

DOES SCRAPPING OF AWARDS SIGNAL MISPLACED PRIORITIES?

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Each year, September 26 is celebrated by the Indian Scientific Community as the birthday of Prof. Shanti Swaroop Bhatnagar, a stalwart of Indian science in the 1940s and 1950s and the founding head of CSIR. This is also a day when the government announces the yearly Bhatnagar Awards aimed at honouring the most outstanding researchers (under the age of 45) working in India. But this year was an exception. There was no announcement of award winners.

Instead, the government released a copy of minutes of a high-level meeting held the previous week. The minutes reveal that the government has resolved to scrap most of the existing awards, including those instituted through private endowment, and introduce a 'select few high-stature' awards instead.

The decision raises more questions than it answers. It still remains unclear what the rationale was for the sudden scrapping of most awards. One reason could be that the government is of the impression that the current awards are handed out in an unfair manner. It is undeniable that some of the past choices for some of these awards have been controversial.

While bias and prejudice cannot be ruled out, there is a strong notion that winning an award becomes easier when the potential awardee is a favourite of one or more members of the selection committee. But these supposedly bad choices have been only a few and most of the time, the current system of selection has undoubtedly rewarded excellence.

Since the minutes have not listed out the reasons, speculations about the government's motive are rife. It was thought that this cull is part of the overall austerity measure, in light of the economic downturn. But that seems unlikely as the total annual budget of all these cancelled awards is so small that it is less than rounding error in the Union Budget. Secondly, this order also shuts down all awards instituted through private endowments, for which the government was not spending anything.

Strangely, the order does not clarify what would happen to the said endowment if it is not used for giving those respective awards. Another oddity about this order is that all the ministries have been told to stop all 'non-core-domain' awards. Just for example, even though the department of atomic energy supports biological research like food irradiation and radiation therapy for cancer patients, it can no longer continue any awards outside its core domain of atomic energy.

It is no secret and certainly not a surprise that only a small fraction of the Indian scientific community align themselves with the questionable scientific agenda of the current government. Centralising all the awards is seen as one way of giving the government a greater control over the selection committees and reward scientists who are seen favourably by the government. This will help in raising the profile of such scientists, paving the way for their eventual elevation to the leadership positions in different research institutes and universities.

There is apprehension that social media activity of prominent scientists is being monitored and that the government has not taken kindly to the critical comments made about its scientific policies. Even before the pandemic, there were occasional instances of fellowships of young researchers getting delayed by 2-3 months. But since the last three years, an astonishingly large fraction of researchers have been experiencing delays. These delayed fellowships and grants

not only means that skilled researchers are just sitting in their labs without being able to procure necessary samples, chemicals or equipment but it also leads to a large number of PhD students quitting mid-way as they are unable to support their families.

Recently, the government issued another order asking researchers to open a new bank account for each new project and meeting all expenses of that project only through that specific account. This would not just lead to more unnecessary paperwork but would create comical situations such as placing multiple orders of the same chemical for the same lab, because it must be billed to multiple projects. Thankfully, after backlash, the government promised reconsideration. Few months back, the government raised the GST on purchase of scientific equipment from 5% to 18%, which has been playing havoc on the research budget of many institutions. The steep increase in the GST rate would mean that grants which have already been sanctioned would now be insufficient to procure equipment, unless topped up by extra funding.

International collaborations have been made almost impossible by mandating multiple permissions just to invite a foreign researcher to an institute or to sign an MoU with a foreign university. Anything which involves foreigners or foreign currency is viewed dimly and has to clear multiple hurdles, which hampers research. The whole procedure has become needlessly cumbersome.

It has been said that the government plans to replace all these awards with a 'few high-stature' awards, tentatively called Vigyan Ratna. Only time will tell if these new awards adequately cover the diversity in not just research disciplines but also in researchers themselves. More importantly, the scientific community would be keenly watching if the new awards are decided on quality of research or they become a vehicle to promote scientists who are favoured by the government.

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