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THE REAL PAGE

THE REAL COOL DUDE

ARVIND GUPTA ON HOW SIMPLE TOYS CAN OPEN UP THE ASTONISHING WORLD OF SCIENCE TO YOUNG MINDS

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SCIENCE is fun. It's a marvellous and magical journey of infinite joy to truth. But our stereotyped concepts of science teaching terrify little minds. Instead of leaving children free to occupy the driver's seat and explore the uncharted but astonishing world of science, we force them into passive mugging of formulas and principles, which they can't connect with real life. We put them in a lab full of pipettes and burettes and make them feel that they always have to be on guard. So, instead of dance, laughter and the wonder of initial steps, students get bored. They develop fear. They begin to detest science. This is Arvind Gupta thinking aloud.

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But unlike most critics of a system, this positive doer doesn't stop here. He buckles down to the task of building a new path to the world of science: An inspiring, enlightening and beautiful path. But above all, an interesting one. "Children love to handle things, manipulate them, open them up, break them. So give them something inexpensive, something all poor children can afford," he says.

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He and his team at Muktangan Vidnyan Shodhika at IUCAA (Inter-University Centre for Astronomy & Astrophysics) have developed, adopted and borrowed ideas to prepare hundreds of science toys which are great fun to make, and are constructed from the waste available in ordinary homes-and which cost next to nothing.

The team conducts



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workshops for schoolchildren and teachers, showing them how to prepare simple toys and the scientific principles behind them. It's a treat to watch curious students prepare toys with ease. And the sheer delight on their glowing faces as they see the amazing things the toys can do. "Luckily, we are a consumerist society. We produce a lot of junk," smiles Arvind Gupta. Thus a tetrapack, toothpaste tubes, used cycle tubes, spokes, photo film containers, newspapers, used footwear, matchsticks, all come handy in making a toy.



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And the 53-year old IIT graduate brings rare innovation to his work. Not to forget an abundance of passion. A lot of this rubs onto his team and the children attending the workshop. Then onwards, it's unmitigated fun all around as students prepare an air pump to inflate balloons, flapping and other birds, caps, planes, gliders, windmill, electric motor and generator, flexagon and a blow toy. Each workshop becomes a thing of joy to be fondly remembered, as far as the children are concerned.

But Arvind Gupta's energy doesn't get dissipated with one workshop. "I love books. We have to take the world's best books to all children, schools and teachers," he says. To this end, he spends hours everyday digitising books on various subjects.

He has put them all on a website along with 600 photographs of step-by-step preparation of various toys. Anyone can open the site, download whatever he or she wants. It's all free. He has put all this on a CD too. Anyone can 'buy' it for Rs.8, the price of a blank CD. All his work is also available in books — something he believes will outlast him.

In the meantime, his fun approach to knowledge-dissemination continues to inspire.

A touching toy

It has a Velcro-plated slate and a fishing line that uses wool. Most of it can be made from waste. As you unwind the fishing line, woollen thread comes out of a hard nozzle-like opening. If you press it onto the Velcro slate, the wool sticks to the slate and forms shapes. Blind children can move their hand over the wool, feel it and enjoy the pattern they have created.

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