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Demystifying the wonders of the universe with his toys

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Arvind Gupta, an Indian toy inventor and populariser of science, began his social service by teaching the mess staffers' children, who had no opportunity for formal education.

Gupta, who currently works at the Children's Science Centre of the Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics (IUCAA) at University of Pune, has dedicated almost 30 years of his life to impart knowledge to students with the help of innovative scientific toys made out of waste material.

Gupta, a student of Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur in the 70s, participated in the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme (HSTP) in Madhya Pradesh in 1978. While he was there, he developed his idea of creating simple toys and tried out educational experiments using locally available materials as well as items thrown as trash.

Finding that these simple toys fascinated children, Gupta went on to make them the hallmark of his movement to popularise science. The range of toys at Gupta's lab is fascinating simply because they are made of things like soft drink bottles, old newspapers, film roll covers, cycle tubes, plastic bottles, pencils, batteries and magnets to name a few. Each toy is based on a scientific concept that makes science endearing.

His first book, Matchstick Models and other Science Experiments, was reprinted in 12 languages. Gupta's website holds instructions, including short video clips on YouTube, in a number of languages, for making hundreds of improvised toys, which he makes available freely without copyright restrictions. Gupta draws inspiration from a number of people, including his mother, Gautama Buddha and George Washington Carver.

He has won awards for his lifelong dedication to popularise science and for his contributions in designing science teaching aids for young children. These include the inaugural National Award for Science Popularization amongst Children (1988), the Distinguished Alumnus Award from IIT Kanpur in 2001 and the Indira Gandhi Award for Science Popularization conferred upon him by the Indian National Science Academy (2008).

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