

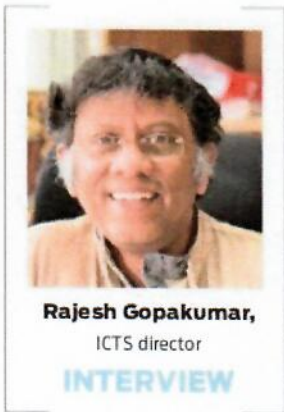
# 'Stephen Hawking inspired me to pursue Theoretical Physics'

"However difficult life may seem, there is always something you can do and succeed at. It matters that you don't just give up," said Stephen Hawking, one of the greatest physicists of the 21st century and the most famous scientist in recent memory, who died at the age of 76 on Wednesday. Although he hadn't collaborated much with scientists from India, there were a few who were inspired by the famed astrophysicist and even spent time with him. Among them is **Rajesh Gopakumar**, theoretical physicist and Director of International Centre for Theoretical Sciences (ICTS), who shared with **Akram Mohammed** the personality behind the controversial scientist, immortalised for shedding light on black holes and other mysterious cosmic phenomena.

## Excerpts from an interview:

**When were you acquainted with Prof Stephen Hawking? What is your first memory of him?**

I got to know him while pursuing my post-doctoral research at Harvard University, where he was a visiting professor. He was there for a semester and had visited our group which was working on String Theory. Everyday we used to go for lunch and he would join us, even as the nurse had to feed him. He, I think, did not try to hide anything and lived his life



**Rajesh Gopakumar,**

ICTS director

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fully.

Even before his book 'The Brief History of Time' came out, he had written an article in 1984 in Reader's Digest, which inspired me to pursue studies in the field.

**Many geniuses are known to be eccentric. How was Hawking's nature?**

Hawking was not eccentric. Despite his extreme disabilities, he was a warm and social person who liked to mingle with others. He would talk to us, even though it took time for him to compose sentences.

When there were banquets and people used to dance, he used to dance by moving the wheels of his wheelchair, which was nice

and inspirational to see.

**How was the experience when he visited India?**

Hawking's first and only visit to India (as a scientist) was in 2001, when he came to Mumbai for a conference on String Theory. He had spent a lot of time with the participants and came across as a warm human being.

**He also attracted criticism for berating the likes of Galileo Galilei...**

Like many successful scientists, he had a big ego. Though he appreciated Galileo, he wanted to say something on the contrary. Perhaps his remarks against such scientists was offensive to some people. Despite these issues, he can be considered among the 10 or 20 influential astrophysicists in the second half of the 20th century.

**What would be your memory of him?**

I would remember him as a person who loved to be happy, dance and have a good time.

Perhaps he has received too much publicity due to his condition and it is an exaggeration to compare him to Issac Newton or Albert Einstein. Doing that would not do justice to other scientists of the 20th century such as Richard Feynman, Erwin Schrodinger, Paul Dirac and others.