

## *Political Vendetta On Academics*

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The recent incident of Prof Siddhartha Ray of Kalyani University not being granted re-employment, has caused irritation among a large section of academics, university teachers in particular. It is being looked upon by them all as yet another instance of political vendetta of the most ugly type. No academic consideration can justify denial of re-employment to Prof Ray. Irked by such an appalling injustice, the All Bengal University Teachers' Association (ABUTA) and quite a large number of teachers and researchers of the country and abroad submitted memoranda to the Chancellor.

University teachers of the State of West Bengal have long been retained in service up to the age of 65 years. The UGC has maintained such a provision in their rules not without reasons. Firstly, higher qualifications needed for entry as a university teacher calls for a comparatively long time to acquire. Further, wider the experience, better is the benefit students are likely to derive from them. In most of the advanced countries retirement age of university teachers is higher compared to others. In America, there is no fixed upper limit. In view of the dearth of suitably qualified aspirants the central Ministry of Human Resources Development has, of late, enhanced, the retirement age of teachers from 62 to 65 in the central universities with a further provision of extending it up to 70 The States have also been requested to follow suit.

Before the West Bengal State universities were taken over by the CPM-led Left Front government and new University Acts introduced, service up to 65 years was a routine matter. Nobody cared to know that it could be made shorter. Age of superannuation was reduced thereafter at the time of revision of pay scales by the UGC. For the university teachers, however, a scheme of re-employment up to 65 was recommended, subject to satisfaction of certain conditions-physical and academic.

This provided the universities here, gripped thoroughly by party political tentacles, with a new weapon to threaten all those preferring to stay outside the 'our-man-syndrome' precincts or daring to oppose it. Quite a few have been refused re-employment so far mostly on extra-academic considerations. A few more did not apply considering undignified it all.

Interestingly, application for justice from those who went to the court of law after being dishonoured by the university, was upheld almost without exception. But most of the times, the incumbents are to pay quite heavily, while the university goes on dragging the legal battle ad infinitum wasting public money. A Burdwan University teacher with a Cambridge University Ph D degree preceded by exceedingly bright academic results, could not teach for a single day after attaining 60 years in January, 1996. After his application for re-employment was turned down, he went to the Calcutta High Court and won. But the university did not stop, only to be thrashed by the court all the times. At one point, the Vice Chancellor and the Registrar reportedly, underwent the humiliation of presenting

themselves physically before the court. The teacher crossed 65 by the way. The court finally ordered the university to pay, within three months, full salary, along with other dues, for all those five years during which he was not allowed to teach. The university has put on hold a substantial part of the judgment still.

Prof Ray submitted his application, along with a medical fitness certificate, much before he attained 60 in September, 2006. His application was unanimously recommended by his departmental teachers and was to be placed before a screening committee comprising, besides the Vice Chancellor and the Dean of the science faculty, three experts—two nominated by the university and one by the Chancellor. The university appeared reluctant in initiating steps for re-employment of Prof Ray. With nearly half the teaching posts remaining vacant and none other to take nuclear physics classes, Prof Ray had to carry on a huge teaching load. But no screening committee meeting was held till the last working day of Prof Ray. On pressure from the department and the ABUTA Prof Ray was asked to continue on an ad hoc basis for a three month term each time.

Finally, the committee meeting was held in June, this year, where the Vice Chancellor and the Registrar reportedly suppressed the recommendation of the department and misinformed the meeting that no opinion was available from the departmental teachers. No surprise, the selectors, going through his bio-data, found no merit in granting re-employment to Prof Ray. The Chancellor's nominee only, a noted Physicist, did not reportedly, agree with the decision and recorded his dissent as Prof Ray's bio-data, to his opinion, did not warrant such an ill-treatment at all. However, the Executive Council on June 29, endorsed the majority decision of the screening committee.

Now, on the question of academic records : Prof Ray was among the first ten in the School Final Exam he passed in 1959. He passed all other exams up to M Sc from the Calcutta University with flying colours. He received M.Sc degree from the McGill University also, followed by a Ph D degree from the same university in 1972. He was a recipient of the Dow-Hickson Fellowship and the Me Fee Fellowship of the McGill University, Canada, as the best graduate in Mathematics and Physics. Since joining the Kalyani University as a Lecturer of Physics in 1979, he engaged himself, along with a fairly heavy teaching load, in active research and guided quite a few research students who received doctoral degree. Prof Ray published a good number of research papers in first grade international journals including *Physical Review*, *Nuclear Physics* etc.

As an experimental Nuclear Physicist, he had to carry out experiments at the three accelerator centres situated at different parts of the country: Variable Energy Cyclotron Centre at Calcutta, Tata Institute of Fundamental Research at Mumbai and the National Science Centre, Delhi. He also became a member of the Scientific Advisory Committee of the last centre during 1998 to 2001. He worked as a Ph D thesis examiner of other universities on a good number of occasions.

As a teacher, Prof Ray was extremely dedicated. Own university apart, he delivered lectures at the Saha Institute of Nuclear Physics, S N Bose Institute of Physical Sciences, Presidency college, Tripura University etc. He was a paper setter and examiner for the universities of Calcutta, Viswa Bharati, Burdwan, Utkal, Lucknow and Garhwal. Prof Ray also served as a member of the UGC visiting team for the Dibrugarh, Manipur, Arunachal and Tripura universities.

Elected by the teachers, he was a member of the Court and the Executive Council of Kalyani University also and rendered valuable administrative service as a member of different committees.

Indomitable Prof Ray refused to be a stooge of the establishment. He was a staunch critic of all wrongful steps in the academic arena undertaken by the government—Central or State and sought to propel teachers' movement against them all. He was one of the leading organizers of the Kalyani University Teachers' Council and was elected its General Secretary a number of times. As a leading member of the ABUTA since its inception, he commanded respect of all. From the newly formed Intellectuals' Forum of the State, he voiced his protest against the recent Nandigram carnage, drawing all round flak for which, the Marxist rulers have reasons to be annoyed.

According to a newspaper report, he antagonized, during nineteen eighties, a prominent SFI leader whose organization tried to disrupt the long-standing admission process of the university. That leader, once expelled from his party for alleged involvement in locking out the Vice Chancellor and trying to set ablaze university property, is now an MP and a powerful member of the Kalyani University Executive Council too. Refusal of Prof Ray's re-employment is his handiwork with a vengeance—goes the rumour, which the MP has, needless to say, denied. □□□