IITs' Tenure Track System

What is the issue?

- The IIT Council has recently introduced the tenure track system.
- This was introduced due to a marked departure in the way assistant professors, who are on the lowest rung of the academic ladder, are hired and confirmed at all Indian Institutes of Technology.

What is the new hiring process?

- **New system** - Combines academic freedom with responsibility and accountability.
- An assistant professor may be hired without the mandatory post-PhD experience requirement.
- Her performance will be reviewed internally after 3 years.
- Based on an evaluation by an external committee at the end of 5.5 years, the person may either be granted tenure (permanent) and promoted to the next higher level of associate professor or asked to leave.
- In some cases, based on the recommendation of the external committee, an extension of 2 years may be granted to the candidate before being assessed again.
- **At present** - A fresh faculty member is placed on probation for a year before confirmation without being subjected to any critical evaluation.
- According to the Council, this leads to a situation where a large number of faculty do not put in enough effort on research and teaching, despite having very good credentials.
- Over the years, the number of faculty whose performance is below par has risen to such an extent that "more than half" underperform.

What are the concerns?

- **No Guarantee** - The tenure track system in other countries doesn't guarantee excellence or improve accountability at the institutional level.
- The principal purpose of the U.S. tenure system is to provide permanency and safeguard academic freedom.
- The U.S also uses the same system to promote research and teaching excellence, which reflects a lack of application of mind.
- **Worsening power asymmetry** - Leaving the large majority of senior faculty

unmonitored while flogging a small subset of young faculty to improve the metrics will do little to achieve the prime objective.

- This will worsen the power asymmetry that already exists between new recruits and the older faculty.
- **Tenure's biggest disservice** - May be in the field of research.
- With the sword of Damocles hanging over their heads, young faculty may end up being more risk-averse and refrain from working in cutting-edge research areas.
- The temptation to settle for short-term, sure-shot solvable research problems or just extending their PhD or post-doc research is likely to become overpowering.
- **Facilities** - Basic infrastructure to carry out research is not in place at many of the newer IITs.
- While in the older IITs, securing lab space can take more than a year.
- Due to this, the experimentalists will be at a greater disadvantage while those working in theoretical areas will find it relatively easier to publish papers.

- **Funding** -While the older IITs provide seed funding of about ₹20 lakh, the new IITs provide just a couple of lakhs of rupees.
- Researchers will necessarily have to turn to funding agencies for grants.
- With a significant reduction in the number of research proposals getting funded, a new faculty will be forced to compete with well-established researchers.
- The delay in disbursal of funds by agencies is another problem.
- **Age limit** - The biggest area of concern is the upper age limit of 35 years for an assistant professor's post, which is not the case in the U.S.
- Since assistant professors are in the early 30s when they secure a position, anyone who fails to secure tenure at the end of 5.5 years is almost out of the reckoning at any other academic institution.
- **Less chances** - The MHRD is planning to extend this system to Central universities.
- The draft National Education Policy recommends its introduction in all institutions by 2030.
- So the above two will make almost nil chances of securing a position at an alternative institution.
- Unlike in the U.S., industry jobs are not in plenty in India for those who fail to get tenured.

Will the tenure track system make the task of securing fresh talent even more difficult?

- Director of IIT Delhi had said that the institute had not been able to find "suitable candidates" to fill the vacant faculty positions for a decade.
- Introducing this system without addressing the problems researchers face is likely to make it even more challenging to find good talent.
- It is also unclear if the new IITs, which are just being built, will find themselves at a disadvantage in attracting talent.
- At this stage, one can only hope that the IIT Council has deliberated on these critical issues and not acted in haste or under duress.

Source: The Hindu