

Pied Piper of science toys

AFTER a brief illness, the Pied Piper of science toys Sri Jagir Chand Soni breathed his last on 10 Dec 2001 in a nursing home in Delhi. Soniji was born in Jalandhar in 1921. His father was the Head of the Department of Physics and the Vice Principal of the D A V College in Jalandhar. The father imbued his two sons -- the elder Ratan Chand and the younger Jagir Chand -- with a love for science. In those colonial days just about every piece of laboratory equipment was imported. Ratan and Jagir were perhaps the first amongst Indian to make their own telescope in the early forties.

I first met Sri J C Soni in 1981 at a workshop on science teaching aids organised by the Department of Teaching Aids, NCERT. I had displayed the matchstick mecanno and scores of other zero-cost science toys and models on a table. Even after the workshop ended an elderly man continued to peer over those small models with great interest. He liked the wheels which I had improvised out of cheap quality show buttons, a long needle and small piece of used ball pen refill. This was my first meeting with Soniji. For the next twenty years we met quite frequently.

That Soniji pioneered the production of science toys would be stating the obvious. He designed, manufactured and distributed toys/science teaching aids -- call them what you will, to just about every nook and corner of this vast subcontinental country. Being a staunch nationalist his product range was appropriately named "Raman" toys. Over the years he had learnt to deal with the moribund state institutions -- the NCERT, SIETs, DIETs and the DST. He was also the lifeline for many genuine grassroots popular science groups. For he supplied them with optical lenses and ferrite magnets costing two rupees each. He used these institutions to fulfill his one point agenda -- trying to popularise low-cost science toys and teaching aids and to imbue the learning of dreary school science with a bit of fun.

Soniji practised the concept of

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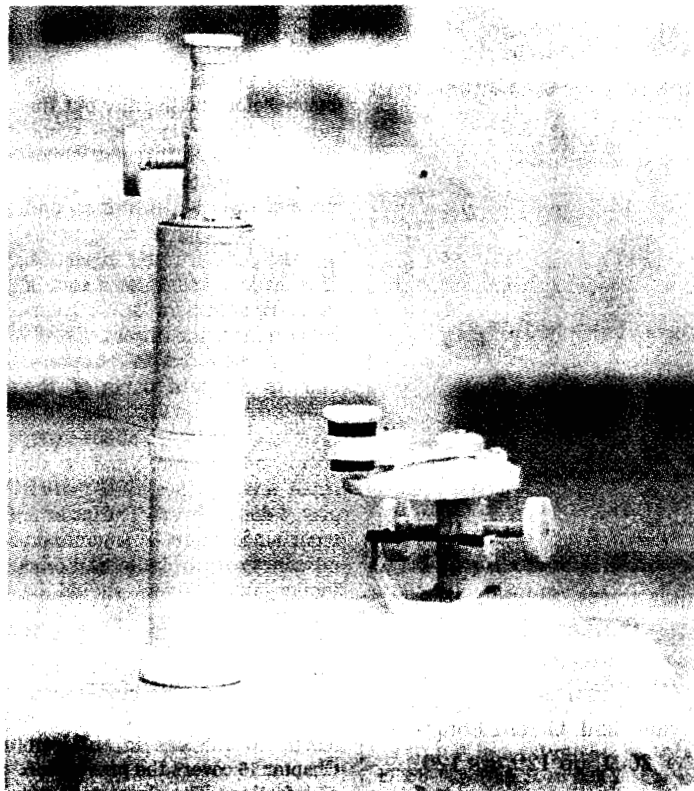
pays tribute to J C Soni,
the man who pioneered the
production of science toys
and popularised them
in every nook and corner
of the country with
a missionary zeal

copyright with great admiration. He took ideas from all over -- Indian or foreign -- adapted them into low-cost materials, mass produced them to get economies of scale and distributed them with a missionary zeal. I always admired his zest for life and love for children. Often he would give every child a puzzle -- a tangram, T shape puzzle, a Soma's cube and challenge them to solve it. There was a bit of a prize thrown in. If the children solved the puzzle they could have it, own it and take it home for good. Thus children got hooked to solving puzzles!

Soniji's toys had no competitors, because he had very low overheads. Soniji was the designer, manufacturer, salesman all rolled into one. He primarily did what he did to fulfill a deep cerebral impulse rather than to make a neat profit. Often his commercially successful sons would ask, "Why do you peddle these five rupees toys, when you hardly make any money on them?" But Soniji went on. He went from

one thing to the next -- a periscope costing 8 rupees, the collapsible telescope, the mineral set containing shreds of 50 common minerals, the microscope, the optical kit and hundreds of others. Often his toys lacked finish and were not of the best quality. But they were very affordable, and this is why they spread like wild fire. In every Book Fair Soniji's shop of science toys was literally mobbed by children. Soniji received several national awards for his outstanding contributions in science popularisation.

In June 2001 I spent three days with Soniji doing a workshop for the activists of the Kerala Shastra Sahitya Parishad. He earnestly wanted to hand over his running enterprise to the science movement. But that was not to be. With Soniji gone an era has come to an end. I would always miss him as a dear friend and an inspiring science populariser.



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