

'Turn off the spotlight please, I'm just a scientist'

The 2009 Nobel Prize for Chemistry may have turned him into a celebrity in India, but Venkatraman Ramakrishnan remains interested only in pure science rather than the sub-atomic particles of skitish fame in the 21st century. The microbiologist, who loves Carnatic music, insists young people must be entranced by science for the sake of science, rather than the febrile glitter of the Nobel Prize. Born in Cuddalore, Tamil Nadu, Ramakrishnan's parents were scientists. In a January 2010 lecture at the Indian Institute of Science, he revealed that he had tried—and failed—to enter the Indian Institute of Technology and the Christian Medical College, Vellore. In Chennai to attend last week's Indian Science Congress, the scientist from Cambridge University in the UK told Pushpa Narayan that science does not need the celebrity factor to shine. Excerpts:

You've been sounding exasperated about the reception you got at the Indian Science Congress. Why?

■ During my lecture at the Indian Science Con-

gress, I spoke about several things. I did not see any of those comments reported in the media. Instead, what was reported was what I told students after the session. Students wanted to take pictures with me and get autographs. I told them I was not a film star. Being attracted to a scientist is the wrong way to be attracted to science. Almost all papers published it. My lecture was ignored.

But you knew that Indians would continue to regard you as a celebrity. Why then did you agree to attend this event?

■ I love India. Media and mobbing can't stop me from coming here. But if this bothers me, I would ensure I keep my visits secret. The last time I came to the Indian Institute of Science, no one knew about it. It was a scientific meeting. There were no formalities. The director introduced me for just two minutes, and I went on to deliver my lecture. I think this is the best way to hold scientific sessions. No glitter, no glamour.

You have been getting this attention ever

since you were awarded the Nobel. Only a very few people attended your lectures (in India) before then. Do you think Indians appreciate science for what it is? Or are they shallow in believing that a western prize makes someone, somehow better?

■ Indian scientists have known me for many years now. They have always respected me. I have

FOR THE RECORD

VENKATRAMAN RAMAKRISHNAN

been speaking about my work on ribosomes (for which he won the Nobel) since early 2000. I have been a foreign member of the Indian National Science Congress since 2008. But for others who never knew me, I am suddenly a celebrity after the Nobel. What I am trying to explain is that there was a good chance I would not have got the Nobel. There are many scientists doing great work. Not all of them win the Nobel. I have to say, I was fabulously lucky to be where I am today. It's a

mistake to judge science by Nobel prizes. Students should take up science for the love of the subject.

Is it not an irony that you, a graduate student of physics who switched to postgraduate biology, won the Nobel for chemistry?

■ No. If you look at the list of Nobel laureates in chemistry, you will see that many are graduates in physics. Science has no watertight compartments. In fact, I can't claim to be an expert microbiologist.

You have said that science should not recognize and does not have national borders. Are you an idealist? Are you a dreamer a la John Lennon whose famous anthem for peace talked about a world without borders?

■ Yes. I am a dreamer. I guess you have to be one to be a scientist.

What do you think are the prospects for science and scientists like you in India? Do you think scientists can flourish in an Indian environment? Could you? Would you?

■ Science in India is now in a transition stage. Earlier, scientists had to wait for a long time to be funded for research.

Now, funding for science has improved a lot in India. There are now many excellent labs in my field in various parts of India. Today, there are many institutions of excellence, such as the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Pune. They look very promising. But it will take at least a decade for them to succeed in their endeavours.

