

Politicians' Vendetta against a Vice-Chancellor

Sad Story of Shivaji University

Politicians from different parties have been carrying on a vendetta against the vice-chancellor of the Shivaji University in Kolhapur and seeking his removal by any means fair or foul. What is at stake, however, is not the fate of a particular individual but the autonomy of the university system and the future of higher education in Maharashtra.

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The government of Maharashtra proposes to amend the Maharashtra Universities Act 1994 to make new provisions for the removal of vice-chancellor, Shivaji University, Kolhapur, from his post. As the newspapers have reported, the minister of higher education, Dilip Valase Patil, gave this promise to members of the legislative assembly on March 30. The government's action is a deliberate attempt to undermine the autonomy of the university and cuts at the root of the system of higher education in the state.

D N Dhanagare is vice-chancellor of Shivaji University. With the help of the Shivaji University Teachers' Association he has sought to curb illegal dealings on the part of private managements and purge the university of corrupt practices. In the last four and a half years he has shown what an independent minded and motivated vice-chancellor can do for the improvement of the university. But because of this an entire political class has risen against him. The reasons for this are obvious. What follows is a detailed analysis of these reasons.

Higher Education in Maharashtra

Shivaji University is situated at Kolhapur and it caters to the educational needs of

four agriculturally developed districts of southern Maharashtra – Kolhapur, Sangh, Satara and Solapur. These districts have a very strong network of cooperatives in general and sugar cooperatives in particular. Shivaji University has played a very important role in the educational and economic development of the region.

Economic development in the region created some islands of prosperity and the cooperative sugar factories began spreading their activities. They opened arts, science and commerce colleges. But a large number of these colleges could not establish their institutional credentials because of political interference, as factionalism in the factories cast its shadow over the college campuses. Hence despite material prosperity many of these colleges remained unstable and no self-respecting person could work independently as principal. The private managements of these colleges, many if not all, flouted the university rules and they did not like vice-chancellors why tried to enforce rules.

In 1982-83 Vasantdada Patil's government decided to start non-aided engineering colleges in Maharashtra because he realised that these colleges could work as the sinews of power for rural politicians. There was a spurt of professional colleges

in the state. We had a large number of engineering, medical, homoeopathy, ayurveda and education colleges which gave admission on the basis of capitation fees. The government deprived the universities of their right to give permission to start colleges. Most of the sugar factories seized the opportunity and opened engineering and medical colleges. Barring a few exceptions, these colleges flouted the rules and regulations of the university and government as they were more interested in capitation fees than in quality education.

Rich students from Maharashtra as well as from other states took admission to these colleges. Since most of them were average students or worse they took recourse to unfair practices to pass examinations. They employed both money and muscle power and corrupted the examination system of the university.

There was a close nexus between class, power and caste in these institutions as their managements had distinct caste affiliations. The private engineering colleges gave birth to education emperors who controlled a large number of schools and colleges over a large part of the state and they were no less powerful than the sugar barons. Many of them are ministers in the Democratic Front government of Deshmukh. The interests of the sugar barons and the education emperors converge on many issues; hence their combination becomes lethal.

Universities Acts of 1974 and 1994

Higher education in Maharashtra has an impressive history. In 1857 the University of Bombay was established. Many of its vice-chancellors were known for their independence. University of Pune was established in 1949 and its vice-chancellors zealously guarded the university's autonomy and independence. In 1974 the government of Maharashtra decided to enact a uniform law for all the universities in the state. The government wanted to have better governance in universities. It also desired to promote more equitable distribution of facilities for higher education in different areas of state and to provide efficient administration, financial control and observance of law in all matters.

The main purpose of this act was to allow greater participation of different elements of society in the affairs of universities. The strength of the senate was increased and seven seats in the powerful executive council were given to people who did not belong to the teaching pro-

fession. The act also provided for elections at all levels. In the senate, principals and representatives of private managements were nominated to one-third of the membership on the basis of rotation.

After 1982-83, the number of colleges in the universities increased and most of these colleges were non-aided professional colleges. The seven members of the executive from outside the teaching profession began playing an important role because now they were supported by the powerful private managements. The universities turned a blind eye to their malpractices. They gave admission to more students than permitted by the university and sought the help of the executive committee members to regularise the excess admissions.

