

## VICE-CHANCELLORS ARE NOT ANGELS

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Corruption of the Vice-Chancellors of Indian universities is not a new thing. In truth Vice-Chancellors are not angels and many of them being appointed by their political masters are responsible for nepotism, fund defalcation, plagiarism and even sexual harassment. The post of a Vice-Chancellor is the most coveted one for which many academics aspire throughout their lives. There are of course examples of highly reputed Vice-Chancellors in many Indian Universities who not only set examples of honesty, discipline and courage but are famous academics as well. By taking advantage of the social prestige and highest powers within the university system, the politically appointed Vice-Chancellors have been committing corruption for the benefit of their own group and sometime to achieve purely personal gains. In a recent book *Universities at the Crossroads* (Oxford, 2010) by Andre Beteille, the world renowned Indian sociologist discussed about the various crises of Indian universities but he wrote nothing on the corruption in the universities in the country, let alone about the involvement of the Vice-Chancellors in nepotism and abuse of power, as if these are not important sociological phenomena for study!

The case-study of one of the most trusted Vice-Chancellors of the Left Front Government of West Bengal who enjoyed two successive terms at Vidyasagar University from 01 December 2003 to 20 January 2011 speaks volumes about the academic health of Bengal. His name is Swapan Kumar Pramanick and he was basically a teacher's association leader rather than an academic. He came from the sociology department of Calcutta University and managed to run Vidyasagar University with good political skill but without any significant research or publication in his subject.

Although, Vidyasagar University (VU), which is located in Paschim Medinipur district of West Bengal is not listed among the Public Authorities as a 'defaulter' in the Annual Reports of the WBIC, the State Public Information Officer and the Appellate Authority of VU were appointed by its Vice-Chancellor by a notification dated 10.01.2008 (memo no. VU/R/Noti/55/08), two years after the promulgation of the RTIA in the country and 16 months after the WBIC became effective in the state. The first meeting of the RTI cell of VU was held on 15.06.2010 (29 months after the appointment of the SPIO and the Appellate Authority) in which only two resolutions were adopted and one of the resolutions read: 'The exact cost of providing RTI information has to be deposited by the applicant' (Resolutions of the Meeting of the RTI cell, dated 15.06.2010). In the second meeting however a much more important and less obvious resolution was adopted on 08.07.2010 which read as follows: 'The resolutions of the E.C., Court and other statutory bodies of the University will be uploaded in the website of the University' (Resolutions of the Meeting of the RTI cell, dated 08.07.2010). Suffice it to say that one will not find any resolution of any statutory body of VU in its website at the time of writing the article during the months of November through the first week of December 2010. In VU website one can only find the notification of the Vice-Chancellor dated 10.01.2010 by which he appointed the Public Information Officer and the Appellate Authority of the institution. More interestingly, the author of this article had to file an RTI application on 22.07.2010 to know the composition and the resolutions of the RTI cell of VU to which the SPIO of VU replied on 27.08.2010 and gave the information which is mentioned above.

On another occasion, a seminar was organised by the VU Registrar, who is also the Appellate Authority of the institution on 7 January 2010. The author of this article, despite his filing of a number of RTI applications to the SPIO of VU, was not invited to the seminar in which the then Secretary of the WBIC, Mr Nandan Roy acted as a resource person. The author had to submit an RTI application on 07.01.2010 to know the details of the seminar! No reply from the SPIO came until the applicant filed a complaint to the WBIC by an e-mail. The SPIO only gave the official notification issued by the Registrar, VU on 23.12.2009

informing the members of the executive council, Deans, Heads and all the associations of the university that a discussion on RTI will be held at VU. No minute or proceeding of such an important discussion was recorded in which the Vice-Chancellor was present. The SPIO simply wrote to the author : 'The discussion was not recorded as it was merely an awareness programme' (Letter of SPIO dated 15.01.2010). The author also wanted to know the proposed 'budget' and the 'expenditure' of the said programme. The SPIO's reply was curt : 'As it was merely an informal gathering no budget was fixed for it' (Ibid). The media however reported about the discussion in a report published on 15.01.2010 and it was learnt that Prof S K Pramanick asked the Secretary of WBIC the following question: 'Does Vidyasagar University come under the purview of RTI Act?' (*The Statesman* 15.01.2010). The report published in the media also revealed that quite a good number of RTI applications were being filed to the SPIO of VU which ranges from the subject of harassment of women teachers of the University to the denial of study leave application of teachers and the students have also filed a number of applications after being dissatisfied by the marks given to them in the examinations. The correspondent also reported that on one occasion the Mr Subir Kumar Basu, the SPIO of VU was show-caused by the State Chief Information Commissioner for not giving information to Dr Abhijit Guha, a Reader in the Department of Anthropology. No letter of protest by the university authorities was published in newspaper which divulged some of the discussions that were held inside the closed room of the University in which the Secretary of the WBIC discussed RTI matters with the university community. After all, 'it was merely an awareness programme', 'an informal gathering' as mentioned by the SPIO!

