

UNIVERSITY 'AUTONOMY'

A cover for corruption?

BY M. J. Audi

In India autonomy is a much abused term, more so in our universities. This is an attempt to acquaint people and their elected representatives with the true meaning of university autonomy.

According to the Report of the Gajendragadkar Committee, "The concept of university autonomy is often misunderstood. It is not a legal concept, not even a constitutional concept. It is an ethical concept and an academic concept. This concept does not question that, in a democratic society like ours, legislatures are ultimately sovereign, and have a right to discuss and determine the questions of policy, which means that legislatures can determine the structure of universities, their rights and their obligations." (Gajendragadkar Committee Report, 1971, pp. 9-10)

Autonomy is given to the university to lead us from darkness to light; to free us from the shackles of ignorance and prejudice. Refined intellect, delicate taste and candid mind are the basic attributes of culture. The university is a nursery of culture. Hence, the destiny of the nation is folded within its universities as is the flower within the close embrace of petals.

Paradoxically, the administrators of the university are the real enemies of university autonomy in India. They willingly submit to the dictates of persons with affluence and influence, in order to tighten their hold on the management of university. Thus, in the name of autonomy, autocrats govern our universities. No wonder, Indian universities, new and old, prestigious and without prestige, are rocked by corruption. Corruption in universities relates to:

- Appointment and promotion of teachers and non-teachers.
- Construction and maintenance of buildings.
- Purchases of furniture, library and laboratory equipment and stationery.
- Examinations.

The teachers are the backbone of every university. Presently, the backbone lacks marrow because favouritism decides the selection of teachers. A large number of academic appointments are finalised on the dining tables and merely formalised through so-called selection committees.

The general conditions prescribed by the University Grants Commission and special conditions laid down by the universities themselves which candidates must meet to be eligible for interview and appointment are trampled under by the managers of the university.

Four and five increments are given to favourites at the time of appointment. In the universities, the teachers must retire on completing 60 years. But retired teachers are re-employed for five more years by inventing excuses, provided the managers of university need them for their own designs.

"Professor" is the highest position in any faculty of a university. Persons whom high schools have refused to appoint as teachers, are often appointed as professors in our universities.

Like a bolt from blue, one of the departments of the university suddenly becomes a "thrust area." The moment favourites are appointed and confirmed in their posts, the "thrust area" becomes a "dust area."

The University managers exercise their discretionary powers in a ridiculous manner. What is roundly condemned as an act of mediocrity in one teacher is warmly praised as a feat of brilliance in the other. His or her doodles are orchestrated as sparks of excellence.

The Government of India has recorded that many persons "with doubtful creden-

tials as teachers and researchers" make rapid advancement in career because of their right contacts and connections. (*Challenge of Education - a policy perspective, 1985*). How can such teachers, and the university administrators that appoint them, command respect or inspire excellence? These malpractices and manipulations of university administrators do not come to public knowledge because they are shielded by the cover of autonomy.

Between the lines of written agreements with architects, consultants, builders, contractors and suppliers lie unwritten understandings between them and university managers. Opportunities for making money at the expense of the university are infinite. So are the pretexts for frequent air-travel and cosy stays in expensive hotels, as well as pleasure trips within India and abroad for the managers and their favourites.

All decisions of university administrators should be approved and confirmed by the executive council. The executive councils do not insist upon knowing all aspects of a given case, which alone can enable them to know the fairness of a decision. They are merely rubber stamps of the managers of the university.

In the universities where the executive councils are one hundred per cent nominated and their proceedings are secret and confidential, corruption goes on in full swing. Whenever the senates, executive

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councils and academic councils of the universities are packed with nominated yes-men and women, those universities become a state within a state and a law unto themselves.

The universities in India are also invaded by persons who are eager to make hay while the sun shines. It is time for the Central Bureau of Investigation to investigate the wealth and *benami* operations of teachers and administrative employees of universities and colleges of all types in India.

It may be stated that the accounts of our universities and colleges are audited by competent auditors. With due respect to the auditors, it must be asserted that the reports of auditors cannot be accepted as certificates of clean and non-corrupt administration. The reports of auditors are not and cannot be the last word.

The value of the audit exercise lies in its being a starting point for better and more intensive scrutiny of the accounts of universities. In this connection, what is more important is not the final audit report but the so-called "inspection reports" in between. Strangely, in our universities, the inspection reports of auditors are treated as secret and confidential. The inspection reports are not placed on the agenda of the senate of the University.

University autonomy definitely does not mean rule of a coterie consisting of the vice-chancellor, the pro-vice-chancellor, the re-

istrar and a handful of handpicked members of the executive council. University autonomy, in the true sense of the term, means the active involvement and effective participation of all teachers of colleges and departments of the university in all decision-making and decision-implementing processes within the university. Such involvement and such participation is guaranteed only when seventy-five per cent of the members of the senate, the executive council and the academic council are directly elected by the university electorate.

The Gajendragadkar committee was allergic to election because it felt that elections introduce "groupism" in universities (GCR p 20). The committee headed by the learned judge failed to grasp the simple fact that "groups" are also formed by the nominated. The Committee completely failed to grasp that it is not the manner of selection of members but secrecy of operations which breeds "groupism" in the universities. That the temples of learning cannot function without secrecy is the most disgraceful feature of higher education in our *swaraj*.

The Gajendragadkar committee also argued that the "best persons" are never elected. Are the "best persons" ever nominated? Reality tells us that in a *swaraj*, the "best persons" are neither elected nor nominated. The fact of the matter is that everywhere in the world, only sycophants are nominated.

The servility and sycoplancy of nominated persons was pinpointed by Mahatma Gandhi when he exposed the Indian nominees of the British government at the Second Round Table Conference on India at London in 1930. Gandhiji's analysis is fully confirmed by empirical evidence of forty years.

Notwithstanding their so-called abilities and talents, only sycophants are nominated as governors, ambassadors and chairpersons of various corporations and commissions. And the universities are not an exception. According to renowned political thinkers, the most rational and perfectly democratic method of selection of members of any assembly or council is selection by lot. The worst method of selection of members is selection by nomination.

It is a classic piece of hypocrisy that India's constitution swears by democracy at every level from parliament to panchayats, but India's universities are governed by nominated persons selected by an anti-democratic method.

Our universities are entirely financed by the governments of the states and the union government. The public exchequer is the final source of all their revenues. The budgets of universities run into crores of rupees. It is the sacred duty of public-spirited persons to ensure that public funds are properly utilised; that truly meritorious teachers are appointed and clean administration is guaranteed in the universities.

In a parliamentary democracy, the legislature is sovereign. The sovereign legislature has powers to discuss everything in the state. If the representatives of the people succumb to the bogey of university autonomy, they would be betraying public interest. Their betrayal would enlarge the scope of corruption in the universities. The representatives of the people are duty-bound to scrutinise each and every aspect of university administration and enforce accountability. University autonomy does not mean non-accountability and immunity for corrupt administrators and their henchmen in the universities. It is time to know that like the government, the people also get the university they deserve.