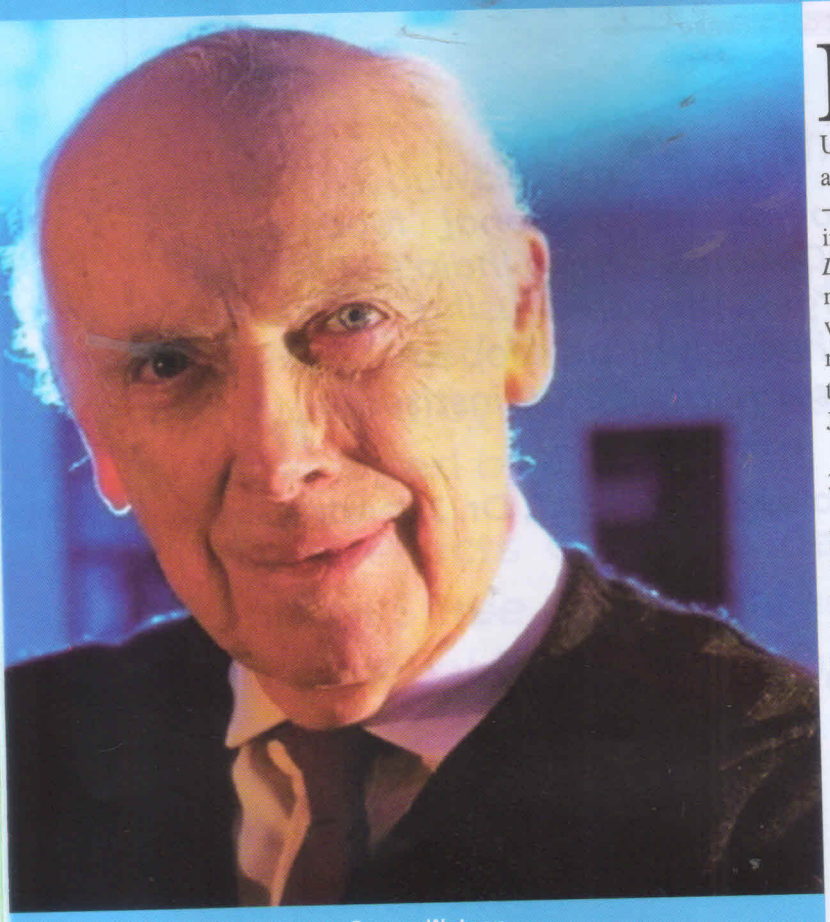
OBITUARY

The Co-Discoverer of the DNA Double-Helical Structure

Tushar Kanti Nath



James Dewey Watson
(6 April 1928 – 6 November 2025)

JD Watson and F Crick

IT was 1968 when an autobiography titled "*The Double Helix: A Personal Account of the Discovery of the Structure of DNA*" was published by Atheneum Press, USA and Weidenfeld & Nicolson, UK. The book was later adapted into a 107-minute television programme by the BBC — "Life Story", and also as "The Race for the Double Helix" in the US in 1987. In 1998, the Modern Library listed "*The Double Helix*" as number 7 among its list of the hundred best non-fiction books of the twentieth century. The autobiography was written by none other than the distinguished American molecular biologist, geneticist, zoologist, and, most notably, the co-discoverer of the double helical structure of DNA, James Dewey Watson.

JD Watson passed away at the age of 97 on 6 November 2025 in East Northport, New York.

Early Life and Education

Watson was born in Chicago, Illinois, on 6 April 1928. Watson was the only son of his parents, James D Watson, a businessman, and Jean Mitchell. Watson grew up in Chicago, where he attended Horace Mann Grammar School for eight years. Later, he entered the South Shore High School for two years. In the summer of 1943, after receiving a tuition scholarship, Watson enrolled in the experimental four-year college of the University of Chicago.

In his early days, he had a keen interest in bird watching, which later shifted to a sincere desire to study genetics after being inspired by Erwin Schrodinger's book "*What is Life*". To pursue his dream, in 1947, he earned a BSc degree in Zoology from Indiana University in Bloomington. He then completed his PhD degree on "The Effect of Hard X-rays on Bacteriophage Multiplication" under the supervision of Salvador E Luria, the Italian-born microbiologist at the Bacteriology Department, Indiana University, in 1950. During that period, he was greatly influenced by three renowned geneticists, namely, SE Luria, HJ Muller and TM Sonneborn.

The "Nobel" Work and his Journey

During the first postdoctoral year in Copenhagen from September 1950 to September 1951, as a Merck Fellow of the National Research Council, he worked with bacterial viruses, attempting to study the fate of the DNA of infecting virus particles. He met Maurice Wilkins and encountered the X-ray diffraction pattern of crystalline DNA for the first time during a symposium which was held at the Zoological Station in Naples. This experience greatly influenced him, which prompted a shift in his research toward the structural chemistry of nucleic acids and proteins. Fortunately, his research advisor, SE Luria, helped arrange for him to work at