There emerged caucuses in the universities. In Pune University what came to be known as the M C Joshi caucus showed how rules and regulations of the university could be violated. The universities got politicised. The government could not have allowed this state of affairs to continue. So it decided to enact a new uniform act for all the universities of Maharashtra. After much deliberation the Maharashtra Universities Act 1994 was passed.

The purpose of the act was to promote academic excellence in the universities, to give better representation to students and teachers and to curb and eradicate undesirable and non-academic influences over the universities. The salient features of the 1994 act were as follows:

- (1) It reduced the strength of private managements and principals in the senate. The strength of the senate itself was reduced from 750 to 92.
- (2) It reduced the strength of the executive and renamed it the management council. Instead of seven members from outside now there was a provision of only one member. Instead of two, three seats were given to teachers.
- (3) Though teachers did not constitute a majority in the management council, they were given a larger representation.
- (4) Mid-term or by-elections were discouraged and the standing committee was empowered to nominate members if a vacancy arose.
- (5) Unlike the 1974 act, 1994 act had a provision for removal of a vice-chancellor if the need arose.

Agitation against Vice-Chancellor

Elections to the senate and other bodies under the 1994 act were held in January

1995 and teachers' unions the in different universities swept the elections. In Shivaji University area, the Shivaji University Teachers' Association (SUTA) registered a landslide victory. The SUTA was a well organised body with more than 5,000 members and it secured five seats on the management council. In October 1995 D N Dhanagare was appointed as vice-chancellor of the university. Dhanagare was known for his academic excellence, fearlessness, integrity and discipline. The SUTA decided to support Dhanagare wholeheartedly because it was convinced that he could implement an ambitious agenda to improve the standard of education and purge the university of corruption in different branches.

As soon as the vice-chancellor took over, a group with vested interests ganged up to harass him, fearing that their corrupt practices would be exposed. The university administration sought to enforce rules and regulations framed by the government and the university. This was not done blindly or without taking into consideration the genuine problems of private managements. But the private managements, wielding tremendous political clout, wanted a pliable vice-chancellor. Hence they opposed the vice-chancellor and charged that he was deliberately persecuting private colleges of the 'Bahujan Samaj', meaning colleges run by non-dalit, non-brahmin communities. Other disgruntled elements joined them.

During his tenure Dhanagare has tried to improve the credibility of the university examination system, curbed corrupt practices in examinations, punished wrongdoers and improved discipline on the campus. He introduced the central evaluation system for engineering and busted many revaluation rackets. The Bombay High Court praised the university for this. Dhanagare started many new courses and opened new departments.

Some corrupt private managements, leaders of the employees' union and disgruntled elements came together to demand the removal of the vice-chancellor. They did not want to compromise on this issue. The vice-chancellor was constantly harassed by the union because it had lost its clout in the university.

The union launched its first serious agitation against the vice-chancellor on February 9, 1998 when it called an indefinite strike to demand the vice-chancellor's removal. The strike was supported by many organisations from Kolhapur city. The

strike was called off after 49 days and the government decided to institute a three-member committee led by Justice Shah to inquire into the problem. The committee visited Kolhapur and met the concerned people and submitted its report to the chancellor.

The agitation was resumed in July 1998 with renewed fury and a greater participation of politicians from the city. A group of student leaders along with hired goons attacked the university building, broke windows and injured security staff. Leaders of the Congress, the Shiva Sena and the PWP came together to demand the ouster of the vice-chancellor. The main reason of this curious coming together of sworn enemies was the competition among the leading contenders from these parties to secure the support of the employees. Also there is a close network of unofficial cooperative credit societies in the walled city of Kolhapur which binds different sections together and forces them to act in a way desired by the vested interests. They called a 'Kolhapur bandh' on July 18, but 22 trade unions in the city opposed the bandh which was violent and the ruff-raff had free play. Barring the two communist parties, other parties could not effectively counter the stranglehold of money, caste and kinship which sustained the agitation for over a month.

