

Jayant Narlikar: A Voice That Lit The Cosmos

By **RAGHUNATH MASHELKAR**

10 Minutes Read Listen to Article

Share: <https://www.rediff.com/news/special/jayant-narlikar-a-voice-that-lit-the-cosmos/20250522.htm>

May 22, 2025 13:04 IST

'When Dr Murli Manohar Joshi wanted to start a course on astrology, Jayant was the first one to have the courage to stand up and say astrology is not science.'
'That's a very rare quality -- to stand up to authority.'

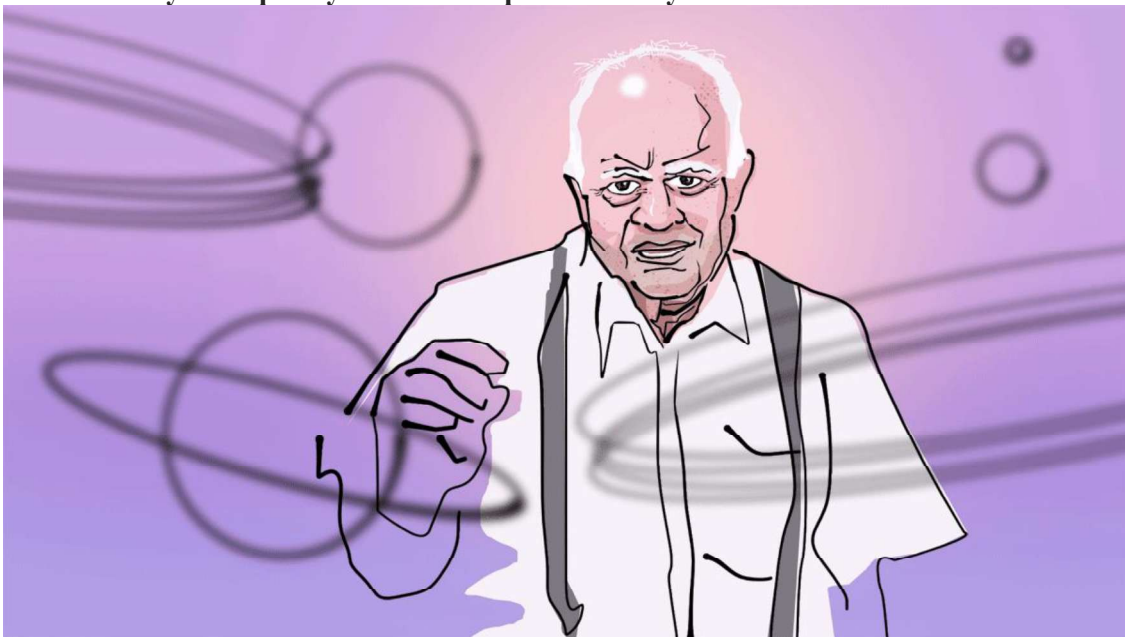


Illustration: Dominic Xavier/Rediff

On May 20, 2025, India lost one of its most brilliant astrophysicists, **Dr Jayant Vishnu Narlikar**.

A thinker ahead of his time, Professor Narlikar dared to challenge the Big Bang theory with the steady-state cosmology he developed alongside Sir Fred Hoyle. His mind lived among galaxies, but his heart always beat for India -- working tirelessly to make science accessible, relatable, and aspirational for all.

In this poignant tribute shared with **Rediff**, Dr **Raghunath Anant Mashelkar** -- former director general, Council of Scientific and Industrial Research -- shares his memories of a dear friend, fellow scientist, and kindred spirit.

Dr Mashelkar spoke soon after coming back from his friend's funeral where, by his own admission, "I cried like a child."

Emulating Jayant Narlikar

Let me start unusually by recalling something that happened 50 years ago. I came back to India (*from the US*) in November 1976, and before coming to Pune and joining NCL (*National Chemical Laboratories*), I met Tara Bole, managing director of a company that made the Makad Chaap tooth powder.

I had very high respect for her, so I went to seek her blessings. The blessing she gave me was, 'Have a great aspiration and try to become Jayant Narlikar. That is the best you can achieve.' The significance of this is that 50 years ago, Jayant Narlikar was in his mid-30s, and the public at large looked at him as somebody to emulate, as a kind of aspiration. 50 years later, today, as we are mourning his passing away, he holds the same respect. And 50 years later also, that will be the case.

