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The Nobel Prize: History, Categories, Selection and Indian Laureates

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The Nobel Prize: History, Categories, Selection and Indian Laureates

Every October, the world waits for a few phone calls from Sweden and Norway. Those calls tell scientists, writers and peacemakers that they have won the **Nobel Prize**. The prize began with one rich inventor's will. This lesson tells you how it works, who picks the winners, and which Indians have won it.



Alfred Nobel, the Swedish inventor whose will created the prizes. Photo: unknown author, Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

The Nobel Prize, at a glance

Four facts that clear up most exam questions

01
Will of 1895

Alfred Nobel signed it in Paris on 27 November 1895.

02
First given in 1901

Five prizes at first. Economics was added in 1968.

03
Oslo and Stockholm

Peace is given in Oslo. All the others are given in Stockholm.

04
Tagore was first

The first Indian laureate, for Literature in 1913.

Laureate A person or group that has won the prize.
Posthumous Given after a person has died.
Storting The parliament of Norway.
Nomination A formal proposal of a name for the prize.

Who was Alfred Nobel?

Alfred Nobel was a Swedish chemist, engineer and businessman. He made a huge fortune from explosives. Yet he is remembered today for a prize that honours peace and learning.

- He was born on **21 October 1833** in **Stockholm**, Sweden.

- He invented **dynamite** in 1866 and patented it in 1867 (NobelPrize.org).
- He held **355 patents** in his lifetime.
- In 1894 he bought **Bofors**, a Swedish iron and arms company.
- He died on **10 December 1896** in **Sanremo**, Italy.

A popular story says a French paper once printed his obituary by mistake. It called him a “merchant of death”. Some say this made him think about his legacy. The story is often told, but it cannot be proved. Exams test the facts in the list above, not this story.

> **Quick check 1.** Q1. True or False: Alfred Nobel was born in Oslo, Norway. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

What did his will say?

Nobel thought hard about what should happen to his money. On **27 November 1895**, he signed his last will at the Swedish-Norwegian Club in **Paris**.

- Most of his fortune was to be put into **safe securities**, forming a fund.
- The yearly income would go as prizes to those who gave the **“greatest benefit to humankind”**.
- The income was split into **five equal parts**: physics, chemistry, physiology or medicine, literature and peace.
- The will said the nationality of a candidate must **not** matter (Full text of the will).

To carry out the will, the **Nobel Foundation** was set up in 1900. It is a private body. It manages the money but does not choose the winners. The first prizes were given in **1901**.

> **Quick check 2.** Q2. True or False: Nobel's will named only five prizes, and economics was not one of them. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Who picks each prize?

Today there are six prizes. Five come from the will. The sixth came much later, from a bank. Each prize has its own judge. This table is a favourite of exam setters.

Prize	Who selects the winner	Where it is given
Physics	Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences	Stockholm

Prize	Who selects the winner	Where it is given
Chemistry	Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences	Stockholm
Physiology or Medicine	Nobel Assembly at Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm	Stockholm
Literature	Swedish Academy	Stockholm
Peace	Norwegian Nobel Committee (five people chosen by Norway's parliament)	Oslo
Economic Sciences	Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences	Stockholm

Why is the Peace Prize given in Norway?

The will itself said so. It gave the peace prize to a committee of five chosen by the **Storting**, Norway's parliament. So the Peace Prize is presented in **Oslo** (Wikipedia).

Is the economics prize a "real" Nobel?

- Its full name is the **Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel**.
- Sweden's central bank, the Riksbank, set it up in **1968**.
- The bank still pays for it. The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences picks the winners.
- The first winners, in 1969, were **Ragnar Frisch** and **Jan Tinbergen** (NobelPrize.org).

So it is not in Nobel's will. But it is handed out with the other prizes, under the same rules.

> **Quick check 3.** Q3. True or False: The Nobel Peace Prize winner is chosen by the Swedish Academy. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

What rules does it follow?

The prize has a few firm rules. Each one has turned into an exam question at some point.

