



MGK Menon - Commemoration

A Tribute to M.G.K. Menon, a scientist statesman and a dear friend

I met Professor M.G.K. Menon (Goku) for the first time around 50 years ago in a meeting of the Indian Academy of Sciences. That was the period when Prof. C.V. Raman presided over the Academy and gave an evening lecture. The very first time I met Prof. Menon, it became clear to me that I was talking to a brilliant man. He was then Deputy Director and Professor at the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research. Prof. Homi Bhabha chose him personally as the Deputy Director in charge of physical sciences at the TIFR, acknowledging his brilliance and other attributes. He became director of TIFR in 1966 after Prof. Bhabha passed away in a tragic accident. Prof. Menon had created a great scientific record in Bristol (UK), having carried out outstanding research in the group of Professor C.F. Powell on cosmic rays. He had been offered a good faculty position in the US, but he chose to come back to India. Prof. Menon was elected fellow of the Royal Society, London, at a very young age.

Prof. Menon has served the country and the Indian Government in various capacities and with a variety of portfolios. He has been in charge of the space program, CSIR, Department of Environment, Dept. of Electronics, DRDO and Department of Science and Technology at different times. When Mr. V.P. Singh was Prime Minister, Prof. Menon was Minister of Science & Technology. He was member of the Planning Commission and Scientific Adviser to the Indian Government during Rajiv Gandhi's Prime Ministership. I had many opportunities to be in close touch with him from the late seventies and he became a close friend. I started calling him Goku. He was Goku to his friends.

Over the years, I have got to know Prof. Menon in various ways, because of common interests and our involvement in various organizations. When he was the Secretary of the Department of Science and Technology, I worked closely with him on the Science and Engineering Research Council. When I was a member of the National Committee on Science and Technology in the early 1970s, I met him a few times to discuss issues related to science policy.

Our close relationship really started when I visited China in a delegation with Prof. Menon as the leader of the delegation. That was the first Indian delegation to China after the cultural revolution. Our common friend, late Devendra Lal, was with us in the delegation as also A.P. Mitra and M.M. Sharma. It was one of the most enjoyable international visits I have had. We went round China visiting institutions and wondering how much better off we were in India in terms of facilities and infrastructure. (Alas! the situation no longer holds).

When I became Director of Indian Institute of Science in 1984, Goku was member of the Planning Commission. Considering the pathetic condition of the 75-year old Institute in terms of basic infrastructure facilities including water and electricity, I approached him for help. He saw to it that a special grant of Rs.3 crores was made available so that the Institute could rectify some serious shortcomings.

We were both members of the Atomic Energy Commission for some years. I looked forward to the lunch in Taj (Mansingh Road) with Goku after the meeting of the Commission. Mr. J.R.D. Tata, who was also a member of the Commission, would often dine with us.

I worked closely with Goku when I was Chairman of the Science Advisory Council to Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. We did several things together at that time. Creation of TIFAC was one such happening.

Having known Goku closely for the last thirty or more years, I must say the following. I consider him to be one of the most brilliant people whom I have known. He had an outstanding mind and possessed great clarity of thought. If he had continued purely in science, he would have made major contributions and reached great heights. However, he decided to serve India in various ways. While it was a loss to science and a personal loss to him, the country benefitted considerably. I have often said that Goku was the academic conscience of the scientific community. I considered Satish Dhawan to be the moral conscience of the scientific community.

Goku is the only person that I know who has headed many major agencies and departments of the Government of India and also all the three science academies. He was also involved in the councils of variety of scientific and educational institutions including the Indian Institute of Science, Raman Research Institute, some of the IITs and the Indian Statistical Institute.

I have enjoyed knowing Goku Menon. We think somewhat similarly on issues. We have many common friends as well as common interests. I feel bad that Goku's services have not been fully utilized in the last few years. I am also not sure that he has been properly compensated for the immense contributions made by him.

It is most unfortunate that Goku's health deteriorated during the last several months. I felt terribly sad seeing him that way. I can only think of a cheerful Goku, full of enthusiasm and ideas.

Goku has been a dear friend. He has also been a national treasure.

Chintamani N.R. Rao