The personal experiences of the author of this article regarding the implementation of the RTIA and the reaction of the bureaucrats at his own university are quite revealing in this regard. The author recently filed (in the month of February, 2010) an RTI application to know the details of the foreign tours of Prof Swapan Kumar Pramanick, Vice-Chancellor of Vidyasagar University. The reply to the aforesaid RTI application revealed that Prof Pramanick had spent Rs 60,976/- from the UGC-Unassigned Grants Scheme in 2004 to attend the 36th International Sociological Congress, Beijing, China held during 7-11 July 2004. Incidentally, as per UGC guidelines, the Vice-Chancellors are not entitled to get financial support for their foreign tours under this particular scheme. There is a separate scheme of the UGC to give financial support for the foreign tours of the Vice-Chancellors. Furthermore, when the present author filed RTI applications seeking the vouchers submitted by the Vice-Chancellor of Vidyasagar University for the expenses incurred for his China tour, those were simply not given to the applicant. Complaints u/s 19(1) and 20(1) of the RTI Act to the West Bengal Information Commission and Central Information Commission by the author of this article against PIO's of VU and the UGC are gathering dust on the tables of the respective officials at Kolkata and Delhi for several months. The present author also wanted to know the 'benefits' gained by Vidyasagar University from the China tour of the Vice-Chancellor to which the Public Information Officer replied twice that the 'query' does not come under the purview of the RTIA! The present author then sought a copy of the invitation letter from the PIO of VU and that was given to him under the RTIA. This invitation letter, which was e-mailed from Professor Jing Tian Kui, Director, Institute of Sociology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, People's Republic of China to Professor Swapan Kumar Pramanick on 11 November 2003 as Vice-Chancellor of Vidyasagar University while Pramanick joined Vidyasagar University on 01.12.2003! It appears from the documents that Prof Pramanick had applied to the Director, Prof Jing Tian Kui, expressing his desire to attend the Congress by impersonating as Vice-Chancellor of Vidyasagar University before 11 November, 2003 when Professor Anandadeb Mukhopadhyay was occupying the VC's chair at Vidyasagar University, according to the VU's official diaries published by the university registrar since 2003 till date. However, Prof Jing Tian Kui in his letter dated 11 November, 2003 invited Prof Pramanick through e-mail addressing him as "Vice-Chancellor, Vidyasagar University" mentioning the telephone and fax number thereon of the VU VC's office at Midnapore when Prof Pramanick was officially nowhere around the VU. He was then serving as a faculty in the department of Sociology at Calcutta University. Prof Jing Tian

Kui also clearly stated in his letter that Prof Pramanick has to "cover his own travel costs, accommodation, membership fee and other expenses travelling to China". Later, after joining the VU on 1 December, 2003 Prof Pramanick, by using his office, procured grants for meeting hundred per cent expenses to be incurred by him from the UGC for the trip. On the basis of his application, a sum of over Rs 60,000 was released from UGC's unassigned grant scheme for the financial year of 2004-05. But by a visit to the UGC website on unassigned grant, one will be surprised to know that the VCs of universities in India are not supposed to avail themselves of the financial assistance for foreign travel from the unassigned grant scheme of the UGC. The reason is simple. There is a separate scheme of UGC for the foreign travel of the VCs entitled "Travel Grant Scheme for college teachers/ VCs/ Commission members", according to the website. But surprisingly, Prof Pramanick did not apply for grants under the above scheme of UGC meant for VCs to which he was aptly entitled. The whole story was published twice in a leading English Daily from Calcutta and no letter of protest is still being published in the said newspaper by the authorities at Vidyasagar University.

*Postscript : A larger and more academically oriented version of this article submitted by the author for consideration for publication in the journal Politics and Society published by the Department of Political Science with Rural Administration of Vidyasagar University has recently been rejected by its editorial board since it raised some 'debatable issues' □□□*