

Balakrishnan Chair Installation

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President

I still remember it ... as if it were yesterday:

The day I was invited to meet the famous professor visiting from California.

It was January 1979. ... I was newly arrived in the U.S. and had enrolled in graduate school at Buffalo to study electrical engineering. Yes ... Buffalo ... with snow everywhere... in the middle of nowhere.

But for us engineering students, that day would be like no other because A.V. Balakrishnan, at age 56, was a true superstar.

That day, I felt as though I were sitting with the God of Engineering.

And in many ways, I was!

Bal was a legend, and today, we're gathered to pay homage to our dear friend and colleague.

At the same time, we will officially install USC Viterbi Professor Petros Ioannou as the A.V. "Bal" Balakrishnan Chair of the Ming Hsieh Department of Electrical Engineering.

Although generations apart, these two men each produced pioneering research that has changed the world.

Bal, as most of you know, soared to lasting fame among the world's engineers for his work in control theory – research that began here at USC more than six decades ago.

It was almost exactly one year ago that we lost Bal. Yet there is something he taught us that continues to lift our hearts.

He taught us how you can stay true to your Trojan Family, even if you work at UCLA.

Bal's unwavering support for USC is especially evident with this chair.

With us today is the woman who was at his side for all of those years – his wife, Sophia. She knows better than anyone how Bal's mind worked.

In 2004, when Bal was awarded the Distinguished Alumni Award in Academia from Viterbi, she summed him up this way:

“Like most theoreticians, he's always creating and destroying his ideas. He'll come up with an equation to explain ‘air flutter’ at 50,000 feet ... then tell me 30 minutes later why it won't work. ...

... “Then he's on to a new way of solving the problem.”

When Bal came to USC in 1947 on a scholarship, he did it for Bollywood.

Prime Minister Nehru wanted to expand India's film industry, and came up with a foolproof plan:

He would pay his nation's top scholars to head overseas and learn the art of making movies.

So here comes Bal, already holding a master's degree in *physics* from the University of Madras, to begin earning a master's degree in ...

... cinema. *Cinema!*

Bal clearly was a man whose analytical mind never betrayed his fearlessness to think differently.

His second master's at USC was proof of that: It was in electrical engineering. Bal figured it would be a perfect foundation for a movie sound engineer.

Next came a doctorate in mathematics. And just like that, what Bollywood lost, engineering gained.

What I especially loved about Bal was that he never saw any discrepancy in being able to excel in cinema... as easily as in electrical engineering.

His innovative thinking and persistence in finding solutions inspired so many of us.

Bal wrote or edited nearly two dozen books over a 70-year span. And his classic "Introduction to Random Processes in Engineering," is still the go-to textbook for first-year graduate students.

It was published when Bal was 72 years old.

The inaugural holder of the Balakrishnan Chair, Petros Ioannou, is a scholar of international renown, whose lifelong work in control systems research has taken him to the frontiers of tomorrow's urban navigation:

The driverless car!

In a way, this is a passing of the torch.

Petros' area of research has been on finite dimensional systems ... and Bal's mostly on infinite dimensional systems ... but together they cover it all.

Petros has said that Professor Balakrishnan was one of the first names he got to know while a graduate student at the University of Illinois.

But what Petros later learned is the breadth of Bal's interest, from theoretical work used to test the control of unmanned aircraft... to communications systems for spacecraft.

With me, Bal even talked about the science of earthquakes.

Looking back at my first meeting with Bal in Buffalo 37 years ago, I will never forget how dashing he looked.

And 25 years later, I will never forget how joyful he looked when I handed him the Alumni Award.

But most importantly, I will never forget how utterly kind he was to this kid from Cyprus.

Yes, he was a superstar...

But he was also a remarkable human being.

Sophia, you and I have seen Bal's USC transcripts.

He had a brilliant mind, and would have been a great sound engineer.

But Bal's true gift took flight at Viterbi...

And for this, we will always keep him in our hearts.