

## TIFR mourns the passing of its second founder

When Mambillikalathil Govind Kumar Menon breathed his last on November 22, 2016, at the age of 88, the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, was bereaved for the second time after the untimely death of its iconic founder, Homi J. Bhabha, in 1966. For, if Bhabha had founded TIFR as a unique centre with the ambience to foster cutting-edge science of the highest quality, it was Menon who completed his unfinished work and created the TIFR which is now taken for granted as India's premier research institute.



Born at Mangalore, in 1928, to a district judge and his wife, Menon was one of eleven children. He was educated at Chennai, Jodhpur and the Royal Institute of Science, Mumbai, before going to the University of Bristol, where he got his Ph.D. in 1953 under the guidance of Nobel Laureate Cecil F. Powell. 'Goku' Menon, as he was widely known, made some fundamental observations on the decays of K-mesons, and had several job offers in Europe and America, but was persuaded by Bhabha to return to India and join TIFR in 1955. Once in India, Menon worked hard alongside other pioneers such as Bernard Peters, Devendra Lal, Yash Pal and B.V. Sreekantan to build a world-class cosmic ray research group at TIFR. Perhaps his best claim to scientific fame is the setting up of the Kolar gold field experiment, where atmospheric neutrinos were detected for the first time (1965).

Gradually, Menon became Bhabha's right hand man in the running of TIFR, at a time when the latter was busy setting up India's atomic energy programme. It was, thus, fitting that when Bhabha died in a 1966 plane crash, the Directorship of TIFR devolved upon the 38-year-old Menon. During the 10 years (1966 – 75) of his Directorship, Menon strived in every way to develop TIFR in the way his friend and mentor Bhabha had wanted. He continued Bhabha's policy of identifying bright young students and sending them to do their PhD.'s with famous scientists all over the world, so that they could bring back the latest ideas and skills to India. Many of TIFR's best minds were hired during his time, the TIFR housing colony came up next to the Institute, and he strongly supported nascent efforts like Obaid Siddiqi's molecular biology group – the first of its kind in the country.

When Vikram Sarabhai suddenly passed away in 1972, Menon held the additional position of ISRO Chairman for a short time before the appointment of Satish Dhawan. After relinquishing his position as Director of TIFR, he became, in succession, Secretary of the DST (1978 – 82) as well as Director-General of CSIR (1987 – 81), Scientific Advisor to the PM (1982 – 89), Minister of State for Science and Technology (1989 – 90) and Rajya Sabha member (1990 – 96). A fellow of the Royal Society since 1970, Menon was one of the founders of The World Academy of Sciences (1983). Over the years he was decorated with the Padma Shri (1961), the Padma Bhushan (1968) and the Padma Vibhushan (1985).

The last few decades of Menon's long life were lived in New Delhi, where he and Mrs. Menon lived very simply and quietly. Till the very end he continued to strive in many ways for India's excellence in science and technology. He will be sorely missed.