

# Luminescent minds

A TOUCH OF GENIUS: THE WISDOM OF INDIA'S NOBEL LAUREATES  
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In his letter (dated January 22, 1914) to Harriet Moody, Rabindranath Tagore complained of the sudden attention bestowed upon him following the conferment of the Nobel prize in literature. "I am still suffering from Nobel prize notoriety and I do not know what nursing home there is where I can go and get rid of my latest and greatest trouble." His epistolary grievance also mourned the loss of his privacy following the award: "To deprive me of my seclusion is like shelling an oyster — the rude touch of the curious world is all over me — I am pining for the shade of obscurity." Tagore's moaning about loss of freedom is quite natural; as the first South Asian and non-European to be awarded the Nobel in any category in 1913, his achievement had spontaneously triggered unprecedented global adulation and attention. India's tryst with the Nobel prize in the following dec-

ades continued to generate awe and public attention among the masses — C.V. Raman (Physics, 1930); Har Gobind Khorana (Physiology or Medicine, 1968); Mother Teresa (Peace, 1979); Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar (Physics, 1983); Amartya Sen (Economics, 1998); Venkatraman Ramakrishnan (Chemistry, 2009); Kailash Satyarthi (Peace, 2014); Abhijit Banerjee (Economics, 2019). Akin to Tagore's reaction in 1913, almost a century later, reminiscing on his success as a Nobel laureate, the structural biologist, Venkatraman Ramakrishnan, mused in his memoir, *A Life of Science*: "Much was made of my prize in India, and I found myself the subject of an entire nation's celebration. I was taken aback by the flood of emails from complete strangers in India, and when they continued unabated for several days, I overreacted to what I felt was an intrusion on my ability to carry out my work." Beyond such overwhelming responses, the award served as a veritable source of inspiration for most Indians at home and abroad. In her Nobel lecture (delivered on December 11, 1979), Mother Teresa proclaimed: "Love begins



at home, and it is not how much we do, but how much love we put in the action we do." Along similar lines, Kailash Satyarthi issued a clarion call for the rehabilitation and the welfare of children in his acceptance speech (December 10, 2014): "Friends! There is no greater violence than to deny the dreams of our children." While advocating initiatives for a child-friendly world, Satyarthi

continued to tread in the footsteps of Amartya Sen who had judiciously used his prize money to set up the Prachi Trust to negotiate with the teething socio-economic maladies ailing the subcontinent: "When the Nobel award came my way, it also gave me an opportunity to do something immediate and practical about my old obsessions, including literacy, basic health care and gender equity, aimed spe-

cifically at India and Bangladesh." Such a miscellany of reflections and viewpoints abounds in *A Touch of Genius*, a remarkable compendium that brings together essays, stories, poems, lectures, songs and prayers of Indian Nobel awardees, thereby providing a unique collection for the readers. As the editor, Rudrangshu Mukherjee, affirms in his Introduction, "The prize

has become synonymous with greatness." Broadly divided into 10 sections — Memoir, Literature, Science, Economics, Religion and Philosophy, Aesthetics, Inequality and Injustice, Politics, India and, finally, the delivered Nobel lectures — each part is bound to sustain the reader's attention. The singular significance of this volume lies in its ability to accentuate the validity of some of the enduring ideals and universal values as perceived by some of the finest minds across multiple disciplines. The Nobel laureates, as clarified in the book, include Indian citizens, naturalised Indians, and erstwhile citizens of independent India, providing a remarkable medley of profound thought through the cogent insights of literature, religion, philosophy, politics, human rights, economics, and negotiations with various nascent socio-political challenges confronting an ever-evolving and complex modern world. Thus, Amartya Sen's "The Threats to Secular India" explores the various challenges confronting Indian secularism in the contemporary milieu. Yet, much beyond that, as

Mukherjee rightly emphasises, the nine Indian Nobel laureates assembled in the book tend to surpass the margins of their individual spheres as they "thought and wrote about subjects beyond their areas of specialization." In this sense, as Mukherjee stresses, "these individuals challenge the notion and practice of pigeonholing them by their disciplines." The physicist, Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar, thus concludes his Nobel lecture, "On Stars, Their Evolution and Their Stability" (delivered on December 8, 1983), correlating his pioneering theory with a deeper realisation of life: "The mathematical theory of black holes is a subject of immense complexity, but its study has convinced me of the basic truth of the ancient mottoes, The simple is the seal of the true and Beauty is the splendour of truth." *A Touch of Genius* is a treasured collector's item. It also serves as a stark reminder for ordinary Indians of the glorious legacy they have inherited and their responsibility to keep the quest for truth, justice and inclusive altruism thriving.

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