- **Three at most:** one prize can be shared by up to three people.
- **Groups allowed for Peace:** the Peace Prize can also go to an organisation.
- **No self-nomination:** nobody can propose their own name.
- **Secret for 50 years:** nomination records stay sealed for **50 years** (NobelPrize.org).
- **No posthumous prizes since 1974:** a dead person cannot win, unless they die after the announcement. Ralph Steinman (Medicine, 2011) is the exception. He died before the announcement, but the Nobel Assembly did not know. The prize was kept.
- **Prize money:** for 2026 it is **SEK 12.0 million** per full prize (NobelPrize.org).

Before 1974, only two people won after death. They were **Dag Hammarskjöld** (Peace, 1961) and **Erik Axel Karlfeldt** (Literature, 1931).

> **Quick check 4.** Q4. True or False: A single Nobel Prize can be shared by a maximum of three people. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Which records do exams love?

Over 125 years, the prize has built up a set of famous records. These are the ones that keep coming back in exams (Nobel Prize facts).

- **Youngest:** Malala Yousafzai, Peace 2014, at age **17**.
- **Oldest:** John B. Goodenough, Chemistry 2019, at age **97**.
- **Two different sciences: Marie Curie**, Physics 1903 and Chemistry 1911.
- **Two unshared prizes:** Linus Pauling, Chemistry 1954 and Peace 1962. He is the only one.
- **Three wins:** the International Committee of the Red Cross, Peace 1917, 1944 and 1963.
- **Said no:** Jean-Paul Sartre (Literature 1964) and Le Duc Tho (Peace 1973) declined.

The very first Peace Prize, in 1901, went to **Henry Dunant**. He founded the Red Cross. He shared it with the French peace campaigner Frédéric Passy.

> **Quick check 5.** Q5. True or False: Marie Curie is the only person to have won two unshared Nobel Prizes. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Why did Gandhi never win?

Mahatma Gandhi is the world's best-known symbol of non-violence. Yet he never won the Peace Prize. He was not ignored, though.

- He was nominated in **1937, 1938, 1939, 1947** and **1948**.
- The last nomination came a few days before he was killed in January 1948.

- Later members of the Nobel Committee have said in public that they regret this.
- When the Dalai Lama won in 1989, the committee chair said it was partly a tribute to Gandhi (NobelPrize.org).

Which Indians have won it?

India’s Nobel story begins with a poet. It runs through physics, medicine, economics and peace. Keep the years in order. Exams often ask “who was first?”



Rabindranath Tagore in 1909, four years before his Nobel Prize. Photo: Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

Indian laureates, including awards received before Independence

- **1913, Literature: Rabindranath Tagore**. He was the first Indian and first non-European to win in literature. The prize is linked with *Gitanjali* (Song Offerings). The award was made during British rule, before Indian independence.
- **1930, Physics: C.V. Raman**, for his work on the scattering of light. The effect is named the **Raman effect**. This award, too, came during British rule, before Indian independence.
- **1979, Peace: Mother Teresa**, “for bringing help to suffering humanity”. She worked in Kolkata.
- **1998, Economics: Amartya Sen**, for his work on **welfare economics**.
- **2014, Peace: Kailash Satyarthi**, shared with Malala Yousafzai, for children’s rights (Wikipedia).

Indian-born or Indian-origin winners

- **1968, Medicine: Har Gobind Khorana**, for reading the genetic code. He was born in Raipur, Punjab, now in Pakistan.
- **1983, Physics: Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar**, for his work on how stars grow and die. He was born in Lahore.
- **2009, Chemistry: Venkatraman Ramakrishnan**, for studies of the **ribosome**.
- **2019, Economics: Abhijit Banerjee**, with Esther Duflo and Michael Kremer, for testing ways to fight poverty.

Other India links

- **Ronald Ross**, Medicine 1902, for his work on malaria. He was born in Almora.
- **Rudyard Kipling**, Literature 1907, was born in Bombay.

- The **14th Dalai Lama**, Peace 1989, lives in India (NobelPrize.org).

One more fact links Tagore to history. He gave up his British knighthood after the **Jallianwala Bagh massacre** of 1919.

> **Quick check 6.** Q6. True or False: C.V. Raman was the first Indian to win a Nobel Prize. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Who won in 2026?

Current Affairs

The 2026 prizes are being announced in October 2026. Medicine came first, on 5 October. Physics followed on 6 October. Chemistry came on 7 October. Literature came on 8 October. Peace came on 9 October. Economic Sciences came last, on 12 October.