Jayant wrote a book called *The Scientific Edge* and at the end he ranked the greatest achievements of Indian science and technology in the 20th century.

Among India's greatest individual scientists, he also ranked the CSIR in the tenth spot and I'm very proud to tell you that I was the director general CSIR during the mid and late 1990s. This has now become a kind of case study for the World Bank on institutional transformations.

A Master of Communication

He was an extraordinary speaker who would convert the most complex things into the simplest of terms. I've never seen somebody doing that. The Indian National Science Academy gives medals to scientists. I had got the medal, and he had also got the medal. All the medal lectures are done one after the other on a particular day.

I remember he was going to speak first, and I was going to speak later. So I went to the organisers and said, 'If Jayant speaks first and then I speak, I will hardly have any audience. Everybody will leave. So can you change the order?' Jayant was a close friend, and he agreed. So I had a full audience -- not waiting for me, but for Jayant.

Quiet Impact in Policy Making

In the mid-80s, Rajiv Gandhi had created the science advisory committee to the prime minister. As luck would have it, both Jayant Narlikar and I were members of this committee. In that committee, the person who spoke the least but made the maximum impact was Jayant Narlikar. His deep views about the importance of science -- not just its importance but about school children loving science, taking science, living science -- was very close to his heart. So whenever it came to science funding or science-related policies, he would be the strongest champion.

Exemplary Leadership at IUCAA

Once IUCAA (Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics) was created, I was made a member of the governing council. Jayant was chairman of the board, and I've observed the way he ran it. If there was a prize for remaining calm and having infinite patience, it would go to Jayant.

He was amazing -- never forced his views, was totally democratic, listened to everyone. Even if we disagreed, the way he handled it was remarkable. I learned a lot from him just by observing him. There are chairmen who thump the table and say, 'This is how it has to be done,' but he was not like that.

People know about conceiving IUCAA as an Inter-University Consortium and how IUCAA has been built. There is no public building which is like IUCAA.

I remember (*the renowned architect*) Charles Correa built it. In lighter moments, Jayant always told me about the fights he had with Charles Correa, because Charles was also a creative genius. But finally, Jayant had his way (*to have the IUCAA building designed based on his feedback*). I can imagine what a great victory it was. This speaks to his sense of aesthetics.

An Indian Einstein

Then, of course, he stands tall for four things. One, as a great astrophysicist -- Everest-like. As a great science communicator, he received the UNESCO Kalinga Prize. In the certificate they gave him, they called him the 'Indian Einstein.' What I want to emphasise is something he said in that interview. What he said was that doing science is our duty, but communicating science is an even greater duty. Scientists do no favour by just doing science; they must understand that taking it to the people is the most important duty. This reflected his sense of responsibility and his humility -- we are not obliging society by doing science.

Nurturing Curiosity: Postcards for Science Questions

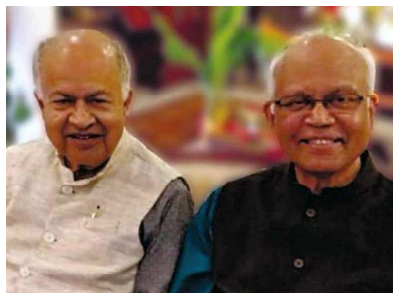
His way of promoting science through books, communications in all media is well known. What is less known is the following: If somebody came to him for an autograph, he would not simply give the autograph. He would tell the person, 'Send me a postcard with a question about science that has puzzled you.' This was very important to arouse curiosity. And he would say, 'I will respond to you in my own handwriting with the answer.' He sent thousands of such letters, which is not widely known.

An Early Hero and Pure Scientist

When I came to India in 1976 and met Tarabai Bole who asked me to become like Dr Jayant Narlikar, I had not met him personally, but I had heard about him. Very early in his life, he had received success and recognition, including the Padma Bhushan.

Although I came from abroad, Jayant was our hero. As soon as you said 'scientist' or 'astrophysicist,' it equalled Jayant Narlikar. Many of us fall into other temptations, but he never did that. His commitment to science and making science popular among the masses was absolutely amazing.

