

C V Vishveshwara –Reminiscences at Random

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C V Vishveshwara – popularly addressed as CVV or Vishu passed into another universe, perhaps altering the spacetime curvature that he fondly studied for close to five decades, on January 16. This is a small tribute to the great friend, philosopher and guide that he was to many like me, in every sense of the word.

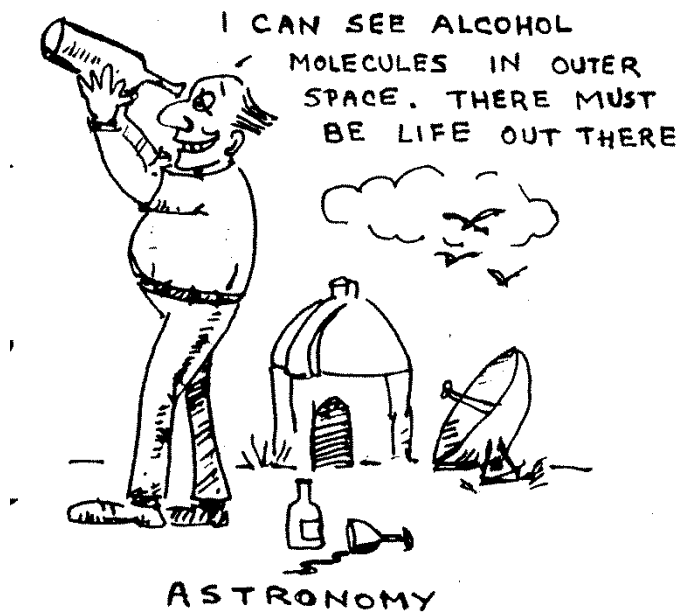
Vishveshwara is very well known in scientific circles both as a rigorous researcher and a Science Popularizer. His name is as popular as the science that he popularized. It is another thing that he did not go after popularity. To paraphrase Einstein, one of the three scientists that he admired most (Galileo and Newton were the other two) ***‘To punish Vishveshwara for his contempt for popularity, God made himself popular’***. He became popular for his witty ways in which he laced hard core science with humour anecdotes and analogies. You mention his name and invariably the person who has heard CVV before will always recall CVV’s sense of humour. That was a stand-out character of his presentations. But then, beneath that thin layer of humour lay the actual flesh and blood of ideas that he wanted us to comprehend. Once, while talking about ultimate fate of the universe, CVV mentioned the competing theories and he mentioned one that he felt would be the correct course of the universe. When questioned by someone in the audience as to how he knew the answer, CVV shot back ‘...because I am the Lord of the Universe!’ All of us, who know that he never indulged in self-glorification, were taken aback at this brazen declaration. With that characteristic pause and trademark intonation, he added ‘ After all, my name is Vishveshwara, meaning Lord of the universe!’ The audience always enjoyed this kind of unexpected, ‘serious’ one-liners from him. I may not be wrong if I told that lots of students would be disappointed without those one-liners. CVV was fond of quoting others’ ideas as well. He had a rich collection of real gem of quotations. He was once asked about what the God was doing before he created the Universe (Big Bang). He would quote St Augustine and say ‘God was preparing Hell for those who asked such questions’.

Vishveshwara's contribution to education is immense. Instead of blaming the ills that plague the education system, he conceptualized a series of educational programmes at J N Planetarium, Bengaluru, when he was the Director. All these programmes have grown in stature and made good impact on the right kind of students. Several students have been motivated and inspired to take to pure science – research and teaching- during the last two decades and some of them are faculty in reputed research institutes and universities and deeply involved in teaching at the same programme that once nurtured them. CVV's impact on students cannot be quantified but one just has to hear from them directly.

As the director of the planetarium, he scripted not only several programmes that brought joy to visitors but also directed the manner in which all the activities were conducted. His taste for aesthetics, music, literature and fine art shone brightly in the scripts of the planetarium shows that made our shows unique and drawing praise from legends such as S Chandrashekar, Roy Kerr, Alan McKay and Anthony Legget – all big names in science that they practiced.

CVV was not in good health over the last nine months. During this period I got to meet him just two times. And, on both occasions, struggling to speak, he enquired about my family – my daughters and wife. His caring attitude was not restricted to his colleagues' work but went beyond that. He knew every family member of every colleague of his.

Well, in writing these random thoughts (well, how can one organize thoughts when one is shell-shocked with the news of his passing away?) I have broken one dictum of his: A good write up must have a good beginning and a good end and keep the two close to one another. I have breached all the three requirements. Sorry, CVV Sir



One of the many cartoons that CVV himself would draw and caption in his inimitable style



Prof C V Vishveshwara