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EDITORIAL

Discrimination

Discrimination is a bad word. Discrimination is politically incorrect. Discrimination is a word that is invariably associated with prejudiced judgements based on caste, colour, religion or nationality. But, the dictionary tells us that 'discrimination' also means the process of 'distinguishing accurately'.

In everyday life, we constantly exercise our judgements and discriminate between good and bad; although in many situations decisions are rendered difficult when the choices are not clearly in black and white, but assume indeterminate shades of grey. How important is discrimination in the conduct of science and the management of institutions? The ability to discriminate between good science and bad, performers and non-performers is undoubtedly critical to the health of any organization.

In academic science, the American universities have evolved a system that has served them well. Tenure, or the promise of a permanent position, on a university's faculty is achieved only after demonstrated performance in research, teaching and, in many fields, the ability to generate resources. This process places the newest recruits, in the most prestigious places, under extraordinary pressure to perform at their very best in the first few years of their academic careers. The American system affords the facility of movement, both within academia and to government and industry, for those who do not achieve tenure at their initial places of appointment. The 'bar' on tenure decisions is raised as we move up the totem pole of academic institutions. The top ranked universities have the luxury of not only recruiting the most promising faculty, but also the even greater privilege of exercising tenure judgements, based not on promise but on performance. It is this ability to make judgements, the luxury of 'discrimination', that has provided the American academic system with the means of ensuring that high standards are maintained at the best of institutions.

The concept of 'tenure' is, of course, alien in our midst. The best of our institutions, the Tata Institute of

Fundamental Research and the Indian Institute of Science among them, offer initial faculty appointments on 'contract'; but there are almost no instances of contracts not being renewed – the equivalent of not being granted tenure. In most institutions, the initial appointments are to 'permanent' positions (the mandatory 'probationary periods', merely an historical artifact), conjuring up visions of a comfortable sinecure that stretches all the way up to the age of retirement. Permanence is a prize attribute of jobs; the government bureaucracy and the public sector providing the gold standard of job security, irrespective of performance. But, academia is not far behind. In these days of privatization, more people are attracted to jobs in companies, which apparently lack the guaranteed permanence of government employment; but the uncertainties are offset by higher salaries, better perquisites and sometimes even greater job satisfaction. The problem of 'permanence' is that at all levels there are no mechanisms in place to ensure that performance is a condition for continuation.

Almost all our academic institutions, research laboratories and university research departments are populated by four categories of individuals. There are the scientists or faculty, administrative staff who man the offices, 'supporting staff', who range from the technically skilled to the completely unskilled and research students and associates. Of these, only the last group are truly 'temporary'; indeed, they are birds of passage, spending a few years working towards a research degree or gaining research experience. Much, if not all, of the research output can be traced directly to this constantly changing and renewable work force. Permanence confers on all the other categories, the privilege of never having to worry about job security. While, in principle, this is a very desirable state there are no mechanisms to goad the shirkers into working. Promotional avenues are limited and overwhelming importance is given to the length of service. Indeed, even when promotions are withheld, the action is hardly more than a minor rap on the knuckles; efflux of time will guarantee elevation to the next level

in the hierarchy. The 'Peter principle', presumably based on Western organizations, tells us that everyone rises to their level of incompetence; in our institutions sometimes, neither competence nor willingness to work is an important determinant in influencing the upward mobility of a career. Interestingly, some of our better endowed 'autonomous' institutions have moved to a system of contracting out routine tasks like cleaning and security to private agencies; a strategy which permits essential jobs to be carried out, without having to deal with a recalcitrant, 'permanent' work force. This device does not appear feasible at all levels of staff in scientific institutions. Faced with the unshakeable permanence of employees, institutions have assessments as the sole weapon in motivating their staff towards a higher level of performance. We can, of course, ignore as exceptions the 'creamy layer' of the academic community, who may be driven to work by internal desires. For a substantial number, institutional ambience determines the quantum of work output. Given the constraints of our institutional systems, one cannot but help wondering whether we should be more 'discriminating'. Can we not evolve a system, which at least makes an honest attempt to make distinctions between performers and non-performers? Is it necessary that egalitarianism should be carried to an extreme, within the confines of academia? Have we completely abdicated the exercise of judgement at all levels simply to avoid even the semblance of unpleasantness?

Any move towards changing the culture of performance evaluations would be most credible if it were to start at the top. Unfortunately, in India heads of institu-

tions, agencies, departments and academics, who have reached a professorial rank are never assessed. This is, of course, true of other fields of activity also. Salaries are a great leveller; the hallmark of a government institution is that pay packets are completely unrelated to performance. There is, often, no correlation between the status of the position held and the quality of the work produced. While there appear to be some yardsticks by which academic performance may be judged, there seems to be no easy way of evaluating administrative competence. Retirements appear to be the sole mechanism for organizational renewal; with no facility for selectively retaining the efficient and productive workers.

This inability to introduce the fine filter of 'discrimination' at the workplace, may be contrasted with the high resolution discrimination on which our school, college and entrance examination systems are based. Here, thousands of students are evaluated in diverse subjects and fractional marks are used to 'discriminate'. However imperfect this may be, there are really no other viable mechanisms to cope with the numbers involved at this level. We have lived comfortably with this procedure, which sifts good performers from poor performers and provides an absolute ranking system, despite all its pitfalls. Unfortunately, at the workplace we cannot have an impersonal evaluation system; subjective judgements must necessarily be exercised. If our public institutions are to move to a higher level of performance, we must improve our ability to discriminate.

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