

Paying the Professoriate: Trends and Issues in India

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“We never had it so good!” was the exclamation one heard when the new pay scales were announced in mid-2008, to be implemented with retrospective effect from January 2006. With arrears of salaries for almost 30 months and a sudden rise in salaries by 40 to 60 percent, teachers in higher education institutions went laughing to their banks. The steep hike in professoriate’s payment was intended to veer potential candidates to academic positions—in view of the competing demands for talent in the knowledge economy, occasioned by globalization. Simultaneously, to tone up the quality of the profession, requirements for both recruitment and career advancement within it have been redefined, since 2009. But are these sufficient to address the crisis confronting higher education in a burgeoning knowledge economy?

COMPLEX SYSTEM AND HETEROGENEOUS PROFESSORIATE

Higher education in India is not only large (the third-largest in the world) but also varied and complex. There are different types of higher education institutions and differences in what the professoriate gets by way of salary and perquisites. While academics working in the federal government-funded

institutions have the best-pay package and service conditions, those employed in unaided private colleges have the worst; those in the state government-funded institutions fall in between these two.

The Indian professoriate is also heterogeneous; there are different types of teaching positions, depending upon the duration of employment and the privileges that go with them. The most coveted is the permanent (tenured) teaching position in a public-funded university or college. Permanent positions are nonexistent in purely private universities and colleges; appointment to teaching positions in these institutions is contractual in nature. As different from these two are the part-time teachers who are paid on an hourly basis and do not obtain other employment benefits.

THE PAY REVISION HIGHLIGHTS

While revising the salary and service conditions of teachers in higher education, the University Grants Commission standardized the qualifications of various categories of teachers, procedures for recruiting them, requirements for and process of their career advancement, and salaries and nonsalary benefits to which they are entitled. A three-tier academic hierarchy—professor, associate professor, and assistant professor—has been instituted in public-funded higher education institutions. To maintain quality of higher education, qualifications for appointment to various teaching positions have been prescribed. Those entering the academic profession (assistant professors) must now qualify in the National Eligibility Test; for appointments to higher academic positions (associate professor and full professor), besides a PhD, which is a mandatory qualification, the candidates must have teaching/research experience and publications to their

credit. Academic performance will now be evaluated through a scoring system (Performance Based Appraisal System). The purely private universities and colleges, however, are outside the ambit of the University Grants Commission and have greater flexibility in all matters concerning the hiring and firing of teachers.

Conventionally, the Indian professoriate has been pyramidal in structure, with fewer positions at the top and a broad base. To improve the opportunities of teachers for moving up in the career ladder and as an incentive to performance, a six-stage Career Advancement Scheme has been introduced. This scheme is well-defined and more rigorous than similar other earlier schemes. Given past experience, it will be surprising if this scheme, too, does not get ritualized.

EARNINGS: COMPONENTS AND COMPARISON

In all public-funded institutions, teachers are entitled to receive an annual increase of 3 percent in their basic payment. There is, however, no scope for negotiation in salary matters.

Teachers' nonsalary benefits are all as per the government provisions: pension and gratuity; a variety of paid leave, including fully paid vacation leave for eight weeks in a year and subsidies for vacationing; medical leave and medical assistance both for teachers and their dependents are some of such benefits. Besides, women teachers get fully paid maternity leave (one year) and child-care leave (two years), during their career.

Over the decades, the gap in salaries between academic and other professions has narrowed considerably. Nevertheless, professionals in the management, information technology and biotechnology sectors and well-

established advocates, doctors, and chartered accountants earn much more than teachers. However, in India, as regards teachers' salary, the general comparison is with that of the bureaucrats; and the salaries of these two are now more or less comparable. The professoriate is now well ensconced in the middle class, has greater purchasing power, and leads better lifestyle than ever before.

MERITOCRACY AND PROTECTIVE DISCRIMINATION

Merit is emphasized in recruitment to academic positions, in public-funded institutions; but nepotism, favoritism, and corruption in selections are not unknown. Selections are often challenged in courts of law, more so after the enactment of Right to Information Act.

In conformity with the policy of protective discrimination (a sort of affirmative action) public-funded higher education institutions are required to reserve about 50 percent of such positions for candidates, hailing from indigent sections of the population—officially termed “Scheduled Castes,” “Scheduled Tribes,” and “Other Backward Classes.” In public debates, this is criticized as undermining merit, but justified in the name of social justice.

PROSPECTS

The changes in the procedures for recruitment of teachers, their pay scales and service conditions, their performance appraisal and career advancement, and other factors are bold and forward looking; but, they are not applicable to purely private institutions and to part-time teachers. Moreover, the growing faculty shortage, which is estimated to be about 54 percent, is not likely to be answered in the near future. Only institutions offering the best of remunerations and

service conditions can expect to maintain the best of teaching talents. Thus, the prospects for state universities and grant-in-aid colleges, which constitute the largest segment of the higher education system in the country, do not appear to be bright.