Pay commission will 'degrade' IIT faculty

As faculty members of the Indian Institutes of Technology across the country go on leave to protest against the Indian government's Sixth Pay Commission, Aditya Mittal gives an insider's analysis of what these recommendations could mean.

In the history of independent India, one among the countable few bastions fiercely guarding against corruption and a dip in societal values is the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) system. Many feel that the IITs are not great because of their faculty, but because of the system that chooses students for India's scientific Oxbridge — the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE).

But who is behind these JEEs? From setting the question paper to conducting the exam and compiling the results to admitting the best students through comprehensive counseling procedures, it is an out and out 'show' of the IIT faculty. In fact, it would be difficult to find a single faculty member in the IITs who hasn't ever been involved in a JEE.

The hallmarks of the JEE system are its unparallel timeline-bound, organised approach envisioned and executed by a faculty that maintains its top-of-the-line research credentials but has never expected any reserved entry into the IIT system for their own children by the virtue of their services. It is the faculty of IIT that provides integrity to the IIT system that is exemplary on a global level.

The government can never pay what an IIT faculty deserves. In fact, one can't expect the government to pay what an IIT faculty deserves. It is considered a privilege to teach and do research at the IITs. Not for the money but for the work ethos created and maintained by its faculty - present and past. People come to work at an IIT because of the dignity associated with the hallowed institution. And they work tirelessly at the IITs believing it is a place that nurtures the mantra of 'being the best at whatever you do, no matter what you do.' This is evident in the success of its alumni, as well as in the success of the faculty in competing with the most specialised research laboratories across the globe despite the time and resource crunch it is always faced with.

However, the government is expected to maintain the dignity of the IIT system. A system that is built solely by its faculty and the environment they create for themselves in its glorious campuses.

Surprisingly, the sixth pay commission's treatment to the IITs simply reflects a sorry state of affairs of the Indian system. It demonstrates the failure of a country to deal with excellence. The commission has brought pay-packets of entry level IIT faculty at par with (or below) bureaucratic positions. It has also clubbed them with groups of recruits in other systems who most often do not qualify to enter the IIT system as PhD students. This simply reflects the poor mindset of our society that is unable to give excellence its due.

In giving its verdict, the Union Human Resource Development ministry has ignored the recommendations of the Goverdhan Mehta committee report which had recommended a hike in pay scale of apex technical educational institutions. I can't blame the government solely for this. For, I live in a democracy which elects its representatives. The current treatment to IITs is reflective of the mindset of the society (of which I am a part) that elects governments.

There is a sense of helplessness among the IIT faculty about the fact that IITs will not be able to recruit quality faculty in the coming years like they did thus far. It will also be extremely difficult to retain quality faculty. For the record, IIT Delhi has offered an entry level position to less than 4% of faculty applicants in the last five years. This is as good as the number of students admitted through JEE. This not only ensures quality but also the right work culture and ethos in a system striving for excellence.

With the current sixth pay commission's 'banding' entry-level IIT faculty in the third pay band and 'grading' IIT faculty into inexplicable academic grade pays, IITs will be forced to compromise on the quality of its faculty. It will not take much time for IITs to become just another university (or 'deemed' or I dare say doomed) in the Indian sarkari (bureaucratic) system.

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