

M. G. K. Menon: A great Indian scientist

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Mambillikalathil Govind Menon can be considered as the architect of modern scientific and technological India. According to V. Radhakrishnan, he is the most eminent “Statesmen of Science” we have in India.

He was born at Mangalore on 28 August 1928 into the family of Kizhekapat Shankara Menon who was a District and Sessions Judge. He matriculated from the Punjab University in 1942. After graduating with his Bachelor of Science degree from the Agra University in 1946, he took medicine as a career at Jaswant College, Jodhpur. He loved science and the spark that lit his deep commitment to fundamental research was provided by none other than the Nobel laureate Sir C. V. Raman. Menon then moved to the Royal Institute of Science, Bombay where he obtained the Master of Science in physics, under the guidance of N. R. Tawde, the noted spectroscopist. In January 1953, Menon was awarded Ph.D from Bristol and soon thereafter the Senior Award of the Exhibition of 1851, which he held for two years 1953–1955, just as [Bhabha](#) did years earlier. He met and married Indumati Patel, a student of philosophy.

Towards the end of 1955, at the invitation of [Homi Jahangir Bhabha](#), Menon joined the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR), which had by then moved from Bangalore to Bombay and was well established at the Kenilworth and the Old Yacht Club. At TIFR, Menon started a programme to develop plastic balloons which could carry scientific payloads to stratospheric heights – a harbinger of India’s programmes in space. He also seamlessly integrated himself with the studies of particle physics and cosmic rays with detectors deployed deep underground, which was already moving forward vigorously, under the dedicated efforts of B. V. Sreekantan, one of the pioneers of Indian science. He also seamlessly integrated himself with the studies of particle physics and cosmic rays with detectors deployed deep underground, which was already moving forward vigorously, under the dedicated efforts of B. V. Sreekantan.

He was soon made the Dean of the Faculty of Physics immediately followed by elevation to the position of the Deputy Director (Physics). TIFR grew rapidly in areas as diverse as biological sciences, radio astronomy, solid state electronics and geophysics, and to quote Sreekantan ‘Menon was the guiding spirit behind these developments’. It was during this period that Menon and his associates, Sreekantan and others recorded the first event ever of a cosmic-ray neutrino interacting deep underground and generating a muon. This was reported at the International Cosmic Ray Conference in 1965 held in London.

It was soon after this that a great tragedy befell the Indian scientific scene: 24 January 1966, [Bhabha](#) was killed in an air crash over Mount Blanc, the Chairman of the Governing Council of TIFR, J. R. D. Tata while appointed Menon as the New Director of the Institute. During the early years of his directorship, Menon was invited by C. V. Raman to play a central role in the Board of Trustees of the Raman Trust. It was thus that when Raman died after a brief illness in November 1970, the responsibility of the future of the Raman Research Institute (RRI) at Bangalore fell on his shoulders. Upon Bhabha’s death in 1966, Vikram Sarabhai had been appointed as the Chairman of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO).

Upon the sudden and tragic death of Sarabhai in December 1971, Menon, who was already holding the position as the Chairman of the Electronics Commission and Secretary to the Government of India, Department of Electronics, concurrent with the Directorship of TIFR, was asked by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to shoulder the additional responsibilities as the Chairman of ISRO and Director of Physical Research Laboratory (PRL), Ahmedabad.

Amidst all this nation-building activity, Menon never lost his focus on science. He helped establish close collaboration in the field of cosmic rays between TIFR and groups at University of Durham led by Arnold Wolfendale and at Osaka University led by S. Miyake. Menon was elected Fellow, Royal Society (London) in 1970, in recognition of his contributions to particle physics and for the studies in cosmic rays.

Menon's creative approach to science and elegant management skills projected him rapidly to the higher echelons of academia across the world. He has occupied the position of the President of the three academies of sciences in India – the [Indian Academy of Sciences](#) (IAS), the Indian National Science Academy (INSA) and the National Academy of Sciences (India) (NASI). During his presidency and, indeed, through his continued association with them, these academies have vastly increased their scope and engagement with society in general. Soon after he was elected President of the [Indian Academy of Sciences](#), the fellowship was significantly enlarged to bring in scientists from new and emerging fields of study. Menon was also responsible for vastly increasing the publications of the academy. C. V. Raman, the founder of the Academy, started with the publication of the 'Proceedings', in 1934, with monthlies in Physical Sciences, to which, in the very next year, he added a monthly devoted to other branches of science and mathematics. Menon, with the association of leading scientists in India, was responsible for the rapid growth of the publications: Premana, to start with, in 1973, and a significantly larger number of others covering various fields in 1977. This growth has continued ever since (including the rejuvenation of "Genetics").

Such sterling human qualities, coupled with high intellect and administrative in Menon was recognized widely in the form of awards, election to the fellowship of several national and international bodies, and also in appointments to high-level administrative and advisory positions such as the Member of Planning Commission, Chairman of the Scientific Advisory Committee to the Cabinet and Scientific Advisor to the Prime Minister of India.

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