India: Enough about Higgs, let's discuss the boson

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NEW DELHI (AP) -- While much of the world was celebrating the international cooperation that led to last week's breakthrough in identifying the existence of the Higgs boson particle, many in India were smarting over what they saw as a slight against one of their greatest scientists.

Media covering the story gave lots of credit to British physicist Peter Higgs for theorizing the elusive subatomic "God particle," but little was said about Satyendranath Bose, the Indian after whom the boson is named.

Despite the fact that Bose had little direct involvement in theorizing the Higgs boson itself, in India the lack of attention given to one of their own was seen as an insult too big to ignore.

"He is a forgotten hero," the government lamented in a lengthy statement, noting that Bose was never awarded a Nobel Prize though "at least 10 scientists have been awarded the Nobel" in the same field.

The annoyance marks yet another case in the ever-growing list of perceived global snubs Indians feel they suffer, from the U.S. airport searches of Bollywood star Shah Rukh Khan to the naming of a superbug after New Delhi, where it was found.

"Indians are touchy about this. All post-colonial societies are touchy about this," said political psychologist Ashis Nandy of the Delhi-based think tank Center for the Study of Developing Societies. "The sooner we get out of that, the better."

Nandy, who interviewed Bose before his death in 1974, said the scientist himself was "least concerned about rankings and prizes."

The boson is named in honor of the Kolkata-born scientist's work in the 1920s with Albert Einstein in defining one of two basic classes of subatomic particles. The work describes how photons can be considered particles as well as waves - such as in a laser beam. All particles that follow such behavior, including the Higgs boson, are called bosons.

Higgs, the English physicist, and others proposed the Higgs boson's existence in 1964 to explain what might give shape and size to all matter. Laymen and the media sometimes call it the "God particle" because its existence is key to understanding the early evolution of the universe.

By then, Bose was living in his Indian city of Kolkata after 25 years running the physics department at Dacca University, in what is now Bangladesh. Bose died aged

80 in 1974. The Nobel is not awarded posthumously.

Indian newspapers decried the fact that Bose was mostly ignored last week when scientists announced the Higgs boson breakthrough, made using a giant atom smasher at the European Organization for Nuclear Research in Switzerland.

Bose "remains unmentioned in most news stories about this discovery," read an opinion piece in the Hindustan Times written by Yale University professor Priyamvada Natarajan, who says Western scientists often gain credit for major discoveries.

"It is harder for scientists to be recognized if they are seen as outliers and if their gender, race or work do not let them belong," she said.

The Sunday Times of India noted other eminent Indian scientists who "never got their due," including physicist G.N. Ramachandran who died in 2001 after making biological discoveries like collagen's triple-helix structure and 3-D imaging used in studying the human body.

It also said living Indian scientists, Varanasi-based molecular biologist Lalji Singh and New York-based E. Premkumar Reddy, should be candidates for awards. Both men reportedly said they were not interested in lobbying for prizes.

"Many people in this country have been perplexed, and even annoyed, that the Indian half of the now-acknowledged `God particle' is being carried in lower case," The Economic Times wrote in an editorial Monday. What most don't realize is that the naming of all bosons after Bose "actually denotes greater importance."

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