

Allahabad physicist wins biggest prize money in academics

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Award thrice Nobel's size

THEORETICAL physicist Ashoke Sen, a string theorist at Allahabad's Harish-Chandra Research Institute, has become a crorepati overnight. On Tuesday, Prof. Sen became one of the nine winners of the first Yuri Milner Fundamental Physics Prize — at \$3 million (Rs 16.7 crore), the most lucrative academic prize in the world.

The prize, which is nearly three times that of the Nobel purse — which is frequently shared by two or three winners — has been instituted by Yuri Milner, a Russian student of physics who dropped out of graduate school in 1989 and later made billions as an investor in companies like Facebook and Groupon. It is aimed at recognizing contributions of younger researchers to fundamental physics.

Prof. Sen, who has just turned 56, confirmed that his \$3 million prize had been credited to his account, but said it was still too early for him to decide what to do with it. The physicist whose work is seen by most as revolutionary but questioned by some, said he did not consider the award as an endorsement of his findings.

"I am certainly very happy with this, but an award does not endorse any scientific theory... I see it (the award) more as a sort of entitlement... encouragement to

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... younger people to take interest in fundamental science," the professor told *The Indian Express* by phone.

"At the same time, I would like youngsters to take up science not for the glamour of an award, but for the joy and knowledge that it brings," he said.

Prof. Sen is a rare scientist who chose to return to India after post doctoral work at prestigious institutes abroad. He said he did not miss the rarefied peer group that often makes the pursuit of academics abroad enriching.

"When I came back in

1995... I did feel a little isolated, but that is no longer the case now. The Internet has made all possible information accessible, and in terms of a peer group I have a good academic circle among colleagues at the Harish-Chandra Research Institute," he said.

"Theoretical physics hardly requires any research funding, so I never felt the need. The overall government and institutional support has been good enough for my work."

Prof. Sen said he is optimistic about research in India.

"While one expects

many more scientists and more research work, I must add that there are several small pockets in the country where great research is being done, and which can replicate the success of scientists in other countries. We do, however, need to set up many more institutes in order to attract more students to science and to hone their talent," he said.

Sen studied at Kolkata's Presidency College and did a Master's at IIT Kanpur before attending the State University of New York, Stony Brook. He did post doctoral work at Fermilab, Batavia, and at SLAC,

Stanford. He returned to India in 1988 and joined the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research in Mumbai. He moved to Allahabad in 1995, and has been with Harish-Chandra Research Institute since.

Prof. Sen received the Padma Shri in 2001 and CSIR's Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar Prize in 1994. He was elected fellow of the Royal Society of London in 1998, and the Indian National Science Academy in 1995.

String theory, Sen's area of research, is described by MIT as being currently the most viable candidate for a

unified theory of physics which describes all forces of nature, encompassing the physics of gravity as well as quantum field theory.

The Moscow-based Milner Foundation said the Fundamental Physics Prize recognizes "transformative advances in the field", and aims to provide "recipient with more freedom and opportunity to pursue ever greater future accomplishments".

Seven of the eight other winners of the prize are based in the US: one at the Institut des Hautes Études Scientifiques outside Paris