



Homage

Professor S. V. M. Satyanarayana: A Great Teacher whose Legacy Continues to Inspire

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Professor S. V. M. Satyanarayana, affectionately known as "Satya" by his students and friends, was more than an academic mentor; he was a beacon of knowledge and a pillar of support. A true master of the art of teaching, a revered educator and a beloved father figure to countless students, including me. I had the privilege of completing my PhD under his esteemed guidance at Pondicherry University. Professor Satyanarayana passed away on 16 September 2023, leaving behind a legacy of wisdom, mentorship, and inspiration that will forever shape the lives of those he touched.

Professor Satyanarayana's academic journey culminated in a doctoral degree in Physics from IGCAR Kalpakkam, where he honed his expertise and laid the foundation for a distinguished career in academia. He worked as a scientist in IGCAR Kalpakkam till 2006. Then he joined Pondicherry University as an assistant professor. He brought immense dedication, wisdom, and passion to the institution.

Professor Satyanarayana's extraordinary ability to convey knowledge was simply awe-inspiring. He had an unparalleled talent for delving into any subject matter, and without the need for a single paper or a script, he could captivate his audience for days on end. His lectures were a mesmerizing journey into the world of learning, where words flowed effortlessly from his mouth and hand. One of the hallmarks of Professor Satyanarayana's teaching was the artistic beauty of his lecture notes on the blackboard. Every stroke of chalk, every line, and every diagram were not only visually stunning but also a testament to his commitment to completeness and perfection. His choice of words in both lectures and discussions was simple, precise, and minimal, making the most challenging topics accessible to all. He said his philosophy behind teaching is "creating intellectual discomfort while providing psychological safety". Professor S. V. M. Satyanarayana shared similarities with the legendary physicist Richard Feynman, in his unwavering passion for teaching. Both individuals possessed an innate gift for making complex concepts simple and approachable.

What set Professor Satyanarayana apart was not just his teaching prowess but also his approach to education. He abhorred the barriers and complexities that often plague the academic world. Professor Satyanarayana believed that knowledge should be a bridge,

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not a barrier, and he lived by this philosophy in all aspects of his life. His dedication to conducting Sunday classes, which he single-handedly initiated in Chennai in 1996, ran uninterrupted for 25 years. Every Sunday, he travelled approximately 100 kilometres to Chennai, demonstrating an exceptional commitment to education without any expectation of material gain. This selfless quality is one that Professor Satyanarayana embodied wholeheartedly. What truly distinguishes him from other passionate teachers is his complete lack of expectation from his students in return for his efforts. He never sought recognition, accolades, or financial compensation. Instead, his greatest reward was witnessing the success and personal growth of his students. His legacy endures through the lives he touched, the knowledge he shared, and the dreams he helped students realize. He used to remind his students “You may be a product of your past, you don’t have to be a victim”. Professor Satyanarayana’s legacy serves as a poignant reminder of the profound impact that a single individual can have on the lives of many and the enduring power of education to uplift communities.

Professor Satyanarayana assessed students based on the quality of their questions rather than the correctness of their answers. He encouraged students to ask questions and employed various methods to create a student-friendly classroom environment. Professor Satyanarayana’s impact on his students went far beyond academics. He was not merely a professor but also a mentor, a guide, and a friend. He nurtured not only their intellect but also their character, instilling values of integrity, trust, perseverance, and humility. His influence transcended the classroom, as he encouraged his students to be curious, compassionate, and open-minded individuals who could make a positive difference in the world.

Professor Satyanarayana had the courage to challenge authority when necessary. He did not shy away from speaking out against practices that hindered genuine learning and academic progress. In one situation, Professor Satyanarayana and his fellow teachers had to endure persecution and arrest and were brought before the court during the protest. Even in the face of these tribulations and tests, he remained remarkably calm and content. I once asked him, “How can you maintain your peace when you are going through these trials?” He shared an insightful analogy he had heard from a talk. He asked me to imagine that we are in a car on a road stuck in heavy traffic – a situation that can be painful and frustrating. However, if you were to view the same scene from a helicopter, looking down at the long line of cars, it would not be as painful. In essence, he had an aerial view of problems rather than a terrestrial one. This perspective allowed him to detach from the immediate turmoil and see the bigger picture. It was this elevated viewpoint that enabled him to navigate challenges with grace and composure, and, as a result, problems didn’t affect him as profoundly as they might have otherwise.

Professor Satyanarayana stood as an unwavering pillar of support for students with learning difficulties. He couldn’t comprehend why some teachers felt the need to express anger towards students facing learning challenges. He was deeply disheartened when a student was intentionally failed by a professor in a prestigious national institution. Professor Satyanarayana was prepared to advocate fiercely on behalf of that student, ready to champion their cause.

He was also actively engaged in educating teachers. He served as a resource person in numerous orientation programs conducted by academic colleges. Additionally, he initiated a series of lectures, which were recorded and subsequently uploaded to YouTube by the Academy of Physics Teachers, Kerala. The audience for these lectures consisted of college teachers from various institutions in Kerala. Furthermore, he played a significant role as one of the national coordinators of Physics Training and Talent Search (PTTS), a training program designed for highly motivated and talented undergraduate and postgraduate students from across the nation. The program followed an active learning methodology to impart training.

Though his primary passion was teaching, Professor Satyanarayana actively engaged in research throughout his career. He completed his Ph.D. in the field of Characterization of Chaos. In 2003, he did Post-Doctoral research at Forschungszentrum Jülich in Germany, where he made notable contributions by publishing a research paper on the shape and motility of a model cell. Under his supervision, five students successfully completed their Ph.D. research. Professor Satyanarayana's research interests were diverse and encompassed fields such as Statistical Mechanics, Biophysics, Density Functional Theory and Quantum Entanglement. His contributions to these areas underscored his intellectual versatility and enduring curiosity.

Professor Satyanarayana passed away due to pancreatic cancer. Prior to this, he had experienced two massive heart attacks. He underwent chemotherapy as a treatment, but unfortunately, it had little to no effect. Eventually, he approached the end of his journey. Recognising the signs and preferring not to spend his final moments in the hospital ICU, he strongly urged his wife to arrange for his discharge. He returned to the place of learning he cherished so dearly and passed away in the loving embrace of his beloved wife, Annalakshmi. This was a poignant moment, a departure from the clinical environment of a hospital to the setting that resonated with his lifelong passion for education. It's worth noting that his PhD mentor, Valsakumar, succumbed to stomach cancer, passing away in the ICU on a ventilator. After visiting Valsakumar in the hospital, Professor Satyanarayana reflected, "Hospitals are encashing the futile desire of human beings to live longer." He was resolute in not subjecting himself to such circumstances, even in his final moments. His commitment to his philosophy remained steadfast until the end.

In the passing of Professor S. V. M. Satyanarayana, we have lost a true luminary in the world of education. His soulful teaching, commitment to simplicity, and unwavering belief in the power of knowledge without barriers will continue to inspire generations of scholars. His legacy is a testament to the profound impact that a dedicated educator can have on the lives of many.
