

Dr. V. K. Iya

Champion of Radioisotope Program in India



Dr. V.K. Iya with Dr. Hemchandra Gupte (centre), Mayor of Bombay (now Mumbai) during his visit to BARC on September 2, 1971. Photo courtesy SIRD Archives.

Dr. Vasudeva Kilara Iya, an eminent Indian nuclear scientist and key figure in the country's radioisotope and radiation technology program, passed away on August 10, 2024, at age 96. His pioneering contributions have significantly shaped nuclear science in India.

Born on September 16, 1927, in Vadodara, Gujarat, Dr. Iya excelled academically, graduating in Chemistry from the University of Pune and earning a gold medal for his M.Sc. at Central College, Bangalore. He pursued his doctorate at Sorbonne University, completing his D.Sc. under Felix Trombe. In 1955, Dr. Iya was recruited by Dr. Homi J. Bhabha for the Indian Atomic Energy Programme, gaining experience at the French Nuclear Laboratories at Saclay. Returning to India in 1957, he joined the Atomic Energy Establishment, Trombay (AEET), now known as Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC).

Dr. Iya took over the radioisotope program in AEET after C.B.G. Taylor's departure and led the Isotope Division by 1963. He was appointed Director of the Isotope Group in 1974, overseeing significant advancements in radioisotopes, radiopharmaceuticals, and radiation processing technologies. He played a crucial role in the work on preparing isotopes for India's first peaceful nuclear explosion in 1974, popularly known as "Operation Smiling Buddha". Beyond BARC, Dr. Iya established the Board of Radiation and Isotope Technology (BRIT) in 1987 and chaired the Experts Committee for the Performance Related Incentive Scheme for DAE units. He represented India in the Regional Cooperation Agreement for Nuclear Science and Technology in Asia and the Pacific since its inception in 1972.

As an educator, Dr. Iya mentored many who became leaders in nuclear science. He was the Founder President of the National Association for Applications of Radioisotopes and Radiation in Industry and served as President of the Association of Medical Physicists of India from 1985 to 1987.

Dr. Iya received numerous accolades, including the DAE Homi Bhabha Lifetime Achievement Award in 2009 and the NAARRI Lifetime Achievement Award in 1995. His legacy as the "Pitamahah of Isotopes," aptly described by Dr. Anil Kakodkar (Former Chairman, AEC) in the book *The Renaissance Man*, authored by his daughters Vidya and Rekha published in 2010, is a testament to his profound impact on the field and his inspiring journey. Dr. Iya held significant positions at institutions such as Tata Memorial Hospital and the Bangalore Cancer Hospital, contributing to advancements in nuclear medicine. Dr. Iya is survived by his family, colleagues, and many inspired by his contributions to science. His passing marks the end of an era in nuclear science, but his legacy will continue to inspire future generations.

(Compilation by Shri Madhav N., of Public Awareness and Foreign Languages Section, SIRD, BARC).