

# Freezing of science awards: Curtains down on research?



**T. V. Venkateswaran, science writer. For contact: [tvv123@gmail.com](mailto:tvv123@gmail.com)**

The union government has recently come up with a new set of science awards called 'Rashtriya Vigyan Puraskar', revamping its award policy. This move has fuelled a controversy, drawing flak from the community of scientists. Adding an insult to injury, the union government has also prohibited scientists from accepting other awards, without prior approval, than the government awards.

## **An end to prestigious awards**

The union government has frozen around 400 science awards. Among them are four national awards, 97 private foundation awards, 54 research scholarship awards, 207 awards covering 56 sectors given by the Department of Science and Technology, 38 awards given by the Department of Atomic Energy, three awards given to each division of the space research sector, four awards by the Geoscience Department, eight national awards in the medical field and nine private trust awards. Besides, the government has also suspended the awards given to science researches. As a result,

prestigious awards such as PC Ray Award, Ambedkar Award, Subhash Mukherjee Award, Anna Mani Award and so on have been abolished.

Here afterwards the Rashtriya Vigyan Puraskar award will be given in 13 fields including physics, chemistry, medicine, engineering and space science. Moreover, the union government has also announced new awards: Vignan Ratna for lifetime achievement, Vignan Sree for achievement in science sector, Vignan Yuva Shanti Swaroop Bhatnagar award for researchers under 45 years of age to encourage young scientists and Vignan Team award for collaborative research.

The union government has abolished the existing awards and in their place announced the new set of awards. The reasons it has cited for its move are lack of transparency in the selection process, financial burden, and the diminishing value of the existing awards.

### **Benefits of awards**

The Copley Medal award given by the Royal Society of England to Stephen Gray in 1731 for his research on electrical conduction is considered as the first award in modern science. Researcher Robert K Merton says that just as the trophy is an inspiring goal in sports competitions, science researchers are motivated by the recognition and awards given based on the evaluation of fellow researchers.

Ching Jin, Yifang Ma, and Brian Uzzi, who had analyzed 11,000 science awards given around the world, published their research results in the scientific journal 'Nature' in 2021. According to this study, the awards themselves stimulate scientific development more than the funds allocated for the purpose and in the first 5-10 years, the awardees publish 40 per cent more research papers and their research receives 33 per cent more attention. The benefits of awards do not just go to the laureates. The award-winning segment of scientific research grows at 40 per cent additional speed. The students of the awardees carry out outstanding research. It is also worth noting that this study shows the prize money component of awards is not that important. That is, it can be understood that several awards, though with lesser monetary entitlements, are more likely to stimulate scientific development than awards with large monetary endowments.

In these circumstances, it is unfortunate that the committee formed by the officers under the Union Home Ministry has arbitrarily abolished the existing awards without taking into account such studies as mentioned above.

## **The other side of awards**

Of course, there is no gainsaying that science awards, as prevailing in all fields, have some unsavory tendencies. Many times research is done collaboratively, but only a few are awarded. Awards have the potential of sparking a competitive envy in organizations. More and more prizes are showered on famous people only. We all know the 'Matilda effect' according to which the women, the oppressed and the marginalized, who are involved in science research, do not get the attention they deserve from the award committees.

There is also a danger of people having a misconception that only the research, which gets the prestigious prizes such as the Nobel Prize, is deep and meritorious. Moreover, since the award-winning research is remembered, additional funds may be allocated to only a few specific studies having award potential, leaving essential researches unfocussed.

It is important to correct such negative effects of awards. In particular, social justice perspective is needed in distribution of science awards as well. Scientific organizations around the world have realized the need for awards and accolades that encourage multiple categories of researchers from different regions of the world, economic cultural backgrounds, gender, and young researchers. That is why various reforms such as proper representation are made in the award selection committees.

But reducing the number of awards, centralizing the national selection and having a single committee select all awards will not be proper solutions to the awards issue.

## **Government's duty**

"Multiple selection committees select people with diverse mindsets for awards. Considering that some of them are critics of the government's policies, there is an attempt to give awards through a centralized selection system in future to the scientists who will toe the line of the current government in policies and programs," says Professor Rajamanickam, former secretary, All-India People's Science Organization.

Also, the scientific community suspects that the purpose of the union government's initiative is to remove awards like P.C. Ray Memorial Award associated with liberation movements and replace them with awards having the names such as Vyasar, Dhanvantri, Patanjali and so on.

The American Physical Society alone presents 78 awards worth \$4,70,500 annually. Compared to that, the number of prizes and awards given annually by the Indian institutes of science is very meager. In the circumstances, the union government's decision to freeze awards may hamper the development of science in India as it restricts the independent functioning of science institutes. Various biases should be eliminated and efforts made to make awards widespread.

It is only when multiple organizations give out multiple awards for various research endeavors that several sections of the society receive prizes and appreciation. The government will do well to keep this in mind.

**Translated by V. Mariappan.**