

## Honorarium for Bhatnagar Awardees and Fellows

The purpose of this letter is to question the wisdom of the recently introduced policy of paying an honorarium of Rs 15,000 pm, up to the age of superannuation, to those who have either been awarded the Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar Prize or are Fellows of at least two of the four national science and engineering academies of India (INSA, IASc, NASc and INAE). It has also been remarked by some that such Prizes and Fellowships do not always go to the most deserving. There has been some discussion on these matters in recent issues of *Current Science*<sup>1-4</sup>.

Focussing first on the Bhatnagar Prize, luck (such as in one particular subject or in one particular year, the number of deserving candidates may be fewer than usual, making it easier for someone to get an award), the ability to network effectively and working in a fashionable area of research play a role not infrequently. In some cases, the difference between someone who wins an award and someone who does not may be insignificant and very subjective. In view of all this, it seems rather unfair that someone could reap an enormous financial benefit of, say, Rs 36 lakhs (calculating the honorarium for a period of 20 years from winning the Bhatnagar prize at the age of

45 years up to a superannuation age of 65 years) over and above the prize money of Rs 5 lakhs, while someone else with comparable achievements misses it completely. This could vitiate the cordial atmosphere among colleagues and cause a lot of bickering.

The Academy Fellowships also have a tacit age limit and suffer from similar drawbacks. The main difference is that more people are selected by the Academies each year than those awarded the Bhatnagar Prize. In spite of the larger numbers, many deserving candidates with poor networking have been neglected in the past. It also seems strange that the honorarium would continue to be paid even if the concerned person completely stops doing any productive work, whereas no such honorarium is paid to persons who may continue to be highly active in research even after superannuation. Finally, it should be noted that in this age, scientific achievement is always due to the contributions of a group of people rather than a single individual, and rewarding individuals with huge sums of money is thus not appropriate.

We would therefore submit that the government should stop this honorarium and instead consider more equitable ways

of rewarding highly successful scientists and engineers. For instance, such people could be given large research grants with fewer constraints through a fast track so that their entire research groups may benefit. There should be no upper or lower age limits for awarding such grants, and the work done using such grants should be periodically reviewed. One can surely think of many reasonable ways of encouraging high quality research without giving long-term personal rewards for work done over a period of about 10–15 years. Therefore, paying an honorarium to individuals seems to be a particularly ham-handed way of recognizing scientific merit.

1. Rao, K. R., *Curr. Sci.*, 2008, **95**, 1510.
2. Saidapur, S. K., *Curr. Sci.*, 2009, **97**, 467–468.
3. Desiraju, G. R., *Curr. Sci.*, 2009, **97**, 980.
4. Tripathi, Y. B., *Curr. Sci.*, 2009, **97**, 1273.

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## Need for more science academies?

Among the national science academies in India, the National Academy of Agriculture Sciences (NAAS) established in 1990 is the youngest. Since the Indian Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Sciences and Indian National Science Academy, established much earlier served various disciplines of science, a need was felt to focus on agriculture and the large number of agricultural scientists. The NAAS has clear objectives to cover distinct areas like crop sciences (CS), horticulture sciences (HS), animal sciences (AS), fishery sciences (FS), national resource management (NRM), plant protection (PP), agriculture engineering and technology (AET), social sciences (SS) and frontier sciences (FrS). NAAS can be credited with bringing out

policy papers from time to time related to the national agriculture scenario, organizing National Agriculture Science Congress, discussions on topics of current interest, publication of newsletter and awarding the Academy fellowships to meritorious scientists. A glance at the activities of NAAS reveals that it has been serving the cause of agriculture most satisfactorily and recognizing the scientists fairly well, although not balanced with fellowships.

