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In Search Of Excellence

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Think of the names of the best-known scientists in India, and examine their resumes. Inevitably you find that, besides being great scientists and researchers, they were heads, directors or chairpersons of various committees, advisers to ministers/the prime minister, etc. It will be very hard to find a well-known scientist in India who did not become an administrator particularly in the past few decades. (In an exercise we did, a few PhD students were asked to list the Indian scientists whose names they knew and then check their CVs all 21 scientists listed had held significant administrative positions.)

Now let us look at the best researchers in the scientifically advanced countries. Of the 27 Nobel laureates in physics of the last 10 years, only seven hold any major administrative post.

This reflects a basic difference in how science and scientists are viewed in our society and how they view themselves, as compared to the situation in the scientifically advanced countries. We still remain a very hierarchy and title conscious society, where power and title are regarded more important goals than anything else (except money perhaps). When a scientist does good work and is recognised globally, the best way the government and the civic structures seem to reward the person is by giving an administrative title and role, so he becomes a 'big administrator' who will rub shoulders with the 'powers-that-be'. Not only is the thinking of administrators and government like this, this is the nature of thinking of scientists and academics also after an individual has achieved some name in science, he starts looking for 'elevation' as an administrator.

We do not seem to have reached a state of evolution in our scientific community where science and research can be ends in themselves, and not a means to a 'higher' end. To be fair, a good scientist or a researcher starts with intentions of doing great science/research. However, slowly after a decade or two, often he starts facing the 'what next' question. Rather than striving harder to reach a higher level in science and research, either due to complacency which over the years sets in as it is systematically encouraged, or due to lack of recognition or visibility as compared to administrators, or some other reason, remaining a scientist no longer seems sufficient. The senior scientist then starts aspiring for administrative positions with power.

This situation is not likely to change unless there is pride and satisfaction in being an academic or a researcher, and unless there are icons in society that are academics and researchers. In the last two decades, people like founders of companies such as Infosys have created new icons. This has put entrepreneurs and business people on a high pedestal you can see that they no longer feel 'below' the bureaucracy but treat them, and are treated as, equal (or sometimes even superior as they are rich).

Similar icons need to be created in academics scientists who are held in high esteem and are 'stars' not for the position they hold but for the science and academics they did and contributions they made to the furthering of science, research and education. And the way the government should support them is by giving them labs and grants, awards, monetary rewards, naming buildings, roads and the like after them, promoting them in national and global forums as icons, etc, and not merely by giving them administrative posts.

The management of scientific and academic institutions also needs to change. They have to imbibe the value system where an administrator feels pride in what scientists and academics have done rather than what he as an individual has achieved. And instead of feeling dwarfed by the fame of a scientist working 'under' him, an administrator ought to see that as a sign of his doing a good job that should be rewarded.

Unless we reach a stage where the stars are the scientists, and the administrators are understood to be good only to the extent they provide support to create such stars, we should not hope for much excellence. Excellence in research cannot be achieved by half-hearted commitment to the pursuit of knowledge. We must develop a value system where a star scientist wishes to remain a scientist and is respected and admired for the science and research he does.

It should, however, be added that a scientific establishment, if it is to achieve any levels of excellence, must be headed by a scientist/academic of decent calibre who understands excellence and what is needed for it. Putting an average scientist/academic or a bureaucrat in charge can be a recipe for disaster, as such a person is likely to surround himself with average people ("An A hires an A, but a B hires a C"). But the administrator must support the value system in which he is mostly a facilitator for getting good science and research done. The limelight rightfully belongs to the brilliant scientists and researchers doing excellent work.

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