- The **2026 Medicine prize** went to **Karl Deisseroth**, **Peter Hegemann** and **Georg Nagel**.
- They won for **light-gated ion channels and optogenetics**.
- Optogenetics lets scientists switch nerve cells on and off with light.
- The light switch is a protein called **channelrhodopsin**. It came from **Chlamydomonas**, a single-celled alga (Nobel press release).
- **2026 Physics: Francis Halzen**, a Belgian-American physicist at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. He won the prize alone.
- He won for **the IceCube Neutrino Observatory and the discovery of high-energy neutrinos from deep space** (NobelPrize.org).
- IceCube sits deep in the ice at the **South Pole**. It uses one cubic kilometre of ice fitted with light sensors.
- Neutrinos are tiny particles that pass through almost anything. A rare hit on an atom makes a flash of light, and the sensors catch it.

- **2026 Chemistry: Henri B. Kagan** of Université Paris-Sud, France, and **Kenso Soai** of the Tokyo University of Science, Japan.
- They won for **the discovery of non-linear effects and autocatalysis in asymmetric organic synthesis** (NobelPrize.org).
- Many molecules come in two mirror-image forms, like left and right hands. Chemists often need only one form.
- Their work showed how to make one mirror-image form in greater amounts than the other.
- **2026 Literature: Anne Carson**, a Canadian poet, essayist, translator and classicist. She won the prize alone.
- She won for **a bold and inventive body of work that plays with the classical tradition and creates new forms for modern literature** (NobelPrize.org).
- Carson has taught classics and comparative literature. Her writing often mixes poetry, essay and translation.
    - **2026 Peace: Navanethem "Navi" Pillay**, a South African jurist. She won the prize alone.
    - She won for **her efforts to promote peace and international law** (NobelPrize.org).
    - Pillay was the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights from 2008 to 2014. She also served as a judge at the International Criminal Court.
    - **2026 Economic Sciences: Robert E. Hall** and **Michael Woodford**.
    - They won for **microeconomic foundations of macroeconomic stabilisation** (NobelPrize.org).
    - They showed how to build economic models from the actions of households and firms. Older models relied on links between inflation, output and spending.

- This helps governments plan better policies to keep the economy steady.

Exam Angle

How have exams tested this?

Quick Q&A

When were the first Nobel Prizes given?

In 1901.

Which body picks the Literature prize?

The Swedish Academy.

Who was the first Indian Nobel laureate?

Rabindranath Tagore, Literature, 1913.

Who is the youngest Nobel laureate?

Malala Yousafzai, at 17, in 2014.

How long are nominations kept secret?

For 50 years.

Related Topics

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MCQ on the Nobel Prize

5 verified questions from this lesson.

More questions on Nobel laureates:

Practice MCQs

1. Match List I (Nobel Prize) with List II (body that selects the winner): A. Physics B. Literature C. Physiology or Medicine D. Peace1. Swedish Academy2. Norwegian Nobel Committee3. Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences4. Karolinska Institute

A. A-3, B-1, C-4, D-2

B. A-1, B-3, C-4, D-2

C. A-3, B-1, C-2, D-4

D. A-4, B-1, C-3, D-2

See answer ↓

2. Arrange these Indian Nobel laureates in the order in which they won, earliest first:1. Amartya Sen2. C.V. Raman3. Rabindranath Tagore4. Har Gobind Khorana

A. 2-3-4-1

B. 3-2-1-4

C. 3-2-4-1

D. 3-4-2-1

See answer ↓

3. Consider the following statements about the Nobel Prizes:

1. The prize in Economic Sciences was set up by Sweden's central bank in 1968.

2. All six prizes are presented in Stockholm.

3. Since 1974, a prize cannot be given to a person who has already died, unless death came after the announcement.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

A. 1 only

B. 1 and 3 only

C. 2 and 3 only

D. 1, 2 and 3

See answer ↓

4. Which one of the following is the odd one out?

A. Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar

B. Mahatma Gandhi

C. Venkatraman Ramakrishnan

D. Har Gobind Khorana

See answer ↓

5. The 2026 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine was given for optogenetics. The light-sensitive protein channelrhodopsin used in this method was first found in which organism?

