

Appointments in Universities: Triumph of Political Largesse Over Academic Considerations

Unless a system of independent academic audit is devised for leadership positions in universities without any influence of party politics, nothing can be done to arrest the downward slide of higher education.



Representative image of Delhi University which has been given the Institute of Eminence tag. Photo: Public domain

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Himachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly recently passed the Himachal Pradesh Universities of Agriculture, Horticulture and Forestry (Amendment) Bill, 2023. The Bill amends the Himachal Pradesh Universities of Agriculture, Horticulture and Forestry Act, 1986, under which two of the seven state universities are established and governed. The amended Sections 2, 23, and 24 of the Act confer the exclusive power upon the governor of the state (in the ex-officio capacity of chancellor) to appoint vice-chancellors of Sarwan Kumar Krishi Vishvavidyalay, Palampur, and Dr. Y.S. Parmar University of Horticulture and Forestry, Solan on the “aid and advice” of the government.

The statement of objects and reasons of the Bill claim to pursue objectives of the National Education Policy, 2020 and give effect to the “aspirations of the people”. Accordingly, the amendments are carried out to “allow the Democratic Government to exercise its right to shape the institutions of higher learning by exclusively controlling the appointment of VCs”.

The Amendment abolishes the original system of the selection of VCs through a neutral Selection Committee and gives exclusive power to the state government to decide on the top appointments in the universities. The government has similar proposals to amend other

Acts of the state to bring democratic (political) influences by nominating MLAs in the governing bodies of its universities.

Himachal is, however, not the first state that has tried to diminish the autonomy of state universities. The first state was the Janata Party government of Gujarat which tried to control the leadership of the universities by making the post of VC a political one. It amended the Gujarat University Act, 1949 in 1978. Subsequently, there are many states, including Telangana and Uttar Pradesh, which have followed similar policies. Recently, Tamil Nadu amended its two statutes in 2022 to establish political control over the appointments of VCs in its 13 state universities.

Influence of party politics

It may be noted that two years before the Gujarat amendment, the Indira Gandhi government in 1976 brought the 42nd Amendment to the constitution and reconstituted the entire scheme of education under the Indian federal constitutional setup. In the initial phase of post-colonial India, all educational institutions, except the existing three central universities such as Delhi University, Banaras Hindu University, Aligarh Muslim University, and a few central educational institutions, were schematised to be managed by the state governments. The government or parliament of India had only the power of coordination and maintenance of standards with respect to higher education. The University Grants Commission (UGC), All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), Medical Council of India (MCI), Bar Council of India (BCI), and Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR), etc., are the central agencies for coordinating and ensuring the minimum standard of education to be maintained across the country.



The JNU campus. Source: JNU

The 42nd Amendment transferred the subject of ‘education’ from the exclusive ambit of states (State List) to the Concurrent List of the constitution, where both the Centre and states can make laws on the same subject matter. But, in case of conflict, the Central legislation has primacy by virtue of Article 254 (rule of repugnancy) of the constitution. This new constitutional scheme has failed to establish a minimum standard for the administration of educational institutions in India.

Teaching is never a neutral act. All education is political (Paulo Friere, 1968). Paulo was talking about the methods of pedagogy. But in the Indian context, the education system is caught up in the power politics of political parties. As far as the education system is concerned, neither democratic politics nor constitutional federalism has served well in India. In other words, the practical logic of party politics and shifting schemes of federalism have worked against the cause of education.

The right to school education is a fundamental right under Article 21A of the constitution for every child in the age group of 6-14 years. Notably, Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948 declares the right to education a human right. Its language expresses the morality of aspiration to ensure elementary education is free and compulsory and higher or technical education accessible to all on the basis of merit. These normative enunciations mean little to the Indian policymakers who have increasingly used the system of school and higher education as a means of party politics.

