

## **A Suitable VC for Delhi University? Or What Is To Be Done**

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With the announcement of the new Vice Chancellor (VC) for JNU a few weeks ago, the rumor mills regarding a prospective CEO for Delhi University --- for that's what most heads of Universities, wielding executive power shorn of intellectual leadership now aspire to --- have gone into overdrive. The political, academic and networking credentials of the possible candidates are being dissected in great detail in the University and even on social media. It is expected that a new face will soon grace the hallowed precincts of the Old Viceregal Lodge, from where, post 1931 when the Viceroy shifted to Raisina Hill, Delhi University has been run ever since.

Given the state of affairs in the University, the new Vice Chancellor will have his/her plate full. To put it bluntly, the University is in a mess. Whereas a Centre for Higher Learning should be an arena for free exchange of ideas and opinions, there now reigns a culture of fear and intimidation. Academically, Delhi University has gone through several cataclysms in the recent past --- the semester system, the introduction and subsequent withdrawal of the Four Year program, and now the half-baked Choice Based Credit System (CBCS). And all these in just seven years! The net result of these "reforms" is a curriculum which is laughable, and the implementation of which faces severe human and infrastructural constraints. An institution which for decades has had a reputation for academic excellence and all round development of students, is now in terminal decline.

Such is the seriousness of the situation, that it is imperative that the new incumbent take radical steps to stem the rot: the abysmal state of teaching and research infrastructure, the streamlining of examinations, alternate sources of funding in view of budget cuts come readily to mind. However, three crucial things cry out for immediate attention and

sustained efforts. These relate to the culture of the institution, academic overhaul, and finally, the appointments of faculty.

Any large system with many components depends on various stakeholders. This elementary insight seems to have eluded the administrators of the University in the recent past. The stakeholders in our case are of course the students, the teaching faculty and the support staff. Unless these entities feel that they have a voice in the running of the system, there is little hope of any change being genuinely successful. Unfortunately, the last few years have seen all these constituents being completely left out of any meaningful engagement with the University administration. Worse, they have been intimidated, threatened with police and disciplinary action etc. One just has to see the massive security and police *bandobast* on the campus to get a feel of this atmosphere of fear.

That this culture of neglect and disdain needs to be changed is not in question. The administration needs to initiate “confidence building” measures to promote a genuine “glasnost”. Related to this is the issue of democratization of decision making. Of course, a large system like the University cannot function in a perfectly democratic manner, since that will make it ungovernable. Besides, there are few institutional mechanisms which allow for any meaningful dialogue. However, in this day and age of technology, it is not difficult to think of ways to facilitate a genuine dialogue with the various stakeholders. Interaction with the stakeholders or their representatives is imperative to take them on board. This interaction cannot be of the Baba Ramdev variety: of hundreds of handpicked supporters and acolytes gathered in a stadium, cheering the administration. Nor should it be *a la* Haroun al-Rashid paying surprise visits to colleges to catch the truant teachers. Instead, the teachers and students should feel confident to voice their opinions in a congenial atmosphere without fear of reprisals, a point that cannot be overstressed in view of what has happened in Hyderabad.

The second area which needs immediate attention is the academic overhaul of the system. In this, the much maligned college teacher needs to play a central role, as s/he forms the fulcrum on which the academic health of the University depends. Unfortunately, the general perception about college teachers is not a very positive one. A college teacher is thought to be someone who does not take classes and is engaged in a “side-business”. There

is of course an element of truth in this, for there are obviously some who are not working diligently. But then, this is as true for college teachers as for all other professions --- doctors, nurses, accountants, bureaucrats etc. The fraction of these is in fact very small. The majority of college teachers do indeed work very hard, under severe infrastructural constraints and do their job to the best of their ability. Else, the system would have collapsed, and an undergraduate degree from DU would have lost its sheen several decades ago!

The college teacher is essential to any academic change that one might wish to bring about. For instance, it is widely accepted that the Choice Based Credit System in its current form needs to be modified. The one-size-fits-all approach of our academic planners is disastrous for a system with wide disparities in human and physical infrastructure. In this exercise, the University needs to engage the college teachers ---- the ones who are actually responsible for the delivery of the content. A mid-course correction to previously accepted models is not just desirable in any large system, but a necessity, since what is at stake here is the career of lakhs of students.

Finally, the long term health of a university depends on its faculty. The current appointment system is deeply flawed and excessively centralized. Faculty appointments at the departmental level (where postgraduate teaching and research takes place) are centralized, the department itself playing no role whatsoever. It is important to reform this, and it can even be done within the current set of rules which do allow for shortlisting of eligible candidates being called for the interview. Currently, this shortlisting is done essentially bureaucratically, with some such criteria like a first division in postgraduate degree etc. All that is required is to replace this with an academic shortlisting ; indeed one in which the departmental faculty collectively decide about their future colleagues. These shortlisted candidates can then be interviewed by external experts, thereby providing a check for nepotism and inbreeding. The departmental faculty can have the prospective candidates give research and pedagogical talks, and decide on the basis of these plus academic and research record, which candidates need to be interviewed. This is the norm the world over, and indeed, is even followed in some of our own institutions like the IITs and IIMs. But somehow even in our best public Universities, faculty appointments at the

postgraduate level, have become the one arena where our VCs have got used to arbitrary exercise of power, where such external experts are usually called who would do the CEO's bidding.

Institution building is a long and tedious process. It requires not only vision, but also sustained hard work and the ability to take people along; it cannot be done by fiat. Destroying an institution, on the other hand, is a relatively simple and rapid task, easily accomplished by even the most mediocre VCs exulting in willful irresponsibility towards the institution as almost a prerogative of this high office! Recall that not so long ago, Allahabad and Calcutta Universities were considered to be among the best in the country. One hopes the new incumbent at Delhi University is aware of these historical precedents, and has the will to implement the changes required to restore the institution to its previous glory.

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