Humility of a Giant



Dr Jayant Narlikar, left, with Dr Raghunath Mashelkar (Pic credits: Dr. Raghunath Mashelkar)

I was so awe-inspired by him that when I met him, I was shocked because his simplicity and humility were striking. In engineering science, there are only three Fellows of the Royal Society (*from India*) who have been selected in 363 years of the Royal Society's history.

That's considered a great honour -- after Nobel, it's one of the two or three most important recognitions. They are **Professor Roddam Narasimha** (*the celebrated aerospace and fluid-dynamics expert*), Professor M M Sharma (my guru, Professor Man Mohan Sharma, chemical engineer and first Indian engineer Fellow of the Royal Society, pioneered multiphase reaction engineering, directed ICT [earlier University Department of Chemical Technology] Mumbai, and won the Leverhulme Medal), and myself. The great privilege that you have as a Fellow is that you sign in the same book in which Newton signed. You have to do it exactly the way they used to do it -- with ink and a dip pen, not a ballpoint. We had to practice so as not to spill the ink. All Fellows are given the privilege of seeing one signature. People go for Einstein or Newton. Newton's signature is on page nine, and because everybody sees it, it has been laminated. When I looked at the page, I expected to see a big signature with authority, but there was a very apologetic small signature in a corner: 'Isaac Newton.'

It was exactly the same with Jayant. I had such awe for him, but when I saw him, he had such a simple, humble manner, speaking in a low voice. This comparison occurred to me just now, because we are comparing two great people.

Lessons in Irreverence, Patience, and Conviction

The first lesson I personally learned from Dr Narlikar is that all of us are great followers, not leaders. What does a leader do? A leader has to have a certain degree of irreverence, not believing what everybody else believes, but having his own view. When he challenged the prevailing theories -- Fred Hoyle and the Big Bang versus the Steady State -- he challenged the Big Bang. It required guts because the entire community was against him. That's pretty irreverent, to be able to challenge the obvious.

My work has been considerably influenced by that. A lot of my work in stability responsive genes is actually based on challenging the known. That is one thing I learned from him.

The second thing I learned from him was patience, perseverance, and tolerance. Even during the most heated arguments, he would bring calm to the meeting. That was a great quality because I was a very excitable person -- young, brash.

Third was his courage of conviction. When Dr Murli Manohar Joshi (*HRD minister in the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government*) wanted to start a course on astrology, Jayant was the first one to have the courage to stand up and say astrology is not science. That's a very rare quality -- to stand up to authority. Others were falling in line. Currently, you can see what is happening -- unless you toe the line, there is a challenge. People are afraid to speak. But he had that courage. I don't think I could emulate him as much as he did.

A Life Free from Controversy

Remarkably, Narlikar faced little professional jealousy. Everyone respected him. He was fortunate that when IUCAA was founded -- India's first Inter-University Centre -- UGC Chairman Yashpal supported his vision. This innovative institutional model spawned other centres, including one for nuclear science that I chaired for five years.

Narlikar earned respect from political, social, and scientific spheres alike, maintaining a reputation unblemished by controversy.

Personal Loss and Lasting Legacy

Narlikar was a very close friend. When paying my tributes as he lay in state, I cried like a child. His presence embodied purity -- of thought, intention, and scientific purpose. Unlike many who constantly seek awards or recognition, he had no personal agenda.

Despite his contributions, he was never made a Fellow of the Royal Society. Yet in 40 years of (*our*) friendship, he never once complained about this slight. He harboured no ill will toward anyone -- a truly rare quality.

Dr Narlikar's seminal feats

Establishing IUCAA, which continues producing leaders in astronomy and astrophysics (the mark of a true leader is creating better leaders), and becoming a household name throughout India. While schoolchildren might not recognise **Homi Bhabha** or **C N R Rao**, they know Jayant Narlikar.

The national mourning following his death resembles the outpouring after Ratan Tata's passing. Looking at Marathi newspaper headlines in Pune confirms this widespread grief.

There will be only one Jayant Narlikar. Nobody like him.

As told to Prasanna D Zore/Rediff