The vice-chancellor of a university is the leader of that institution whose visions and actions lead the university in a certain direction. Therefore, the post of vice-chancellor should be held by an academician of profound intellect and highest integrity. The moment this post is made into political largesse, by any political party in power, its independence is compromised.

In the last few decades, both in central universities and national institutions of importance too, political parties have been playing a decisive role. Teachers of colleges or degree colleges have been appointed to the post of vice-chancellor frequently. People such as careerists from private universities are rewarded with the post of vice-chancellor or registrar due to their connection with the political party in power. Parties do it, chiefly, to strengthen their cadre base by way of gifts of state largesse. Immediately, the education system falls victim to the party-centric political system.

Public reason and electoral democracy are concepts that belong to the same essence. The government of the day happens to be the so-called custodian of public reason. However, neither public reason nor democracy can be conducive to the cause of knowledge and education. Thus, traditionally, universities have been regarded to be autonomous spaces; free from not only unrestricted governmental control but also from the coercive sentiments and opinions relating to morality and cultural norms emanating from the society.

Importantly, cadres of the political parties are the chief instruments for exercising social, political, and legal coercion in the education system. For example, in Himachal Pradesh, the system of appointment of ‘guest teachers’ without any merit-based examination has already done irreparable damage to government schools. Every government gives the benefit of the appointment of guest teachers to its party workers. Later on, through legal battles in the courts, the permanency of the job is secured by the guest teachers and the question of merit disappears forever. A similar pattern has been adopted in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Bihar, among others under the Shiksha Mitra Scheme. The scheme is notorious as *Shiksha Shatru* (enemy of school education). Not unexpectedly, private schools with poor quality have been mushrooming in Himachal Pradesh for the last two decades. Almost every village, *Kasba*, or town has some sort of private school.

No consideration for academic standards

With respect to the system of university, it should be clearly understood that the universities must be governed by the “academic reason” primarily. Academic reason comes with commitment, devotion, and lifelong dedication to the cause of knowledge, truth, and good academic accomplishments but not by political interference. If the teachers of

universities are appointed due to political allegiance rather than academic merit then what can one expect from Indian universities with respect to academic excellence?

Unfortunately, this state of affairs is visible in all prominent universities of the country.

Interestingly, it is believed that the Union government interferes in the governance of state universities through the agency of governors. In reaction, the states are resorting to amendments in their laws. In both cases, it is the autonomy of universities and academic standards which suffer. The contemporary systems for the appointment of vice-chancellor in Indian universities are not governed by academic reason rather it is determined by the political expediency of the party in power. Teaching, learning, and administration of the institution are affected by the policies and preferences of the vice-chancellor who needs to please – in a give-and-take manner – the political party.

The current fate of leadership in higher educational institutions may be understood by asking a few conjectural questions. A student may simply ask herself how many research articles her vice-chancellor/director has written which ought to be taught and read in her Master's Course. Has her head of the institution produced academic books that can be prescribed as mandatory reference material in her post-graduation course? How many works of such head/leader are part of reference courses in the top 1,000 universities of the world? And so on. Most of the vice-chancellors on these parameters do not have to their credit significant academic contributions. But their political background and efficacious lobbying help them to reach the top posts in universities.

Way forward

Democracy has both emancipatory as well as repressive and regressive potential. Thus, there are politics of justice, fairness, liberation, and excellence. There are also politics of subjugation, domination, deprivation, and regression. The education system in India is suffering from the malaise of the latter which needs to be corrected urgently to revive the spirit of education as a process of contemplation and critical exploration. India needs Gandhian praxis of pragmatism, Ambedkar's humanism, and Tagore's sense of aestheticism in the leadership of higher education to visualise the renaissance of education in India.

It is important that a system of academic audit is devised and every candidate for the top positions of leadership in universities is assessed accordingly. The system of assessment may be operationalised by a neutral selection or screening committee on the basis of publicised academic audit reports amongst the professors, scholars, and students where the idea of academic reason can have a sufficient role to play.

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