As on 1 January 2009, the NAAS had 482 fellows ([www.naasindia.org/fellowships.html](http://www.naasindia.org/fellowships.html)), with an annual addition of 22 fellows, spread over the nine areas mentioned above. CS garnered the highest number of 128 fellows (26.5%), followed by NRM with 110 (22.8%),

whereas HS had only 21 fellows (4.3%), the lowest. The selection of fellows in PP (78) and AS (48) was better than in SS (34) and FS (24). A majority of the NAAS fellows are from 93 research institutes and 4 deemed universities under the Indian Council of Agriculture Research (ICAR), and 42 state agriculture universities (SAUs), spread all over the country. The most glaring imbalance is evident in HS with just 21 fellows (none selected in 2009), since the inception of the NAAS in 1990, that is just over one fellow per year. This is despite the fact that there are 22 research institutes under the Horticulture division of ICAR and almost all the SAUs, except the veterinary universities, have a Department of Horticulture, with principal/

senior scientists and professors with several years of experience on a variety of horticultural crops. This implies that the number of eminent scientists in Horticulture Science did not get due recognition with required qualification for the Fellowships.

A cursory look at the list of Fellows in HS reveals that most of them are from vegetable sciences, fruit sciences, and floriculture but none from plantation crop sector, which has about 10 institutes both under the ICAR and commodity boards like tea, coffee and rubber, some of them over 60–80 years old. It is just impossible that the NAAS could not identify eminent scientists in plantation crops which is part of HS. Similar to many crop scientists who were selected for the NAAS

Fellowships, good number of scientists in plantation crops have also served in the national and international committees.

A critical examination of the areas of NAAS indicates that the scientists who work in crop science institutes with specialization in plant breeding, plant genetic resources, plant physiology and biochemistry, seed technology seem to get the benefit of selection for the NAAS Fellowships, so also those in plant protection – entomology, pathology, nematology and microbiology. Horticulture institutes under the ICAR are multidisciplinary with all the above specializations with hundreds of scientists working for decades, but ignored during fellowship selection. Thus, a blatant injustice to them is evident from NAAS's own data

on the lowest number of fellows in HS. That the eminent horticulturists as the Deputy Director Generals of ICAR during the last decade and above could not improve the situation is rather unusual and bad to the scientists who worked under them.

To be fair to the scientists in HS, it may be necessary to establish a separate academy, namely the National Academy of Horticulture Sciences (NAHS) to ensure proper recognition to the scientists.

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## Teachers and honorarium

'Teachers and Teaching' is a thought-provoking editorial<sup>1</sup> and hopefully law makers will take the contents seriously. I fully accept the fact that teachers are generally less paid and finding committed teachers has become a tough task. However, this fact may not be true for institutes like IITs, IISc, NISERs and IISERs. The teaching faculty at these premier institutes get high salaries with flexi foreign tours as exchange programmes and visits while making decent per diem at least 2 months in a year which amounts to couple of months additional salary. The comment that 'researchers have received many hastily conceived sops' which I would say is being abused by the teaching faculty of these national teaching institutes. If one looks at the statistics of Bhatnagar awardees and fellows of academies, it appears that unfair practices have been adopted by these teachers to select the awardees. The exclusive research laboratories (CSIR, DST, ICMR, etc.) have always been treated by these teachers as

second line research institutes. The Bhatnagar award includes Rs 5 lakh cash prize and another 20 years of Rs 15,000 per month cash incentive. When we consider this as the most prestigious award, why this age limit of 45? We all know that awards are given as recognition and encouragement to perform better. Can any national academy of our country look into the statistics of previous Bhatnagar awardees and fellows of academies performance after the award or fellowship is bestowed? I am sure the statistics will reveal a shocking post-award syndrome. Before scientific corruption reaches its peak, I suggest the monthly cash incentive for fellows and Bhatnagar awardees should be abolished and that money should be used for smaller universities where teaching is done with more passion. Also, there should be a senior Bhatnagar Award for scientists of about 50 years age and Bhatnagar Lifetime Award for 60-year-old scientists so that the pressure on scientists will be distributed and there is a reward for every age

group. Also, the age limit of fellow of academies should be fixed at 60 or 65 as there is no reason to recognize researchers beyond retirement. If we can create a reward/award system for best teachers without politicizing it and distribute it fairly across the country without restricting to few pockets (as in the case of the Bhatnagar award and fellows of the academies which are restricted to the elite IITs and IISc) and incentives are handsome; naturally, the so called 'political' scientist teachers will become true teachers.

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1. Balaram, P., *Curr. Sci.*, 2009, **97**, 609–610.

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