

Graves of Academe

Vice-Chancellors' Diffused Role

By J V NARLIKAR

MY father told me the following tale from an edition of the *Ramayana* relating to the period when Rama had returned to rule at Ayodhya and his court had begun to enjoy the reputation of merit and uprightness. One day a hideous looking dog entered the court and demanded justice against a *sanyasi* who had mercilessly beaten him. Rama asked the accused to be produced in court and so he was. The *sanyasi* readily admitted to the act but gave the following mitigating reason. He said the dog was following him everywhere as he went begging for alms and such was the dog's appearance that the lady of the house he went to would shut the door in fright. So he had to go hungry all because of the dog. The dog argued that he was also hungry and had followed the *sanyasi* in the expectation of some food. Was it his fault that he looked the way he did? The *sanyasi* admitted that he did transgress the rules of civilised behaviour in taking out his frustration on the dog.

So with the crime established and admitted, it was time to mete out a punishment. Rama asked the dog himself, what he could suggest. 'Sire! Please establish a new Vidyapeeth and make this *sanyasi* its Kulapati'. Rama was surprised: was this not an honour rather than a punishment? The dog explained that the post brought so much anxiety and frustration that it was punishment enough!

Decline in Standards

That was in the *Treta Yuga*, when the code of conduct was far exalted compared to what is found in this *Kali Yuga* of ours. Adapting Gilbert and Sullivan, one can say that the modern day vice-chancellor's lot is not a happy one.

First, the academic quality of the place. We all moan the rapid decline of academic standards in the typical university. Can the vice-chancellor do anything to improve them? Often distinguished persons with high achievements and credibility are appointed to these posts in the pious hope that under their direction the universities would recover some of their pre-independence glory.

The conditions under which universities are asked to function are most difficult. They are expected to deliver when practically everything is stacked against them. They cannot recruit students and faculty on

merit, yet they must generate excellence. Instead of leading the university with his experience and distinction, for which he was appointed, the vice-chancellor is bogged down with sorting out faculty squabbles, negotiating peace with various unions, handling student agitations, making the lethargic staff work, and so on. That is, when he is not presiding over the numerous inaugurations that take place in the campus. Remember the university stands for education in a wide variety of subjects. And so the vice-chancellor has to make wise remarks on such occasions on a variety of subjects. Then there are the numerous government circulars telling him what he must do and what he cannot do, circulars whose faded cyclostyled get-up matches the contents in their unattractiveness.

Personal Stamp

Not surprisingly, only two kinds of vice-chancellors accept such assignments and survive in this atmosphere. There are those highly-motivated ones who are optimistic that their personal stamp will clear the mess and make the seat of learning a better place than what it was when they took over. Some do produce their stamp; but the results are minor and last only while they are in power. The system is too far gone to respond to any individual's efforts.

The other end of the spectrum has those who positively aspire for the post and are in the business to create their own power bases, who use the vice-chancellor's chair to thrive in local politics, play with departmental appointments, manipulate management councils and other university bodies with great skill, which alas, they could not bring to right the wrongs in the organisation.

As far as the autonomy of the system is concerned, the strong arm of the government is always felt overtly or covertly. There were instances when the vice-chancellors had to resign when a different political party came to power in the state. One such person thanked the education minister of the state at a public meeting, for honouring the commitment of making him the vice-chancellor. Contrast this with the 1942 freedom struggle, when the British governor of UP wanted to send police into the campus of Banaras Hindu University, to

search for freedom fighters. At the time, the vice-chancellor Dr Radhakrishnan put his foot down and declined to allow the police into the campus. The governor backed down. It is a sad reflection on the law and order situation today, that police now maintain a continuous presence inside the campus and there are occasions when the vice-chancellor has to plead for reinforcements.

Contrary to the glowing reports made by the vice-chancellor at the annual convocations, no one can deny that the university system has taken a steady beating since independence. Successive governments added to the number of universities, allowed them to grow indiscriminately, eroded their autonomy and showed no encouragement for their merit. Now the standard line is that higher education will get low priority, that universities must fend for themselves. This is like an illiterate couple producing a large number of offspring and then denying all responsibility for their upbringing.

It seems that as far as producing the likes of Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard and Princeton in the Indian framework is concerned, everybody who has any say has given up. The populist view is that these ideas are elitist and India does not need them. Fine; then we do have the answer to the often asked question: why has India not produced a Nobel Laureate in the post-independence period? The answer is: this award is elitist and we do not need it.

Revealing Instances

Perhaps the most revealing instances of academics (and the government too?) having given up on the universities have come up in the last two years. A group of NRI scientists wanted to set up a science university with the major contribution coming from the government of India. More recently, there is an attempt to set up an indigenous Advanced Centre for Science and Technology with degree-giving status. Both proposals are aimed at producing highly-motivated students. For various reasons, I opposed the first and am a signatory to the second. But both proposals share one common feature. That these organisations should be outside the normal university sector.