My Greetings to Bhal...

Dr. Jayant Narlikar

I am happy to associate myself with the happy occasion when friends and admirers of Bhalchandra Udgaonkar are celebrating his eightieth birthday. I am proud to count myself as one of them. As I will be abroad at the time of celebration, I am sending my greetings to Bhal in advance of the occasion.

My association with Bhal dates back to the late sixties. I had seen his name on the scroll of honour at Mumbai's Institute of Science, in a list that carries names of my father and Homi Bhabha. But the chance to meet him arose when I dropped in to see him at the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR), on one of my visits from Cambridge. I was then contemplating joining TIFR, and had found that a discussion with a scientist already working there might be useful. Indeed I found the chat useful in forming my overall picture of what life in Mumbai, working in TIFR would be like.

When I joined TIFR, I was given an office on the fourth floor next to Bhal's and it was always a pleasure to drop in on him for some advice or other. For, I found him to be a fountainhead of experience and wisdom. In his views he was quiet but firm: not offering them unless specifically asked for. We discovered an older link. I was trained in the campus of Banaras Hindu University and there my family knew Bhal's in-laws. His father in law was the distinguished historian A. S. Altekar, and Shreedhar, ASA's youngest son had been my school-mate.

As I got to know TIFR better, I began to appreciate the role Bhal was playing as a senior faculty member. Whereas most of our colleagues were concerned only with their own research, very few of them realised or appreciated the importance of teaching. Bhal was one of the latter. He took interest in the graduate school programme, planning courses, interacting with research scholars, and also in the initial interviews that selected them. Sadly, the then constitution of TIFR did not permit interaction with undergraduates. But still Bhal kept in touch with the bright physics students from Bombay University. Even today I meet (now distinguished) scientists who had interacted with Bhal as undergraduate students.

As a member of the University Grants Commission, Bhal had to deal with important policy issues of universities. There he brought to bear on the problems the inputs from working in a research institute like TIFR. In the UGC, such inputs are always valuable whether in matters of degrees, courses or syllabi.

He was always trying to build bridges between universities and TIFR. I was associated with the teaching collaboration between Pune University Physics and TIFR in the mid-1980s. This involved selection of some bright students for the Pune University M. Sc. Physics course, awarding them scholarship and also having some TIFR scientists teaching courses in the M. Sc. programme. I believe Bhal

lectured on dynamics while I took the course on electromagnetic theory. This involved spending 3-4 days in Pune each week, staying on the university campus and interacting with the students. I found the experience exhilarating and was sorry that the programme did not continue for various reasons. I think one of the reasons was that the TIFR faculty did not share enough enthusiasm for such teaching.

I think it was Bhal's active encouragement at the other end of the student spectrum that led to the flourishing of the Homi Bhabha Centre for Science Education. Aimed at school education, the Centre concentrates on teacher training in science, the writing of good textbooks and enhancing the role of experiments. With Bhal on the Governing Board, the Director of the Centre, V. G. Kulkarni could reach out for higher and higher aims.

I end this tribute to BMU by recalling his successful presidency of the Marathi Vidnyan Parishad, when he introduced several new programmes and diversified the scope of activities of the Parishad. This was one instance of his concern for bridging the gap between the ivory-tower scientist and the common man. Although he worked a lot for enlightening the general public he himself shunned publicity and was more comfortable working from sidelines.

I wish him many years of active and satisfying life ahead.

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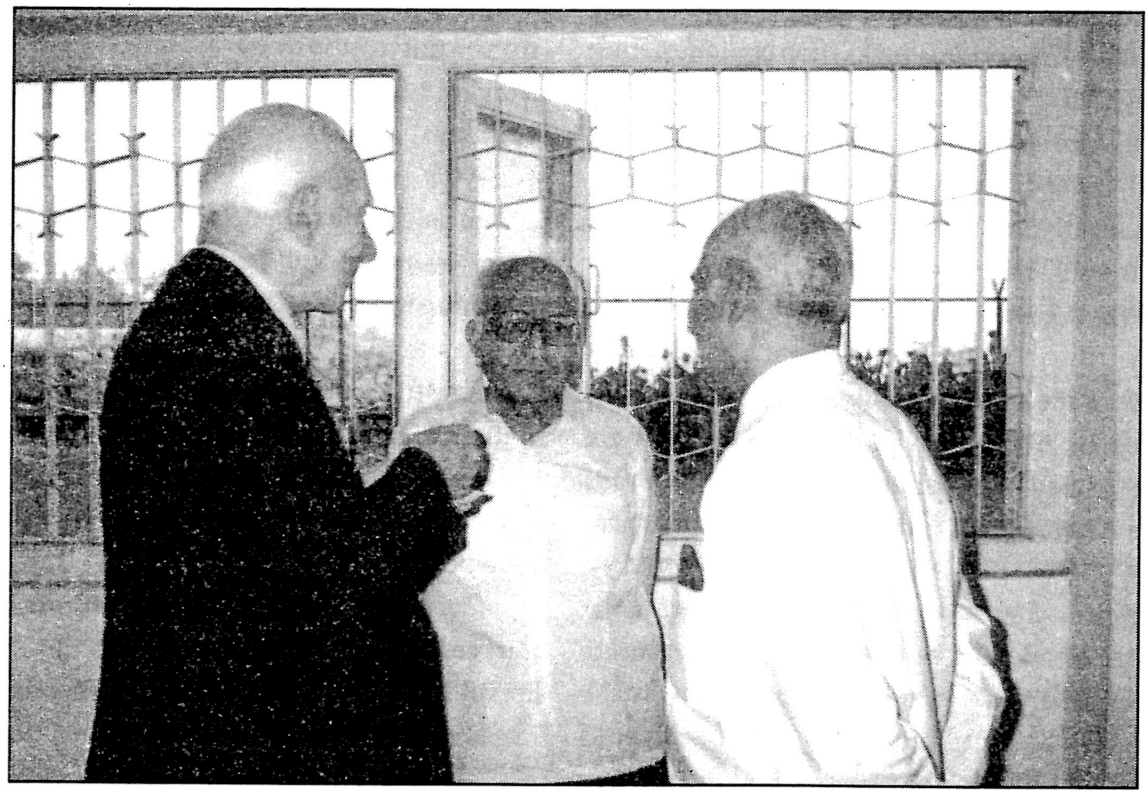

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