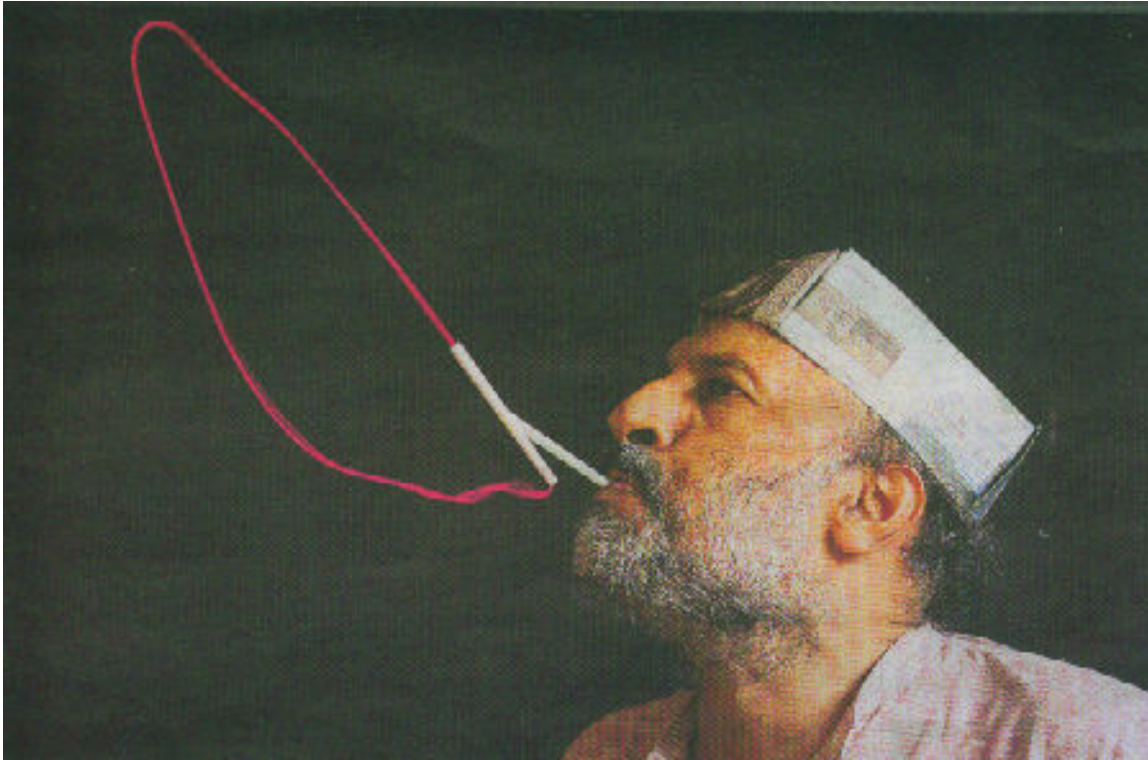


NO FOUL SMELLING LAB THIS

(Hindustan Times, Mumbai, Wednesday, April 18, 2007)

*For 25 years Arvind Gupta has made science accessible to children.
In Mumbai now for a workshop, he talks to Gitanjali Dang*



Indians have a knack of ignoring the elephant in their room. The indifference with which we treat our trail blazers has; stopped being astonishing.

It comes as no surprise then that we praise the *Baby Einstein* phenomenon as the one that awakened us to the need of initiating children to science. And we needed an American political heavyweight, Al Gore, to raise the awareness levels about global warming with the documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*.

Elephant in the room

The elephant in the drawing room, in this case, is Arvind Gupta and his marvellously inventive body of work that spans 25 years or 1500 schools and innumerable toys that have helped Indian children look at science as something that can occur outside the confines of smelly laboratories.

The Pune - based Gupta is in the city to conduct a second series of workshops - *Science through Activities* and *Science Toys*— at summertime festival at Prithvi theatre.

In Pune the 53-year-old Gupta has been innovating at the Children's Science Theatre, at the Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics.

Gupta explains, "We create new toys every day with children. They're science models but we call them toys because that makes them less forbidding."

Though the Children's Science Theatre was initiated by Indian astrophysicist Jayant Narlikar, Gupta speaks keenly about the contributions of others. "Pu La Deshpande's wife Sunlta, contributed money to set up base and since there has been generous funding from the Sir Ratan Tata Trust."

Watershed year

Gupta completed his B.Tech in Electrical Engineering in 1975 from I. I. T Kanpur. He then went on to work at Telco.

1978 was however a watershed year in his life. He explains, "I took time off from Telco and participated in village science teaching programmes being conducted in the Hoshangabad District of Madhya Pradesh. The same year I went to visit Laurie Baker.

The four months Gupta spent working with Baker, who is often described as the Gandhi of contemporary Indian architecture, altered his vision.

He adds, "I had idolised Baker since my college days. He made a difference to the lives of the poor by constructing for them. He was a very noble man."



Cola crowns and compact discs

Discussing his work Gupta continues, “This is the age of buy more and throw more. We use everyday material— film cans, bicycle tubes, compact discs and cola bottle crowns — to make the principles of science such as the centrifugal force accessible to children.

“We are trying to empower children. The Nehru Science Centre does not empower them. It is a show of state power and the crores they are sitting on. Though the state may not support us, we are in touch with others who are working in similar fields and we are doing well on our own.” - Apart from devising science toys, Gupta has also written 10 books and translated over 45 books on science, environment and education. His book, *Matchstick Models and Other Science Experiments* has been translated into 12 Indian languages. This and approximately 550 other books are available on Gupta’s website.

Great leveller

“The Net is a great leveller. Every day we have people from across the world accessing the website to download books and toys. Everything is free,” says an enthused Gupta.

These days Gupta is also translating books into Hindi. He concludes, “I come from Bareilly in the heart of the Hindi speaking belt. There are 40 crore Hindi speaking people, but there isn’t much of consequence for them to read. I spend three hours a day translating and trying to make a variety of literature accessible to the Hindi reader.”

Arvind Gupta’s inventions and books and a lot else can be accessed at <http://arvindguptatoys.com>