

CORRESPONDENCE

industrial and land development sectors. Although various government agencies and NGOs have done environmental impact assessments, details on the survival threats facing local fauna and flora are not available. In spite of this, local NGOs and security forces have locked into a debate recently, when the state asked for clearance from the Centre (Ministry of Environment and Forests) to build a road through the Kachchh Desert Wildlife Sanctuary⁵. Although the road may run over some patchy territories displacing the spiny-tails (Figure 1) along the Harappan site of Dholavira, the flamingos that breed in the Great Rann managed to get some conservation attention. Conservationists argue that

the proposed road will destabilize the breeding grounds of thousands of flamingos and chase them away. But proponents from the Government maintain that the road is critical for the Border Security Force to better access to its last outpost – the hotspot of the 1965 war between India and Pakistan. The Indian wildlife conservation efforts have a history of promoting only ‘glamorous’ wildlife^{6,7}, and so the threats facing the often ignored spiny-tailed lizards in the Kachchh frontier may sadly go unnoticed.

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NET: in-built conflict

The University Grants Commission (UGC) and the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), New Delhi biannually conduct a combined National Eligibility Test (NET) for postgraduate (PG) students in order to award the Junior Research Fellowship (JRF), and eligibility for lectureship (LS) or assistant professorship in universities and colleges. It has been observed that the first preference of meritorious and desiring PG students is to clear the examination so that their academic liaison remains uninterrupted and they become independent with a sizeable fellowship available for a maximum of five years. A limited number of candidates succeed in NET, which entitles them for LS. The CSIR test clubs several distinct but interdisciplinary subjects in one packet and overall five packets cover the entire science domain. The case is vastly different from UGC that conducts the test in 94 subjects related to humanities, commerce and languages, and allied subjects. The GATE exam also awards fellowship in 22 engineering and engineering-related science subjects.

NET has had a chequered history since its inception; on and off NET qualification is made compulsory or optional for academic positions. It is observed that there is a general paucity of NET-qualified

candidates. To overcome the shortage of NET candidates, the higher education regulating authority, the UGC, allowed states to conduct their own tests, popularly known as the State Level Eligibility Test (SLET) or State Eligibility Test (SET). UGC also frequently considered, in a time window, higher degree holders (MPhil/PhD) for academic jobs without NET qualification; and at present with a rider that in-job NET clearance.

Time and again relaxation in basic eligibility condition of NET raises doubts about its importance. This is a multidimensional problem. Frequent relaxation in induction qualification implies that policy makers are unable to grasp the ground situation created by the voluminous syllabus which is exceedingly heavy in comparison to top competitive exams. It is also beyond the capacity of an above-average PG student. One fails to understand what purpose does this syllabus serve. Neither teaching nor research standards have increased after introduction of NET. Allowing SLET/PhD/MPhil in itself is a confession that NET is difficult to crack and softer options are needed for vacant positions. No reasonable answers are available for the following questions: Why are examinations not conducted subject-wise? What purpose does an option-less examination

serve? Why does a candidate have to appear only in one paper? Why are superficially related subjects clubbed together? Is the purpose of NET to promote interdisciplinary research? Are our universities allowing a student of mathematics to register in botany? Why are the states allowed to conduct their own examination? Why is an equivalent job of scientist position available in national laboratories on the PhD qualification? Why do NET papers include research-related questions whose answers are not available in standard textbooks?

The science NET exam has to be candidate supportive. The first step towards this would be to have two papers (subject-wise exam). The best way to attract talent in higher academics is by offering opportunities within a few months after the PG examinations. There is no doubt that we need talented and research-oriented candidates in the higher education set-up. Talent is not always reflected by marks; it is the sum of knowledge, intelligence, hard work, commitment and passion for academic work.

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