

Why is NET necessary?

According to the recommendations of the Rastogi Committee, set up to study the eligibility criteria for the appointment of lecturers in universities all over India, the NET has become optional. There was always opposition to this criterion. The various state governments devised ways to bypass this criteria in the form of SET/SLET-like tests through an examination. Now that this qualification is made optional, PhD holders, who could not clear this test will be happy. But it will affect the appointment process badly and needs re-consideration.

The question arises what should be the criteria for the appointment of lecturers? A PhD degree as a minimum qualification for lecturership sounds

good. But we have instances where these degrees are got by unfair means and this has nothing to do with the general competence of the person concerned. People argue that a NET qualification need not necessarily mean a good teacher. PhD degree too has nothing to do with teaching competence. The NET at least showed the personal competence of those who qualified. In an age when there is stiff competition for every post, this noble job should not be left to fancies of the governing lots in various institutions. It is immaterial whether those who qualify NET are paid scholarship or not, the lecturership eligibility must be retained exclusively. This is the only way by which UGC can exercise some control over the appoint-

ment of lecturers in different universities. There may not be consensus over the type and pattern of examination, but some all-India level competitive exam is necessary to see that the appointees are compatible to some national level tests. If there is a need to change the pattern of this examination to reflect the candidate's teaching ability, it will be welcome. It is also advisable that a re-evaluation of the theses be made by a committee at the time of appointments.

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Proliferation of awards will lower the quality of our basic research

The editorial on 'Promoting Young Scientists' by P. Balaram (*Curr. Sci.*, 1999, 76, 1059-1060) touches the raw nerve of our scientific community, but without showing the wound visible on a closer look at the ground realities.

With rare exceptions, the lab environment today is such that when one is seriously preoccupied in research activity, not infrequently some others glibly ask, 'Busy working for a Nobel Prize?'. This sarcasm is reserved for such seniors who could, in principle, get the work done by their juniors or research students. That is, the comments are by and for the potential leaders of the scientific community. This is because most of us take to research as a 'job' and, therefore, do not normally feel either the pressure or the urge to work beyond office hours. The image is also consistent with the conclusion of Ashok Khosla (*Curr. Sci.*, 1999, 76, 1080-1086) on the reasons for our failure to place '... science at the service of the society'.

The unfortunate fact is that we have learnt not to believe that enthusiastic

hard work could be driven by intrinsic interest in the research problem at hand. More pertinently for this discussion, we would usually attribute some immediate gain to the 'hectic' activity such as participation in a symposium, or increasing the list of publications for a rise in the hierarchy and its associated perks like recommendation for an award and so on. The Nobel award in such comments serves to epitomize a benefit of a kind different from the normal ones which most scientists can get without working hard because the threshold of the level of quality for rejection by the peers is exceedingly low - a cursory glance at any symposium proceeding should convince anyone.

Indeed, the cynicism is much deeper. It is implicit that the awardee has some 'Godfather' or 'connection' up there. Rumours pave the way for controversies in newspapers, but spread more through loose talks. Invariably these detractions end up reasserting the unstated but deep faith in our inability to do good science as well as in the futility of efforts to

arrest the decline. In these private talks, usually, criticality is shunned in favour of juiciness.

Yet the cynicism is not totally unfounded. Going by the Science Citation Index (SCI), our contribution in the global context is poor. It clearly provides an objective basis for the skepticism about the true worth of the awards at least in basic sciences. There is a need to base awards on more transparent and objective grounds than what exist today. Perhaps objective assessment could be achieved by linking the awards to SCI at levels reasonably close to average for National awards in more dynamic scientific communities of the world. However, then there would be fewer winners. The gain, of course, would be enormous by way of return of the missing faith in their worth. But who will bell the cat? Unless the scientific community shows the will to accept the fall-out of the hard steps to be taken through a less flexible set of ethical codes in its routine transactions, the cleansing effort will necessarily end

up as yet another boot-strapping exercise.