A. A soil bacterium

B. A glowing jellyfish

C. A bread mould fungus

D. A single-celled alga

See answer ↓

6. Who was the first Indian to win a Nobel Prize?

A. C. V. Raman

B. Rabindranath Tagore

C. Mother Teresa

D. Amartya Sen

See answer ↓

7. What did C.V. Raman win the 1930 Nobel Prize in Physics for discovering?

A. The discovery of penicillin

B. The theory of relativity

C. The "Raman Effect," describing how light changes when it scatters through a substance

D. The structure of DNA

See answer ↓

8. What did Har Gobind Khorana win the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for?

A. Founding India's atomic energy programme

B. Work on the structure and evolution of stars

C. The discovery of the Raman Effect

D. Research on how genetic code directs protein synthesis

See answer ↓

9. India's Nobel laureate in Economics (1998), who argued development should be judged by real freedom and a person's ability to live the life they value, is known for which idea?

A. Trickle-down economics

B. Comparative advantage

C. The invisible hand

D. The capability approach

See answer ↓

10. Nobel Prizes (other than the Peace Prize) are distributed annually in which city?

A. New York

B. Stockholm

C. Geneva

D. Manila

See answer ↓

11. Ronald Ross, the 1902 Nobel laureate, was born in which Indian town?

A. Secunderabad

B. Calcutta

C. Almora

D. Shahjahanpur

See answer ↓

12. Abhijit Banerjee shared the 2019 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences with two other economists, for their experimental approach to alleviating global poverty. Who were they?

A. Raghuram Rajan and Michael Kremer

B. Esther Duflo and Paul Krugman

C. Esther Duflo and Michael Kremer

D. Amartya Sen and Jagdish Bhagwati

See answer ↓

13. Which North Vietnamese negotiator, with Henry Kissinger, won the 1973 Nobel Peace Prize but refused it?

A. Vo Nguyen Giap

B. Le Duc Tho

C. Pham Van Dong

D. Ho Chi Minh

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **A.** The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences picks Physics. The Swedish Academy picks Literature. The Karolinska Institute picks Medicine. A five-member committee chosen by Norway's parliament picks Peace. ↑ Q1
2. **C.** Tagore won Literature in 1913. Raman won Physics in 1930. Khorana won Medicine in 1968. Sen won Economics in 1998. ↑ Q2
3. **B.** Statements 1 and 3 are correct. The Riksbank set up the economics prize in 1968, and the 1974 rule bars posthumous awards. Statement 2 is wrong because the Peace Prize is presented in Oslo. ↑ Q3
4. **B.** Khorana, Ramakrishnan and Chandrasekhar all won Nobel Prizes. Gandhi was nominated five times for the Peace Prize but never won it. ↑ Q4
5. **D.** Channelrhodopsin came from Chlamydomonas, a single-celled alga that swims towards light. Deisseroth, Hegemann and Nagel shared the 2026 prize. ↑ Q5
6. **B.** Rabindranath Tagore won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913, becoming the first Indian and the first Asian to receive a Nobel Prize. ↑ Q6
7. **C.** C.V. Raman won the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1930. He discovered the "Raman Effect." This describes how light changes when it scatters through a substance. ↑ Q7
8. **D.** Har Gobind Khorana won the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine. His research was on how genetic code directs protein synthesis. This was a major contribution to molecular biology. ↑ Q8
9. **D.** Economist Amartya Sen argued that development should be judged not just by income or GDP growth, but by real freedom and capability -- a person's actual ability to live the life they value, including health, education, and dignity. This is called the capability approach. ↑ Q9
10. **B.** The Nobel Peace Prize, uniquely, is awarded in Oslo, Norway instead. ↑ Q10
11. **C.** Ronald Ross was born on 13 May 1857 in Almora, present-day Uttarakhand. ↑ Q11
12. **C.** Banerjee shared the 2019 Nobel Prize in Economics with Esther Duflo and Michael Kremer, announced on 14 October 2019. ↑ Q12
13. **B.** Kissinger and Le Duc Tho negotiated the Paris Peace Accords. Le Duc Tho declined the prize. ↑ Q13

Quick-check answers

1. **False.** ↑ 1
2. **True.** ↑ 2
3. **False.** ↑ 3
4. **True.** ↑ 4
5. **False.** ↑ 5
6. **False.** ↑ 6

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