celebrated astrophysicist, having received the second highest civilian award, the Padma Vibhushan in 2004. Two decades earlier, he was honored with the Kalinga Award, UNESCO’s highest recognition for science popularisation.

A large donation from Sunita Deshpande, the wife of his late friend Pu La Deshpande, a cultural icon of Maharashtra, turned this dream into reality and the children’s exploratory science centre was inaugurated in 2004 by Prof Yash Pal, a fellow Kalinga awardee who shared his vision of science.

“Right from its inception, IUCAA had an active public outreach programme. Every second Saturday, there was a popular science lecture/demonstration for some 1,000 students and teachers from over 100 schools in Pune. This tradition still continues. JVN started the students’ summer internship programme. During summer holidays, children would work with scientists on some projects. That gave children a feel for what goes into doing science,” Prof Gupta said.

Prof Gupta also spoke about Dr Vidula Mhaikar, who is now with Garware Bal Bhavan, Pune; and Ashok Rupner, now with Indrani Balan Science Centre, IISER, who had joined him at IUCAA’s children’s science centre.

“In 2004, we set up the popular website arvindguptatoys.com. We started uploading science projects – photographs, videos, and popular books on the website. We made over 8,700 videos in 15 languages and uploaded them on YouTube. We had 3.7 lakh subscribers, and we were the

second-largest YouTube channel from India at one stage. Today, 12 crore children worldwide have viewed our 2-minute 'toys from trash' videos," Prof Gupta said.

Dr Gupta also recalled that the anti-superstition activist Dr Narendra Dabholkar often collaborated with Prof Narlikar. "Prof JVN was a renaissance scientist. He wrote prolifically in his mother tongue, Marathi, and was a pioneer of science fiction writing. He was a rationalist and consistently debunked pseudoscience. Dr Narendra Dabholkar often collaborated with JVN, who was invited widely to give lectures to school and college children," he added.

According to reports, Dr Dabholkar also conducted a statistical test on the accuracy of horoscopes with Prof Narlikar. The report was published in the journal Current Science.

Anuradha Mascarenhas is a journalist with The Indian Express and is based in Pune. A senior editor, Anuradha writes on health, research developments in the field of science and environment and takes keen interest in covering women's issues. With a career spanning over 25 years, Anuradha has also led teams and often coordinated the edition. ... [Read More](#)