

# CURRENT SCIENCE

Volume 82 Number 7

10 April 2002

## EDITORIAL

### Retirements and extensions

In a terse and typically, obscurely worded notification, the Government of India recently armed itself with the power to extend the age of retirement of scientists to 64 years. The operative clause states: 'Provided also that an eminent scientist of international stature may be granted extension of service up to the age of 64 years, if such extension is in the public interest and the grounds for such extension are recorded in writing'. Clearly, if the gazette notice of 27 February 2002 is to be literally interpreted, there must be a confluence of scientific eminence, international acclaim and public interest in the case of those individuals on whom the government bestows its munificence. A few years ago in the aftermath of the Fifth Pay Commission the retirement age for academics in many national institutions was raised by two years to 62, although some major scientific organizations like the Department of Atomic Energy have yet to follow suit. A few Central Universities have had an internally accepted procedure to 're-employ' their faculty up to the age of 65 years; an age also adopted by several prestigious national laboratories, set up under the peculiar device of a 'registered society', as the age of formal retirement for scientists, who direct these institutions. But, the vast majority of scientists and academics who work for government, autonomous institutions and universities retire at the age of 60 or 62. The government's, apparently unprovoked, initiative raises several questions. Indeed, the sensitive problems of retirement itself may be considered in the light of some broad issues. How should retirement ages be determined? Is uniformity desirable or is it important to retain wide discretionary limits? Is mandatory retirement desirable in an era of enhanced life expectancy and improved health standards?

Retirement marks a particularly difficult transition in life. Oliver Goldsmith eulogized retirement 'as friend to life's decline', but he also portrayed an idyllic, pastoral setting, which offered a retreat from a life of hard labour:

'How happy he who crowns in shades like these,  
A youth of labour with an age of ease;  
Who quits a world where strong temptations try,  
And, since 'tis hard to combat, learns to fly!'

*(The Deserted Village)*

In the modern world, retirement for many means to be cut adrift from one's moorings, to float uncomfortably in an unfamiliar setting, as age takes its toll. The transition can be painful for those who have developed few outside interests; wrenching for those who have become accustomed to the perquisites of administrative power; devastating for scientists suddenly cut off from their research, which sometimes transforms unobtrusively from a professional activity to an impossibly, addictive hobby. In the West, retirement ages have generally been higher than in India, with scientists in Europe holding formal appointments till the mid to late 60s. In the US the retirement age for University faculty was 70 until 1994, when Federal laws prohibiting mandatory retirement on the basis of age, came into force. Since then, US universities have wrestled with the problems that have arisen once the age of retirement became a matter of personal choice. With the abolition of the 'retirement age', universities have had to re-examine their tenure policies to introduce mandatory review for senior faculty and to enhance the attractiveness of retirement packages.

Given the conditions prevailing in India, mandatory retirement from government employment must be seen as an absolute necessity. Retirement, undoubtedly, is a critically important parameter for institutional renewal. Since the concept of a 'permanent job' is inextricably associated with government employment, no mechanisms exist within academic institutions for easing out non-performers. Retirement, indeed, is the only way out for jettisoning deadwood and transferring salary burdens to the task of recruiting fresh entrants, who offer hope for a better future. Within the cloistered precincts of academia, many professors have productive research programs and laboratories that still attract students, as they approach retirement. Quite often, many academics establish independent careers almost on the verge of middle age and appear to have got set to play a good innings, just as retirement approaches. In the world of academia, most professors do not just pack up their bags and go home on the day of retirement. They, in fact, go about their normal business, much as though nothing has changed; gradually fading, as the loss of official status slowly erodes the functioning of their laboratories. Emeritus appointments

and sponsored research projects keep the flame flickering, but official retirement for most scientists, marks the end of a research career. It sometimes seems a shame to put out to pasture, individuals whose scholarship is undeniable; to lose teachers, whose talents can hardly be replaced. But, age does take its toll. Few individuals manage to maintain a high level of scientific productivity as they approach the age of retirement. Indeed, true academicians, with limited managerial skills, do poorly as they age; they do not successfully build large groups, with a structured chain of command, which can camouflage the slow decline of individual performance, behind a facade of collective activity.

Many institutions in India also face a fresh problem, as retirements begin to outstrip recruitments in several areas of science and engineering. The uneven rate of recruitment over a long period of time, partly the result of lethargy and administrative inaction in many organizations, has left departments top heavy, with the prospect of bunched retirements in the future. The loss of experienced teachers for many specialized courses in institutions offering advanced degrees is a matter of concern. Faced with these problems, institutions may, in the future, have to turn to devices like re-employment, extensions and recruitment of retired professionals on short-term contracts. But, at present the 'extension of service' seems aimed selectively at an important breed of scientists in India – the science administrators. Disturbingly, in government circles there is an almost complete lack of appreciation for the ground realities of the practice of science in laboratories; the administrators of science appear to be vested with an 'academic eminence', which has little to do with continuing scholarly achievement. The consensus appears to be that generalist administrators may be more important to furthering the development of science, than specialist researchers, who work unobtrusively, but successfully in their laboratories.

Indeed, the best way for senior scientists to extend their careers appears to be to laterally transfer themselves into positions of administrative authority. Strangely, the label of 'irreplaceability' rests more comfortably on administrators than on scientists with specialized skills. Over the last few years support for emeritus scientist schemes has been diminishing, with the Indian National Science Academy downsizing and modifying its programs, that cater substantially to its fellowship, which presumably includes many of our most active scientists. In this context, the new spectacle of the extension of service to 'eminent scientists of international stature' is intriguing. This appears to be, clearly and unabashedly, a move to further perpetuate the notion that extensions of service for high-level managers of science are critically important in 'the public interest'. Unsurprisingly, even in the best of our scientific institutions the occupants of administrative positions are often associated with an aura of generally, exaggerated scientific eminence. If science in India is struggling it is not for lack of administrators; rather we need to maintain and enhance the pool of productive scientists by vigorously promoting recruitment and by introducing new, innovative schemes to tap the potential of retiring scientists. Enhancing inter-institutional mobility and removing administrative bottlenecks in making short-term contract appointments may facilitate continuation of active researchers. Unfortunately and unavoidably, it is administrators who rule the roost. In the true traditions of bureaucracy, even science administrators have learnt to feather their own nests; public interest and self-interest merge seamlessly. Louis XV of France, in the run-up to the French Revolution said famously: 'Après moi le deluge' (translated crudely, 'after me the flood'). This is surely a sentiment to which most of our administrators of science, subscribe.

P. Balaram