

# Maladies of Indian Universities

By M. J. Audi

Quality of education is always decided by quality of educators. Hence, teaching profession is the backbone of education. In India, the backbone is attacked by several diseases: They are: method of selection; increments at the time of appointment; avenues of promotion; re-employment after retirement and methodical corruption. Together they destroy quality of teaching and research.

## Administrators

Vice-Chancellors and Registrars are *de facto* administrators of our universities. Vice-Chancellor is academic and administrative leader. A leader can inspire the led, not by preaching sermons, but by providing personal examples in integrity and excellence. Such vice-chancellors are few and far between. Paradoxically, the moment a person becomes Vice-Chancellor, he or she ceases to be academic. Academic work of Vice-Chancellors is confined to delivering key-note addresses, attending committee meetings in different parts of the country and hunting visits abroad. Whatever the pattern of selection, the vice-chancellor is always a political choice. The rat-race amongst the aspirants and inevitable sycophancy of the powers that be to retain the prize have demeaned the office of Vice-Chancellor. The Government of India ruefully admits that the office of Vice-Chancellor functions "on the basis of a fast dwindling prestige".

Registrar is just a record-keeper of the university. However, as all decisions and all financial transactions are processed in the office of Registrar, its holder dominates the entire university system. Vice-Chancellors are endowed with discretionary powers. The Assumption behind conferring discretionary powers on the authority is that those in authority are persons of integrity and are always impartial, objective and committed to public good. Empirical evidence indicates that this assumption is absolutely wrong. Everywhere, persons in authority use discretionary powers for selfish purpose.

The University Grants Commission prescribes basic qualifications and number of years of teaching experience for the selection of Professors, Readers and Lecturers. At the same time it gives discretion to the administrators to relax them and even ignore them if in the opinion of selection committee the candidate is an "eminent" scholar. When the universities advertise the posts, candidates are instructed to apply only if they fulfil the conditions. Sincere candidates who do not meet the conditions do not apply. Candidates who meet them are not selected. The favourites without prescribed qualifications and experience are prompted to apply, called for interview and selected. Aggrieved parties approach the courts. But the courts concentrate only on the observation of procedural technicalities during interview. As the courts do not go

into the merits of selection, the legal check is useless.

## Pay scales

When the new pay scales were announced in 1987, the Government of India were compelled to fix the meaning of "eminence". Government placed the Professors of Eminence above the Vice-Chancellors and boldly declared that the Vice-Chancellors are not eminent scholars. With very few exceptions, the Vice-Chancellors are commonplace scholars. The Government also refrained from appointing Professors of Eminence because we do not yet have clear and concise criteria to determine "eminence". Strangely what the Government know about "eminence", the U.G.C. does not. Again, eminent scholars never apply. They are always invited. Whoever heard of Jagdishchandra or Einstein applying? And how can the members of selection committee, themselves not known for eminence, decide the "eminence" of candidates that appear for interview? The university administrators use the cloak of eminence to select their favourites. Existing process of selection of university teachers is a pure farce. Existing Professors, Readers and Lecturers are the product of that farce. How can they inspire the students? What is their contribution to knowledge? Dull and drab lectures; long and laborious research papers; tedious and unreadable jargon-loaded books.

At the time of appointment as many as five advance increments are given to the favourites but not even one to the deserving candidates. Partiality in giving increments affects the moral of employees in every institution and universities are not an exception. An investigation of increments given at the time of appointment to teachers and administrative staff will reveal the machinations of university administrators. In our universities, presently promotions are not recognition of merit but reward for manipulations. The favourites of university administrators quickly rise in the hierarchy. Non-favourites stagnate for decades.

The Government of India are deeply disturbed to find that many persons "with doubtful credentials as researchers and teachers" advance in their careers. Persons become Professors because of their connections with centres of affluence and influence. Like a bolt from the blue, one of the disciplines in the university suddenly becomes a "thrust area". The Vice-Chancellor creates four posts of Professors in that Department. The moment favourites are appointed and confirmed the "thrust area" becomes "dust area". The teachers need promotions not only for more pay but also for academic pursuits. Indian academic world is status-oriented. For example, when research proposals are submitted, the funding authorities allocate funds not on the basis of merit of proposal but on the basis of status of proposer. Major research projects and academic

opportunities go only to the Professors. Others are treated as untouchables.

The university administrators nominate servile teachers to the various bodies of university; order them to approve anti-academic and anti-democratic Statutes and Ordinances and thus secure legal protection for their mal-practices and manipulations.

## Corruption

There is a *jugalbandi* between corruption and legislation in India. The finest anti-corruption laws adore our statute-books and corruption also prospers. Corruption is very methodical in our universities. Commissions are standardised and mostly paid in cash punctually one month before the actual transactions take place. All are *benami* payments. Those who contend that expenditure on universities is unproductive tell the truth but they are totally mistaken in condemning the noble profession. Thirty per cent of expenditure is upon providing luxurious living to university administrators. Thirty per cent goes on fat salaries given to their favourites in teaching and administration. Ten per cent is reserved for lavish entertainments to select guests. Only thirty per cent is spent upon teaching and research *per se*. The universities have no money to expand and improve facilities for teaching and research but they have plenty of money for frequent air travels and cosy stays in expensive hotels for university administrators and their cronies for purposes of "study". How the universities profit from their "studies" is a subject fit for investigation. Can such administrators command respect? Are they capable of making universities the centres of excellence?

Happily, the Government of India is aware of these maladies as could be seen from their "*Challenge of Education — a policy perspective, 1985*". Unhappily, the Government has not yet initiated curative action. What needs to be done? The university administrators should be divested of discretionary powers as such powers do more harm than good. The universities should be governed by properly framed rules and regulations.

The selection committees should record in writing reasons for selection and rejection of candidates appearing for interview. The interviews should be taped. Presently, selection committees run down candidates opposed by university administrators and build up their favourites. Presently, there are no means to know whether selection is objective. The tapes will show calibre of the members of selection committee, type of questions asked to different candidates as well as performance of the candidates. Two tape recorders should be used during interview of every candidate. One tape should be deposited with the Registrar of High Court and other

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with Registrar of University. The Executive Councils should hear the tapes before issuing the letters of appointment.

The universities should have a clear policy on advance increments given at the time of appointment and it should be uniformly applied. The notion that salary of university teacher is negotiable is nauseating. The universities are temples of learning and not market-places for haggling. In India, persons joining civil service steadily rise in the hierarchy. There are time-bound promotions. The mediocrities become Secretaries to the Government of India but teachers with higher qualifications and better talents stagnate for decades and retire as lecturers in the colleges and universities. What a cruel punishment for choosing a noble profession in a country which is known as world's best worshipper of knowledge! Excellence has no chance without time-bound promotions for teachers. The universities should also decide the age of retirement. Should it be 60 or 65? The decision should be applied to all without exception. There should be no re-employment after retirement for any teachers or

administrator. The retired teachers willing to work should get automatic financial support directly from the Government of India as a matter of right and not as a dole from any person in power in the Government, of the U.G.C. or the university.

The annual budgets of universities run into crores of rupees. The entire money comes from public exchequer. The Government of India is alarmed to find "lack of accountability of the various bodies concerned with academic and managerial functions". That the temples of learning cannot function without secrecy is the most disgraceful feature of higher education in independent India. Secrecy is the main cause of malpractices, machinations and manipulations in the universities. Hence, the only way to guarantee accountability and clean administration is to include a provision in the University Acts that complete proceedings of all the bodies of university as well as all decisions of university administrators will be available for public scrutiny within thirty days from the date of action. Like the Government, people get universities they deserve.