



## Pride and prejudice of Indian science awards

Hell, if I could explain it to the average person, it wouldn't have been worth the Nobel prize.

There has been a vehement battle (but not bloody brutal) debate on the honorific inference of the most prestigious award in science in India. It is merely a disagreement on trivial conception of whether the award is well known and popularised among the general public. The arguments are strictly based on personal biases. But I won the day—or so I think!

The storyline runs like this: Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar Prize for Science and Technology *used to be* the most prestigious award in science in India, but the prestige is now supplanted by the India Science Award. But popularity lingers for Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar Prize.

SSBPST (to make the story short) was launched in 1958 by the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), Government of India. It was christened after the founder-Director of CSIR, S.S. Bhatnagar, which was convenient, but excruciatingly inconvenient for its content of the amount of alphabets, in short, its length. It is given out every year to scientists of Indian blood who contributed significantly to original research in science. The prize is endowed with a citation, a plaque, and a cash award of ₹ 500,000. In addition the lucky winner receives an honorarium of ₹ 15,000 every month until he/she reaches 65. (After which one better opt for immediate but grateful death, unless you care to subsist in perpetual penury). Another irony is that the candidate must necessarily be below 45 years of age, and so far as my knowledge stretches, I know of no tribal, OBC or scheduled caste relaxation (you unfortunate bastards; and if you aged away from 45 but made an epic scientific discovery, you can curse on

your premature birth certificate for the rest of your wretched life). Furthermore the prize is split up into (1) Biological Sciences (2) Chemical Sciences (3) Earth, Atmosphere, Ocean and Planetary Sciences (4) Engineering Sciences (5) Mathematical Sciences (6) Medical Sciences (7) Physical Sciences. Further, and each discipline can have up to two winners (so the actual value is cut down to ₹ 250,000).

India Science Award was introduced in 2004 by the Indian Ministry of Science and Technology through Indian Science Congress. The prize is singly awarded, carrying ₹ 2,500,000, a citation and a gold medal. Only two persons – two Raos, C.N.R. Rao in 2004 and C.R. Rao in 2010 (not to be confused with each other) – have been deemed the awards. The rule allows the prize shared by two persons. There is no restriction on age, as long as one is a sentient being. The vision is to compete with Nobel Prize in terms of prestige. It may be because they want to maintain such a tight prestige that they could not find a deserving person for most of the time.

As one can deduce it is not always right to claim (as their press release always do) SSBPST **as the “most coveted” or most prestigious.** In terms of all criteria the India Science Award has surpassed it. Some would still grumble on the historical significance, but I say, the criteria and value are the points here. The Darwin Medal and Copley Medal are definitely superseded by Nobel prizes, and we do not claim the historical significance of these Royal Society awards.

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