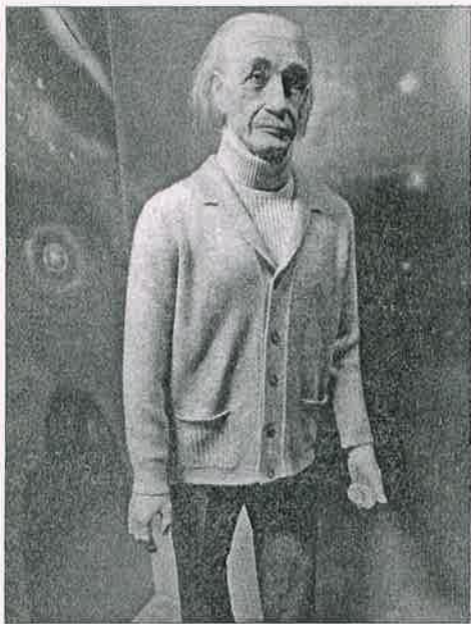


# Einstein Missed the Boat to God's Own Country!

Travancore varsity had invited Nobel laureate to be its V-C, but he refused



Albert Einstein's wax statue

**JOE A SCARIA**  
CHENNAI

Just a couple of kilometres from the headquarters of the Kerala University in Thiruvananthapuram lay mounds of gold, diamonds, emerald, rubies and myriad precious stones roughly valued at a trillion rupees, in the vaults of the Sree Padmanabhaswamy Temple, hardly known to anyone for decades, except for a few trustees of the temple.

Just as the temple is basking in the glitter of that awe-inspiring treasure find last year, the university, which is celebrating its platinum jubilee this year, has dusted out of its annals what really would have been another crown jewel for it and the state: Albert Einstein as its vice-chancellor.

When the Travancore University, which later metamorphosed into the Kerala University, was established in 1937, the diwan (prime minister) of the princely state, Sir CP Ramaswamy Iyer, is famously known to have invited the founder of modern physics, Albert Einstein, to be its first vice-chancellor. The legend who gave the world the theory of general relativity, however, turned down the offer and opted to be an associate with the Princeton University in the US.

"We have no official records of such a communication to prove the veracity of the invitation to Einstein," a Kerala University official told ET, but there is a mention of the invitation on the university's website, and corroborated by the late historian professor A Sreedhara Menon, whose book talks about the invitation to Einstein to be a professor at the university for a monthly salary of ₹6,000.

There are some who raise doubts whether this was indeed true, given that the diwan himself drew a salary of only ₹4,000. In the event, it was the Travancore king Chitira Tirunal Balarama Varma who led the university as chancellor, queen mother Setu Parvathy Bai as pro-chancellor and the diwan himself as vice-chancellor.

Diwan CP Ramaswamy Iyer has few equals in Kerala history in having die-hard fans and foes alike, and for the same reason, while many feel that it was his foresight that led him to invite a person as eminent as

Einstein to head the princely state's first university, others insist it was the shrewd politician in him that made him float such an idea to quash the hopes of some local academicians who were eager to grab the post. Iyer, who is also remembered for suppression of communists in Kerala, resigned in 1947 after a failed assassination attempt on him.

Notwithstanding the disappointment of missing out on Einstein, Kerala University had some eminent personalities as its vice-chancellor, including John Mathai, who was Jawaharlal Nehru's finance minister and also vice-chancellor of the Bombay University. "When Mathai was invited by the first Left government in Kerala, the then state education minister Joseph Mundasseri is said to have asked him, 'Is it because we are Communists that you have a problem?'" says Govindan S Tam

**DIWAN**  
**Diwan of Travancore, Sir CP Ramaswamy Iyer, is known to have invited Einstein, to be its first V-C**

pi, a former CAT member and a long-time bureaucrat.

The invitation to Einstein, if it indeed occurred, could also be taken as a reflection of the

strong culture of education that had already taken root in the state, aided in no small measure by printing presses established by European missionaries.

Those were also the years when literacy rates in Kerala were the envy of the rest of India. In 1951, for instance, the first census after independence showed a literacy rate of 47% in Kerala, compared to a rather wretched 18% for India.

Wishful thinking lingers about just what might have been if the Nobel winner had indeed settled down in coconut palm-fringed Thiruvananthapuram, but Kerala University has moved on from those days. Its degree certificate now comes with a hologram and boasts of as many as 112 security features. Now, even Einstein would have been proud of such scientific expertise, though the relativity guru might also have wondered why in the world Keralites would want to use their ingenuity to counterfeit the certificate of a university he might have headed.