

Career choice: a virtue out of necessity?

In any gathering of senior science academics, a frequent complaint is that students these days are no longer motivated to take up science courses or pursue careers in research and teaching. This is followed by further laments about how the youth are largely lured by money and have veered away from the ideals of nation building, which inspired the earlier generation (meaning us) to join careers like teaching, research or defence. This is not something new or specific to our generation. In my career as a university teacher, I have participated and occasionally contributed to such discussions for the past 40 odd years. At times I have cringed at the level of hypocrisy to which these discussions can degenerate into.

With full honesty, one can only discuss one's own motivations for a career choice. In the fifties and sixties when I was going to school and college, there were several factors in the general social milieu of the urban middle class, which influenced our career choice. First, the country was young in independence, and hence there was a lot of talk in radio, newspapers and in speeches of prominent leaders about how science, technology and medicine were the keys to our development. Few people had college degrees and still fewer had science degrees. Though becoming a doctor or an engineer was the ultimate goal for the young, there was a lot of glamour in becoming a scientist or a science professor at the university. For example, in our large extended family only one person had occupied the position of a professor, and the respect given to him was lot more than to doctors or advocates. I do not believe that we were very different from others around us. The economic level of the middle class was far lower than these days and there was a great sense of insecurity. Unemployment was high and in general jobs for the educated class were scarce. The government was the biggest provider of jobs. People looked for jobs that were secure and government jobs were certainly the coveted ones. For me, who was good at studies and had little aptitude for medicine or engineering, do-

ing science seemed a good option from a very practical point of view. Moreover, it offered a chance to go abroad, for which my engineering and IAS friends envied me. I might add that the understanding of science acquired in school hardly inculcated much love for science for real reasons. One should also realize that in the social milieu of those times, the overt desire for money was looked down upon. People had little to spare from their daily necessities and any ostentatious behaviour was discouraged, as it put social pressure on others.

This is not to suggest that the other young people around me felt the same way about science. Some may have been driven by more idealistic goals. Sadly for a vast majority such choices were not available. But surely in general, people made career choices that gave them the best prospects for money and prestige, and which were commensurate with their education, family circumstances and prevailing social values in their strata. Now we can think about what has changed in the past 40 years. The same middle class is financially better and more educated. There are a lot more jobs outside the government and economic security is not such an overwhelming concern. Coveting money is no longer looked down upon. Even the exhortations to sacrifice for the nation have become a little muted. In this higher level of education, even a Ph D degree has lost its earlier aura. With the opening of so many other avenues, teaching or research jobs do not command the same respect and monetary rewards as many other professions available to an educated person. How does a young person decide her or his career? Like earlier generations, today's youth also search for the best among the options available to them consistent with today's social values. Even if a young idealistic boy toys with the idea of becoming a scientist, his parents and family are likely to dissuade him from doing so. How many children of university teachers or research scientists take on careers of their parents as their first choice? Can we blame this on the decline of idealism among the youth? I believe that the

ideals of a generation are very much a product of times and they have played and continue to play a big role in our decisions. Talking to young people, I get the clear impression, that the love for science is very much there, but clearly it needs more nurturing and encouragement.

Of course things continue to be far from rosy for most of our countrymen. A college education and a career in science mean a lot to a huge section of society. One can see the changes in the composition of science classes in the universities. More students come from small towns and families of modest means. While children from the erstwhile middle class have options of more lucrative careers, there are many more for whom science offers the best their circumstances allow for. I believe that there is no dearth of talent available for science, but it is mainly a matter of providing training and opportunities to a vast untapped potential.

I do not want to play down the genuine concern of academics and the society in general, that the academic careers are unattractive. For example, a research scholar takes around eight to ten more years before she or he can earn as decently as in other professions. So certainly there is a paramount need to make the careers in basic sciences comparatively gainful. In recent years, the government has taken a number of initiatives to promote science education and research. Many new science institutes, IITs and central universities are being started and many older technical institutes are being upgraded. Though the discussed views might represent one end of the spectrum, the planning of new initiatives certainly calls for an honest assessment of the situation. One hopes that all this would raise the reach and accessibility of science to a wider section of people.

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