Gerontophobia, Ageing and Retirement

Gerontophobia is defined as the fear of growing old or a hatred of old people. The definition is curiously double-edged. It encompasses both the fears and self-doubt of individuals as they age; even more importantly it describes a sense of hostility that sometimes appears directed at an older generation, by a new and upcoming order. A recent letter in this journal (K. Subba Rao, Current Science, 2004, 87, 1029) draws attention to growing gerontophobia in our scientific institutions. In the correspondent’s perception the attitude of younger colleagues towards recently retired senior colleagues seemed to be characterized by ‘visible apathy’; although as I read the letter it seemed that ‘undisguised hostility’ may have been the phrase the author might have liked to use. But the letter raises many general questions on retirement from science, ageing and the ever-present tensions between generations. Retirement is a difficult proposition in most professions; in academia, professors and researchers find it almost inconceivable that they have reached a stage, where they may no longer be able to continue the work that has occupied them for decades. Unlike in many other occupations, in science practitioners follow their own instincts in research; most often becoming attached to trails of investigation, which others may not always find exciting. In some sense, scientists in academia are their own masters, much like artists and authors, who do as they please. There is, of course, an important difference; artists and authors earn a living determined by their talent, while academics lead a secure existence working under the umbrella of publicly (or privately, in some cases) funded institutions. In addition, the practice of scientific research is expensive, requiring substantial inputs, which invariably come from public resources. Academics are therefore employees of organizations, which are constrained to impose an age of retirement, which ensures the process of institutional renewal. But, it is hard to tear professors away from their surroundings. In institutions across the world, we have ‘emeritus’ academics who continue to come to their places of work, long after their names have been deleted from the payroll. Old professors, to borrow a phrase from an army ballad quoted famously by General Douglas MacArthur on his retirement, just ‘fade away’; at times, very slowly.

What should be the age of formal retirement? What facilities must be extended to productive and scholarly academics, who may enrich their surroundings and their disciplines with their work, even as they advance in years? What responsibilities must rest on those who seek to continue to maintain offices and laboratories in the institutions where they have spent their careers? These are difficult questions which confront administrators of academic institutions and heads of departments, who need to make judgements on senior colleagues. The mandatory retirement age for scientists and academics in India is presently 60 or 62 years; most centrally funded institutions follow the higher age limit. In Europe, the age of retirement varies from 65 to 67 years, while in the United States there is no formal requirement that compels academics to retire. The age of retirement was not a major issue when the average life expectancy was limited. Now, with the relentless advance of modern medicine, average life expectancies have risen dramatically. A 60 or 70-year old today is far fitter and more active than was the case half a century ago. Human populations are ageing worldwide, spectacularly so in the developed world. A visit to the website of the United States Census Bureau provides interesting pictorial projections of the age and sex distributions of populations in countries across the world, comparing data in 2000, with that expected in 2025 and 2050. The ‘population pyramids’, constructed with age represented along the vertical axis and population along the horizontal axis, are remarkably revealing. ‘Pyramids’ are visible in 2000 in most countries, but the change in shape seen in some developed countries, is predicted to be a worldwide phenomenon in coming years. Countries like Japan are ageing dramatically, as are the countries of Western Europe. The rate of ageing is very large in China too; and I suspect this would be the case in India, although the effects may be quite different depending on the nature of the population group. Much of the discussion on ‘retirement’ in the West centres on the wasteful practice of ‘putting out to pasture’, healthy, alert and competent individuals. Over the past few years many prominent European scientists, compelled to retire in their own countries, have moved to the United States, often setting up new and productive schools of research. The most vigorous researchers (often with Nobel prizes under their belts) have been enticed to the US, with the promise of laboratories and facilities for continued research. The ‘brain drain’ from Europe thus seems to have two compo-
ments; the young scientists drawn away at the start and the stars pulled away at the pinnacle of their careers.

The world of sport presents some of the most compelling moments of drama, where a remarkably successful individual ‘voluntarily’ retires, when the high standards of their own past performances, highlight the inevitable process of decline. The public demands on successful sportsmen are immense and we have often witnessed the agony of timing a retirement. But, in most professions, the standards of judgement are far more modest and expectations are almost non-existent. Retirement is not a consequence of the automatic decline of performance; rather it is an administrative deadline which is intended to ensure optimum (or in most cases, minimum) performance of organizations. Universities and other academic institutions in India must necessarily impose retirement ages; this is the only way that a new generation of academics, teachers and researchers, can be accommodated. Many of our institutions have also provided shelter for a large number of non-performing individuals, who sometimes even acquire a degree of administrative power. Retirement is the only escape route for the institutions. But the question raised by the correspondent in the columns of this journal really addresses a different issue: ‘Can we create an environment in our institutions where the most productive and scholarly members of our profession are allowed to continue to pursue their interests in a congenial atmosphere?’ The plea here is not to do away with retirement deadlines, but to ask if selective encouragement of scholarship is possible.

The causes for ‘gerontophobia’ in our institutions are not hard to see. Many retiring professors acquire the trappings of administrative power in the late stages of their careers. Often, their relationships with their younger colleagues are tense; competition for resources always favours those who wield authority. Academic judgements, and these are the most difficult, are the responsibility of those who are senior. In our surroundings, the credibility of these judgements is sometimes questionable. Not surprisingly, many senior academics end their careers in an environment where ‘gerontophobia’ is widespread. Retaining academics after retirement requires investments of space and funds for research, which most institutions cannot easily provide. But, sadly in many of our universities, large buildings are very sparsely populated, since hiring of new faculty has been extremely slow. One would imagine that encouraging continued scholarly activity by retiring faculty might contribute in some measure to keeping alive an academic tradition. The limited mobility of scientists, both old and young, has also contributed to the problems I have discussed. Retired scientists are invariably treated with a greater degree of congeniality when they move to another institution. The burdens of history are automatically erased. The temptation to be intrusive also disappears.

A possible approach to encouraging movement would be to make ‘emeritus scientist’ schemes especially attractive in terms of research grants, when a change of institution is made. The real difficulty we would face is to make academic judgements. It may be easier and less hazardous to identify promising ‘young scientists’ than to select productive ‘old scientists’. In India, scientific eminence, research ability and even more importantly, academic scholarship, are often seen to be attributes possessed by those who occupy administrative positions. Retiring administrators are thus, most often, the beneficiaries of schemes devised to encourage continued academic activity by productive scholars.

When I began writing this piece my intention was to quickly digress to the subject of ageing. Having used my quota of words on the more mundane subject of keeping retired professors active, it is appropriate to return to a more general theme. Ageing research has acquired a new importance and a great sense of urgency. A visit to the website of the journal Science, leads to a section titled ‘Science of Ageing Knowledge Environment (www.sageke.org). Ageing is one of the few certainties in life. For those who are victims of gerontophobia, there may be some consolation in the fact that a similar fate inevitably awaits their tormentors. No subject has attracted the romantic poets as much as ageing, with the possible exception of love. Two old favourites are worth recalling:

‘The glory and the freshness of a dream
It is not now as it hath been of yore;
Turn, wheresoe'er, I may,
By night or day,
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.’

— W. Wordsworth

‘Ode on Intimations of Immortality’

‘We are not now that strength, which in old days
Moves earth and heaven; that which we are, we are
One equal-temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.’

— A. Tennyson, ‘Ulysses’

Gerontophobia, in both senses of the word, must be banished.

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