Demand to Amend 1994 Act

Meanwhile, there was a demand to amend the 1994 act and the chancellor appointed a committee under the chairmanship of Dhanagare to look into the matter. The Dhanagare Committee went into the subject in detail and suggested some changes in the act. Most of the suggestions were technical in nature. In February 2000 elections to the senate and the boards of studies were held. They were won by the SUTA, but the government issued an ordinance and stayed the elections.

In October 1999 the Democratic Front government consisting of the two Congress parties came to power. There were at least three ministers in the cabinet who regarded their interests as threatened in the university. Also, it was primarily the Congress government that had sought to encourage private managements of colleges. The supporters of private managements demanded a greater say in the university affairs and more representation on the senate and the management council. They wanted to curb the power of the vice-chancellor and an amendment providing

for the removal of the vice-chancellor. They were sharpening their knives against Dhanagare. The non-aided engineering colleges in the state collected more fees from the students than was allowed by the rules. The university detected this and asked the colleges to return the amount – to the tune of Rs 2.83 crore. The managements went to the high court, but the court asked the colleges to pay the amount to the students. The political leaders concerned could not forgive the vice-chancellor for this and the third phase of the agitation with the active support of the ruling party and its ministers began.

The government of Maharashtra had issued a circular in the May 1999 asking the university to give only one answer book to the students in examinations. 'Student leaders' of the Congress had made as issue of this and attacked the university office. There was a law and order problem and immediately the minister of higher education Dilip Valase Patil, came to Kolhapur by special plane along with the minister of state, the secretary and the director of higher education. He had come to Kolhapur to destabilise the vice-chancellor, though he said that he had come to establish cordial relations between different sections in the university.

On March 31, 2000 the education minister led an attack in the assembly on the vice-chancellor and declared that he would amend the act to remove the vice-chancellor from his post within seven days. Despite popular disapproval and adverse editorial comments in different newspapers, he went ahead and met the chancellor to give his version. Now the ball is in the chancellor's court.

Autonomy Threatened

Now the government wants to introduce certain amendments to the 1994 act and increase the representation of private managements and principals of colleges in the senate and the management council. It also wants to reserve some seats for women and the backward castes in the senate. It has accepted many suggestions of the Dhanagare Committee.

The government also wants to amend the provision for removal of vice-chancellors. At present the government cannot interfere, because this is the sole prerogative of the chancellor. The 1994 act states that the chancellor can remove the vice-chancellor only on specific grounds – insanity, moral turpitude, insolvency, incapacity to discharge duties due to physical unfit

and involvement in the political activities and movements. In the last two cases, the chancellor's decision would be final. Now the government wants to enlarge the scope of the chancellor's action by incorporating clauses like refusal to carry out the provisions of the act and functioning in a way which is harmful to the university. The chancellor can remove the vice-chancellor after due deliberations with the government and a proper inquiry. This proposal was put before the vice-chancellors of the state and it is learnt that some of them opposed it on the ground that it opens the way for political interference in the affairs of the university. It has added certain subjective grounds for removal; further, 'due deliberation with the government' results in political interference because in the parliamentary form of government due deliberation could be the advice of the government which could be binding on the chancellor. Thus there is erosion of the autonomy of the university.

The report of the Association of Indian Universities says that 50 years ago the removal of a vice-chancellor was inconceivable, but in recent decades due to politicisation many vice-chancellors have been forced to resign. They had to quit because they refused to act at the behest of those in power. The association asked vice-chancellors not to resign without an inquiry and to take recourse to the courts if they were illegally removed.

In the case of Dhanagare, there are absolutely no grounds for his removal as he was cleared of all charges by the Justice Shah Committee. The chancellor commended the record of the university in declaring the results of examinations in time in September 1999. Again in October 1999, he cleared the vice-chancellor of all charges of corruption. The same old charges of corruption are now being made against him once again by politicians. The political class in the state seems bent upon removing him as vice-chancellor by any means, fair or foul.

The issue at the stake is not the removal of a particular person who is in any case due to retire within six months, but the autonomy of the university. The state government is interfering in the university's affairs by reversing the decision of the university on the issue of supplementary answer books and by not allowing the university to fill the post of registrar of the university. Erosion of autonomy will convert the universities into political arenas causing irreparable damage to the university system.