An important aspect the editorial leaves out may place the role of awards in research activity in its proper perspective. The pleasure of research is primarily the excitement when the right solution flashes in the mind or gradually emerges through an arduous journey to a finale, punctuated often with failures. This act of creation accomplishes its own reward whose worth cannot be matched by any award. Unfortunately, our science education does not encourage readings which expose lives and minds of great scientists. No wonder that the best of our students consider receiving an award as the ultimate index of excellence. Only a lucky few may encounter a teacher or someone nearer who sensitizes them to the real source of pleasure that drove many scientists even to risk their lives or face social stigma, and not seek awards greedily as we tend to do.

Most present-day leaders of our scientific community grew up with an attitude towards awards that must be unlearned now if we are serious about the change. I quote from the twenty-two-year-old narration of V.S. Naipaul, now a classic, *India: A Wounded Civilization*. Since obviously, unless corrected, it will also be passed on to the next generation in a more entrenched state, I leave it to the reader to gauge the depth and the gravity of the chronic problem we are afflicted with:

'India grieved for the scientist Har Govind Khorana, who, as an American citizen, won a Nobel Prize in medicine for United States a few years ago. India invited him back and feted him; but what was most important about him was ignored. "We would do everything for Khorana," one of India's best journalists said, "except do him the honor of discussing his work". The work, the labour, the assessment of the labour: it

was somehow that would occur elsewhere, outside India.'

An award to a young researcher who is not kindled by the genuine spirit of enquiry could snow-ball for the rest of his/her career if it goes into his/her head; getting awards may become the only objective. With our penchant for politicking and manipulation, and with no effective checks from the mute scientific community, such efforts could succeed in spite of some half-hearted resistances until the practice is accepted by all – so that the only way of getting awards ultimately may be through the back door!

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Olive Ridleys in Orissa: Further comments

With reference to our article 'The Olive Ridley sea turtle (*Lepidochelys olivacea*) in Orissa: The urgent need for an intensive and integrated conservation programme' in *Current Science* (1998, 75, 1323–1328) we would like to make a few additional points and clarify certain issues that appear to have been misunderstood.

1. We are happy that, after a gap of two years, mass nesting (arribada) took place at Gahirmatha, the major mass nesting site in Orissa. Nesting took place primarily on a 2 km island that is a fragment of the island that broke away from the mainland in 1989 after a cyclonic storm. It is estimated that 210,000 to 250,000 turtles nested during the last week of March on the two islands, Nasi 1 and Nasi 2, mainly the latter. Nesting also occurred on the mainland beach and a new area near Barunei mouth, 30 km south of Gahirmatha, with 8000 turtles nesting in the second week of March and 20,000 turtles nesting on 21–22 April.

However, the mortality figures continued to be high (10,000 dead turtles

on the Orissa coast) despite the efforts of the Orissa Forest and Fisheries Department, Government of India and NGO initiatives such as Operation Kachhapa. The absence of mass nesting over the past two years may not be related to high turtle mortalities and therefore, the occurrence of mass nesting should not be taken as a sign that all is well with the turtle population. The changing geomorphology of the Gahirmatha coast may have rendered the beaches unsuitable for nesting. The islands (Nasi 1 and Nasi 2) on which the turtles currently nest are two fragments of the island (Ekakulanasi) that broke away from the mainland in 1989. A substantial proportion of nesting occurs on Nasi 2, the northern fragment, which this year has come into contact with the Outer Wheeler island, where the Defence Research and Development Organization (DRDO) has its missile testing range. Nasi 2 is only 2 km long and only 50–100 m wide throughout its length. The island is inundated during spring tide and a large proportion of the eggs are expected to be lost this year (at

the time of writing this piece, field personnel estimated the loss at 80% of the eggs due to inundation and erosion). It is possible that if this beach becomes completely unsuitable for nesting, the turtles will eventually be forced to nest elsewhere. However, if they continue to die at the rate of ten to twenty thousand turtles a year due to trawling mortalities, even this large population will soon become extinct.

The arribada gives us hope, but one should approach the conservation and management of the Orissa turtles with renewed vigour and implement the following measures:

- (i) Protection of coastline and offshore waters by monitoring and patrolling key breeding and nesting areas.
- (ii) Protected Area status for other nesting beaches at Barunei, Devi River Mouth and Rushikulya.
- (iii) Involvement of local fishermen in the conservation programme. We would like to reiterate here that the key to long-term conservation