

Prof. E. V. Chitnis (1925 – 2025)

The scientist who transformed space into service, and knowledge into empowerment.



Born on July 25, 1925, in Maharashtra, Eknath Vasant Chitnis studied physics—an education that became the launchpad for a lifetime shaping India's space vision. At the Physical Research Laboratory (PRL), Ahmedabad—founded by Dr Vikram Sarabhai—Chitnis began his pioneering work on cosmic rays. It was there that Sarabhai, the visionary father of India's space programme, recognised Chitnis's intellect and sincerity, drawing him into the newly formed Indian National Committee for Space Research (INCOSPAR), the precursor to ISRO. As founder-member secretary of INCOSPAR, Chitnis helped lay the institutional and technical groundwork for India's space research. Among his earliest and most consequential tasks was identifying a rocket-launching site. His scientific precision led Sarabhai to choose Thumba, near Thiruvananthapuram, for its proximity to the magnetic equator—an insight that made possible the Thumba Equatorial Rocket Launching Station (TERLS). As Kiran Karnik, former ISRO scientist and DECU Director, later recalled, "Chitnis was the quiet force behind Sarabhai's bold visions, ensuring that every step was grounded in practicality."

After Sarabhai's untimely death in 1971, Chitnis carried his mentor's legacy forward by operationalising the Space Applications Centre (SAC) in Ahmedabad, where he became Director in 1972. Under his leadership, SAC turned space technology from a research dream into a developmental tool. Of the three landmark projects of that era—the Aryabhata satellite, the Space Launch Vehicle (SLV), and the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE)—it was SITE that defined Chitnis's legacy.

Launched in 1975 in collaboration with NASA, SITE used the American ATS-6 satellite to broadcast educational programmes directly to India's remotest villages. Spanning six states and more than 2,400 villages, the year-long experiment (Aug 1975–July 1976) was unprecedented. Chitnis personally oversaw village selection to ensure that the poorest and least-connected communities benefited first. A UNESCO report, *The SITE Experience*, praised the project's social engineering—its careful targeting of areas with high illiteracy and poverty—and its success in improving agricultural awareness, health, and family planning through community viewing centres. For Chitnis, SITE was not merely a technological demonstration; it was a social experiment in democratizing access to knowledge. "Technology," he often said, "is meaningful only when it touches ordinary lives." SITE's success inspired the rapid expansion of Doordarshan in the early 1980s. Lessons from SITE led to the rollout of hundreds of low-power transmitters and the birth of a communication revolution that reached every corner of India—from rural classrooms to cricket broadcasts that would later capture the world's attention. Following SITE, Chitnis launched the Kheda Communications Project in Gujarat, using television to strengthen dairy cooperatives and rural education. He retired from ISRO in 1985, after receiving the Padma Bhushan, and devoted his later years to teaching at Pune University and promoting science education. His son, Dr Chetan Chitnis, a noted malaria researcher and Padma Shri awardee, once reflected, "My father believed progress meant inclusion. He lived simply and worked selflessly so science could serve society." Colleagues and protégés remember Chitnis as a leader of depth and humility. Y. S. Rajan called him "the human face of ISRO," while Pramod Kale, his successor at SAC, said, "He taught us that science must serve people."

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