Teachers' retirement age

This refers to a recent news item regarding the Central Government's proposal to raise the retirement age of central university teachers to 65 years with an option of extension up to 70 years (*The Hindu*, 23 September 2006, p. 3). I was *shocked* to learn about the ill-conceived proposal and the arguments to support it. The Finance Ministry, indeed, is *not happy* at the proposal.

The argument behind the proposal is that seats in different courses are to be increased in view of the OBC reservation, which in turn would need more teachers. That is true! The Human Resource Ministry argues that increasing retirement age will help to resolve the immediate need of more teachers. Common sense says that more students mean more teachers and that does not mean increasing the retirement age of existing teachers, but recruiting more hands.

We must therefore take two steps: first, fill the existing vacant teaching posts, and second, take steps to increase their number. It is indeed understandable that in the meantime, till these things could be done, retired and retiring teachers could be asked and allowed to continue. These steps would also solve, albeit partly, the unemployment faced by qualified people waiting in line for academic jobs. This would also encourage good students to take up a university career, which has become less attractive these days particularly to science students.

To argue that increasing retirement age is the solution is against common sense. It has the serious implication of blocking the entry of newer and younger people to the university faculty. If the senior people continue to occupy posts for longer time, how can they be helped? Whereas opportunities were abundant during the fifties and the sixties (higher education expansion period) and one could get a lectureship in an academic institution at about 25 years of age and could obtain professorship by mid-thirties, young candidates of today have often to wait till 35 to get the first entry to these places. This is because newer positions are rarely being created now, many times posts are kept vacant for a long time, and older people are still occupying the existing posts.

The argument that by enhancing the retirement age we can take advantage of the experience of retiring/retired teachers does not carry weight. A person's commitment, skill and efficiency in respect of an assignment do not necessarily grow with so-called experience. Often, experience and other things saturate. During my university stay, I had noticed that there were instances in which individuals continued in employment despite their being in the grip of physical and/or mental ailments. Ironically no one wants to take a formal notice of such things for humanitarian (?) reasons.

If mere experience is really valuable then there should not be any retirement at all, not only in universities but also in other departments of activity. Some of us would say that some American universities do not define a retirement age and that in UK and elsewhere it is 65. We must remember that ours is a country with entirely different social, cultural, academic and economic conditions and that we cannot cite these examples simply because that suits us.

The said proposal would have serious ramifications also. Why not increase the retirement age of teachers of state universities and other institutions? What is so sacrosanct with the central universities? The proposal would also create conditions for similar demands from employees of other sectors. The 'experience' argument would be equally applicable to them!

One should not ignore the fact that retiring university teachers are mostly professors or senior readers taking less teaching load than their junior colleagues, lecturers. Very often a lecturer teaches as much as two professors together. Appointing new and young candidates is thus more economic and offers encouragement to prospective future candidates.

The said proposal can only satisfy the insatiable desire of my academic colleagues to stay lifelong in universities. I would definitely praise their doing research or getting involved in teaching for more and more years. The universities may need to extend them certain facilities. What I strongly object to is their ambition to stay in *formal employment*. Even after retirement enthusiastic teachers can offer themselves to voluntary teaching activity. That would be a good contribution to the society. In my reckoning, their financial condition is good enough to afford such voluntary work.

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High elevation springs – who owns them?

The Himalayan regions and the Western Ghats of the Indian Peninsula are dotted with innumerable springs, many of which are utilized for community water supply. But, water from most of these springs either flow unnoticed or is used by private parties for irrigation and/or drinking purposes. Most of these private parties are big landlords or hotel owners in hill stations who can afford the cost of pipelines connecting the spring sources and the supply locations. Because there is no law that deprives people from using any spring they like to once these springs occur in the forestland, there is no control on the ownership of springs. Government by far is the owner, and the users know it, but then when the Government officials or the local public agencies examine such springs for the purpose of public use, they tend to overlook the illegality of such unauthorized uses of springs mostly on humanitarian grounds. They then look for some other springs that may not possibly have the same potential as the springs tapped in an unauthorized manner. It is thus recommended that parties that use a spring in Government's land must seek permission from the Government for the same and/or sign a bond

with the local Government or public authority that whenever there is a requirement to tap these springs for public use, they may not resist it and give way to its authorized tapping.

It must, however, be remembered that springs sustain thousands of life forms including plants and trees vital to a balanced eco-system, and rampant uses of these springs would seriously affect the environment. Also, the seeping spring waters augment the ground water recharge of the lower aquifers to support the life of the existing springs issuing from these aquifers. Depending on their locations, these springs at lower elevations are either utilized by the local inhabitants for drinking/irrigation purposes or flow downhill to join the mainstream and continue through the hydrological cycle. Therefore, whether for public or private use, while tapping a spring, a trade-off must be made considering the local needs and downstream users. Emphasizing only on local human needs may lead to severe intercommunity conflict and negative environmental consequences.

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Pharma research for tropical diseases

The discovery and development of new medicines for tropical diseases has the handicap that the need for affordable medicines makes it difficult to recover the high investments in research and development (R&D). This makes a case for doing such R&D in countries such as India, where the costs of developing new medicines may be two or three times lower than in Europe or the USA, while the gestation times may be longer. The recent change in the patent law in India (January 2005) has created an environment that is conducive for increased investments in drug discovery and the protection of Intellectual Property.

In this regard, it was of interest for me to write to five pharma companies and enquire of their interest in setting up pharma R&D centres for tropical diseases in countries such as India. Based on the responses I received it appeared that the following course of action is appropriate. If the turnover of the Indian pharma industry is taxed at 0.5 to 1%, this would generate sufficient funds to finance pharma research for two or three tropical diseases on a long-term basis. Other countries, such as China, South Africa, Brazil, Mexico, Argentina and Israel could adopt a similar approach. This would create a global critical mass of at least 2000 scientists in pharma research for tropical diseases, to ensure that new medicines for such diseases are discovered well in time.

Past experience in the global pharma industry has shown that about 200 scientists and a time period of about 10 years are required to generate one new medicine, for any indication (disease). Phrased differently, the success rates in clinical R&D are usually below 20%, while the same is true for pre-clinical R&D for reasons which have been elaborated elsewhere by others.

This was proposed to the Government of India in July 2005. It is good to know that the CSIR is setting up a new drug discovery centre at a cost of Rs 1.90 billion (US$ 45 million). Hopefully, similar plans are in place or in practice in the other countries mentioned above.

This will ensure that pharma research for tropical diseases receives the needed support and that new medicines for such diseases are discovered and developed well in time. Presumably, this will also lead to increased investments in basic research which is essential for successful pharma research in tropical diseases.

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The century of mind

A debate on the need and relevance of Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) in India has raised many interesting, pertinent and also some pointless questions. The all-pervasive effect of IPR cannot be belittled in this era of global permissiveness. R. A. Mashelkar, the passionate champion of intellectual property in India, acknowledges the significance of innovation in production and knowledge creation, and christens this era as 'the century of mind'. He has noted 'The breathtaking speed at which science is moving is not only shaping our present, but also going to dominate our future. A nation's ability to convert knowledge into wealth and social good through the process of innovation is going to determine its future'.

Every member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) has to unconditionally sign the much debated, but little understood Agreement on Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs). India is now on the verge of a Knowledge Revolution, given the sudden surge in unearthing the country's traditional/indigenous knowledge. This, along with the presence of Multi National Corporations (MNCs) and their intellectual property (IP) registration fervour, has pushed India on a precarious and catch-22 position on IP – whether positive exploitation has to be made or defensive protection should be given is the question.

The economics involved in any form of IP exploitation or knowledge mana-