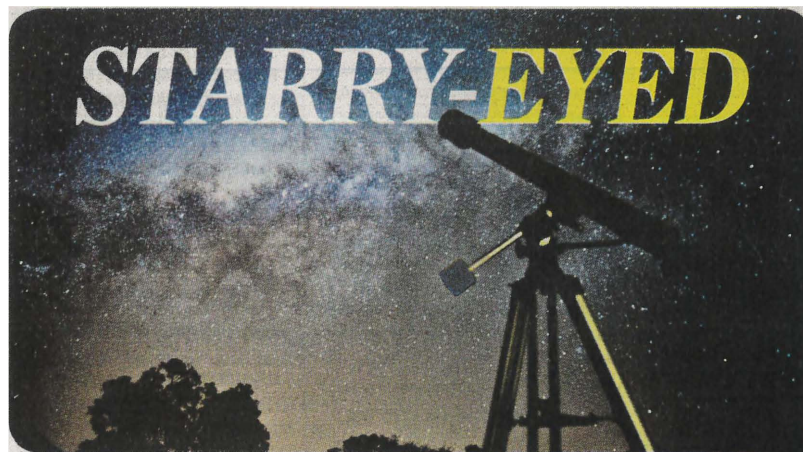


LEARN FROM THE BEST ASTRONOMERS IN THE WORLD
OVER A CUP OF COFFEE OR BEER AT THIS UPCOMING EVENT



MAHIMA NAGARAJU

AS the total solar eclipse makes headlines and attracts astronomy enthusiasts around the world, it may be a good time to lay down on a clear night and look at the firmament of mysterious, beautiful lights that blanket our world, a curiosity for which has inspired epic stories, the creation of gods, rockets and satellites. In Bengaluru, getting a clear look may mean battling light pollution and cloudy weather but when you do, you will go in armed with knowledge if astronomers and Astronomy on Tap's founders Mayuri S Rao and Nivedita Mahesh have anything to do with it. Over a beer or a coffee, the duo has been bringing top astronomers to answer Bengalureans' burning questions. "There is something primal about how we think of space and astronomy as a species, people are inclined to know about the skies – we always get questions about black holes and exciting phenomena that people read about," notes Rao.

This week, the focus is on PhD scholar from New York's prestigious Flatiron Institute, Shyam Menon, exploring a question that astronomers are still actively trying to answer, explains Mahesh, adding, "Globular clusters are dense knots of hundreds of thousands of stars, as old as the galaxies that host them,

some of them formed before the Milky Way even had a disk. The puzzle is, they shouldn't still be here. Clusters like these get pulled apart by galaxies they live in, and the early universe was a violent place to hold together, yet they have lasted for billions of years. What makes it exciting right now is that the James Webb telescope is catching clusters in the act of forming in the early universe, which means we can finally compare the newborns with the survivors."

The AoT chapter here is the first in South Asia of a global network and was born when Mahesh came across an AoT, Pasadena event and called Rao, thinking Bengaluru would be the perfect place to start one. A hub for science research institutes, there has been no dearth of astronomers eager to take the mic here, despite these being free events. "In fact, we're sometimes oversubscribed," says Rao, adding, "We have many scientific institutions like IIA, ISRO, TIFR and RRI who have astronomers and each has new work. We also see an influx of international researchers attending conferences here and get requests from grad students from studying outside who want to talk to their community here."

Expanding to cafes and working with bars which enforce strict norms for under-21s through specialised wrist-bands and entry only with an adult guardian, they have been able to reach school students right alongside young adults and retirees. This is filling a gap in how science communication happens in the city, notes Mahesh, saying, "Most science communication in India is built around teaching – planetarium shows, school visits, open days, competitions. What's much thinner is anywhere you can be curious without signing up as a student. A pub or a café is exactly that. Nobody feels stupid asking a question over a drink. There's no attendance, no hierarchy and no sense that you should already know this."

(For more info, visit @aot.bengaluru on Instagram)



This week's session by Astronomy on Tap dives into clusters of stars formed during the early stages of the universe