

## What bugs the credibility of our awards?

The response of Vidyasagar<sup>1</sup> to the editorial on 'Promoting young scientists'<sup>2</sup> brings out a few significant mechanistic details on the award giving process in the international context. As an experienced committee member of award giving bodies also in India, he emphatically assures us that 'the level of intellectual honesty ... in Indian award giving committees is in no way inferior to ... (that) seen in the rest of the world', and fervently appeals to put an end to the conspiratorial theories. Though his opinion carries considerable weight and conviction, it is unlikely to cut ice in the Indian context for the following reason.

His assurance of the honesty of decisions in the final committee may not be in doubt and in fact may even be generally true of all such ultimate committees; but there is hardly anything in his response to inspire confidence that only the deserving cases, chosen by any given criterion, have been put up to them for selection. Notwithstanding his misplaced emphasis on apprehensions of possible litigations which amounts to assuming a sort of childish gullibility of Indian scientists, more significant even here is the *criterion of quality* compared to any other factor, the violation of which would arouse the sharpest resentment—and understandably so. Let us get that straightened out first. This is really the crux of the problem because the awardees usually do their work in more or less tightly bound teams; their contributions, therefore, are transparent to most members. Moreover, the selection of individuals at any of the multiple levels before the name of a contestant appears in the list forwarded to the final award giving committee may not always appear fair to those who witness the processes of elimination. It is in these transactions that the poisonous fangs of politicking and manipulations actually manifest, in one or more of those levels whose proceedings are relatively free from public scrutiny but accessible directly to some as a member of a committee, or indirectly through acquaintance with the committee members or the approving authorities.

It is essential that the fairness be assured at *every level*, not only in the

final committees. Admittedly, a blanket guarantee of absolute fairness cannot be given in any scientific community because of the unavoidable human failings in judgements. It is, however, possible to establish the confidence of the community that these human failings are accidental and not influenced by extraneous considerations. This can be ensured only if more of us resist the unfair decisions in committees and not look the other way to protect our selfish interests which may appear *obviously* unethical if the hidden or unrecorded reasons for doing so were made public.

As a deterrent to such unethical decisions, not necessarily confined only to the award giving process, it should be useful to make public such motives in the larger interest of maintaining the quality of the institutions, even if personal risks of career advancements are entailed. Mediocrity frequently asserts itself by transmitting disinformation in chorus, usually in private, to powers that matter. This is more likely to happen in relatively larger institutions where the executive heads may not have an easy and dependable means, or the time to personally get to the roots of the problems perpetuated by brute force of unenlightened attitudes from many, thereby affecting long-term performance of the institutions. It also militates against deriving benefits from the sincere and thoughtful suggestions of concerned sensitive members disagreeing with the majority opinion. Therefore, awardees from larger institutions, at times, may actually be less deserving than some left behind by such unintentional aberrations though, at other occasions, these could very well be intentional.

It is almost certain that most of the members of the final committee would normally have no idea about the elimination of better candidates, if any, at earlier levels from where the conspiratorial stories could also originate with some measure of legitimacy. Surely, members of such apex committees cannot be blamed for this ignorance on most occasions, because, it may not be humanly possible to keep track of what went on in earlier stages. Though Vidyasagar is silent on this issue, it is unlikely that he is unaware of such possible

lapses. Clearly, therefore, unless *many of us resist the unfairness in our own immediate microworlds* and also succeed in maintaining the ethical standards within reasonable limits against pressures to violate them which would naturally come from the beneficiaries of the currently eroded ethical codes that feed on and sustain mediocrity, the ultimate decision even if intrinsically fair will remain vulnerable to attacks, as though on a faceless enemy, by conspiratorial theories. This enemy, though faceless, is real enough to selectively strangulate excellence and, it is easy to see, this enemy thrives only on our own loyalty, at times perhaps unwittingly dispensed, towards its nefarious ends!

J. B. S. Haldane in his efforts to invigorate Indian science, was quick to see our cultural weakness in pursuit of science. Though not made in the specific context of the value of awards but on our incompetence in general nearly half a century ago, his observation is just as relevant today. In a very perceptive essay, 'What ails Indian science' reproduced in the 25 July issue of *Current Science*, he states<sup>3</sup>:

'The root cause of all this incompetence and worse is not far to seek. A large number of Indian scientists have no pride in their profession, though they are proud of their salaries and positions. The opposite issue is common in Europe, as it was in ancient India'.

Has anything really changed for the better in our attitude towards the profession in the meanwhile so as to expect that an award will not be considered a target for its glamour alone, like position and salary, to justify its proliferation?

1. Vidyasagar, M., *Curr. Sci.*, 1999, **76**, 1413-1415.
2. Balaram, P., *ibid*, 1999, **76**, 1059-1060.
3. Haldane, J. B. S., *ibid*, 1999, **77**, 305-307.

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