

NOTE

'Autonomy is Counter-Productive'

Bharat Jhunjhunwala writes :

Indian Universities, save a few established recently, were set up by the government. Those individuals were made Vice Chancellors who were willing to follow the directives of the Ministers. Many Professors have established a handful of NGOs. They use their academic credentials to obtain grants. Other professors run private tutorial colleges. These professors have the mobility and facility to please the Ministers and Secretaries and get themselves appointed as Vice Chancellors. In turn, these Vice Chancellors distribute goodies to their favoured coterie. This arrangement suits the politicians and savvy professors but alas it does not lead to imparting high quality education. Research is the backbone of quality education. And research requires dissent, debate and discussion—qualities that are anathema to the yes-men appointed as Vice Chancellors.

The Planning Commission has suggested that 30 world-class universities be established in the country with Jawaharlal Nehru University of Delhi as the model. But one has not heard of JNU degree holders getting salaries equal to IIM diploma holders. One has also not heard of JNU professors having got Nobel- or other awards. The distinction of JNU lies in the battle of words between the CPM- and BJP supporters. Academic issues are regularly resolved on ideological considerations. Indeed JNU may inculcate awareness of social issues but how more JNUs will promote research is open to question.

Moreover, for one 'successful' JNU there are about two hundred failed Universities, including a good number that are supported by the Centre. Professors of Chennai, Delhi and Mumbai Universities, for example, get same salaries as those of JNU and the Vice Chancellors have similar autonomy but produce no results. The Planning Commission should tell the people why Universities of Chennai, Delhi and Mumbai are not producing results with great autonomy before suggesting more autonomy for the 200-odd Universities.

The Planning Commission has suggested that some Professors be appointed on five-year contracts. This suggestion is good. But it too can be turned on its head by savvy Vice Chancellors. Contracts of professors who are willing to toe the line of the VCs may be renewed. A professor in one of Universities confided that her coming to the University every day for the scheduled time and undertaking research was a threat to other professors. Such hard working professors can be shown the door.

A suggestion made at the ASSOCHAM–ICRIER Joint Conference on 'Globalization and Higher Education in India' in November 2006 was to delink the pay of professors from UGC scales and letting the market determine the remuneration. The suggestion is correct. But such freedom can lead to the opposite result. VCs will use the freedom according to their personal objectives. The savvy VC will appoint the nephew of the Minister and pay him higher salary! The Planning Commission and other wisemen like those of ICRIER conference fail to appreciate that more autonomy to the VCs can be counterproductive if the basic system is not reformed. The rot starts from the appointment of VCs on

political considerations. The suggestions of autonomy etc. are good if first the appointment and management of the Universities is set in order. □□□