

# Recruitment of Teachers in Universities

## A Proposal

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In the debate in *EPW* on the relevance of UGC-NET, the critics (K M Seethi, June 3, A K Bagchi July 29 and Sajid Ibrahim October 7, 2000) have examined how the external actors like the UGC, the central government, the Hindutva forces, etc, have been facilitating the recruitment of not-so-deserving candidates as teachers in the universities. While the points they have raised are not without merit, I feel they have given very little attention to the actual processes that determine the recruitment of teachers in Indian universities. The NET model is no doubt elitist in its approach, but the earlier system of recruitment was no better. There is a need to ensure that our opposition to the anti-people educational policies of the government does not end up as endorsement of all that is polluted and rotten in the university system.

We find Jawaharlal Nehru's ideas on universities quoted in many articles, speeches and also on cover pages of prominent journals devoted to university news. But very few universities in India can confidently claim that they have imbibed and reflected his vision and ideals. Many Indian universities have started degenerating from the day they came into existence. A few universities, which initially reflected certain values and standards expected of a good university, have also started showing signs of stagnation in recent years. The overall degeneration finds its reflection even in the way the teaching positions are filled in the universities. The state universities are vulnerable to various pressures coming from above and below.

### Rot in State Universities

Everyone associated with the state universities knows how competitive and political the appointment of vice-chancellors has turned out to be in recent years. Realisation that the position of vice-chancellor (VC) is not only prestigious, but also highly rewarding politically as

well as financially, encourages many a senior professors to try their luck. To secure the coveted position of VC, the aspirants attempt to influence governments by utilising resources, by mobilising groups within the universities and by managing political and media support outside. It would not be just possible for such persons who have become VCs through backdoor methods to say 'no' to candidates recommended by those who have been instrumental in making them VCs. As rare exceptions, here and there we come across one or two VCs who acquired their positions only because of their qualifications. Even such persons find it difficult to appoint the right kind of persons on the faculty due to several internal compulsions.

All state universities are dictated by politics of one or the other kind. If it is party politics in some, it could be caste, regional or communal politics in others. Not just the students, even the teachers and the supporting staff in most state universities organise themselves along group lines. At the time of faculty recruitment each one of these groups makes an effort to exert pressure upon the administration to promote its candidates. The scholars, having learnt from experience that it was not their scholarship but their proximity to the right kind of persons and groups that ultimately ensures them the jobs, join alliances and counter-alliances in the universities with the hope of influencing the authorities. The teachers, who also resort to similar tactics for promotions and other benefits, can hardly inspire students to produce good research work and secure teaching positions through fair means. Many a times the teachers themselves encourage the scholars to turn to such negative games. Most professors aspire to get their students into their departments as lecturers, not because they think their students are bright, but because they feel that it is safe to have their own yes-men or yes-women in the department. In most state universities, the VCs and the

heads of departments decide as to who should be selected as teachers.

The dominant practice in most state universities is to offer jobs to scholars belonging to the same department in the same university. The practice of recruiting scholars who have degrees from abroad or from central universities has been discontinued in several state universities. In some states even the scholars of other state universities within the state are not welcomed. There have been incidents where 'outsiders', recommended by the selection committees, were physically prevented from joining the service. The experience has taught scholars to avoid responding to advertisements for faculty positions in state universities other than their own. In recent years the scholars normally wait for advertisements in their own universities, or else try their luck in the central universities.

### Case of Central Universities

In some respects the central universities, wholly financed by the UGC, have certain advantages. Factors like the involvement of the president of India in the appointment of VCs, non-interference of the government in the day-to-day administration of the university, absence of local pressures on VCs, presence of the visitor's nominee on the selection committees and relative freedom that these universities enjoy in attracting competent persons, if necessary, by offering them additional monetary benefits, etc, did help initially in bringing the best brains from different Indian universities and even from abroad into the central universities. The reputation that the central universities enjoy even today is partly due to these founding faculty members who have given their best to the students and contributed in so many ways to the development of their respective disciplines. But do the central universities maintain the same standards and values and do the teachers appointed in recent years continue to be as productive and committed as their seniors? The dominant feeling today is that barring a couple of premier central universities, which still maintain some standards, the situation in other central universities is no different from that in the state universities. Instead of scouting for the best, inbreeding is being encouraged in several central universities. Recruiting a favoured few on an ad hoc basis through internal advertisements and later making them permanent

after a few years has become a tradition in some universities. There are also allegations that communal, regional and party affiliations often influence the recruitment of teachers in some central universities.

Some attribute the decline to the degeneration in the general standards of all liberal institutions in the country. When the country as a whole is decaying, they argue, how can one expect the universities alone to be different? In the era of liberalisation and globalisation, when everyone has started dreaming of becoming a 'crore-pati' as quickly as possible, spending years in the universities only to face an uncertain future after the completion of PhD is seen as wasteful effort by the newly emerging MTV generation. As the best students are busy trying their luck in the civil service, business, media and computers, even the central universities are finding it difficult today to attract good students to research programmes in humanities, social sciences and to some extent even in theoretical sciences. Consequently even in the central universities, the quantity and quality of research have come down in recent years. Citing these instances, some professors, who sit on selection committees, complain that the quality of candidates appearing for interviews is found to be so bad that many a times there is no choice left for them but to select the least undeserving among those who compete. But this does not seem to be the case always. Despite the fall in general academic standards, one still comes across quite a few talented and committed scholars. But only a fraction of them get absorbed in the universities. It is true that external factors like the government's decision to curtail funds for higher education, the UGC's reluctance to create more faculty positions, especially after the declaration of the new pay-scales, the entry of private and foreign capital in higher education, etc, have contributed to shrinking of job opportunities even in central universities. But even where there are some avenues, teaching positions in the universities are often filled by not-so-deserving candidates. This trend started long before the introduction of the UGC-NET. It is no use criticising the government and political parties for the rot in the university system. Everyone conversant with the recruitment process in the central universities is aware of the autonomy that the universities enjoy in recruitment. To understand why, despite the autonomy that universities enjoy, many deserving candidates do not find place in the universities one needs to divert the

attention to the internal dynamics within the universities.

Barring a few exceptions, most professors in the central universities suffer from highly inflated egos. Everyone tends to consider himself or herself the best in the department and all others as mediocre and good-for-nothing. Most professors have a tendency to exaggerate their contributions and belittle what others have been doing in the department. Unlike in the state universities, where the teachers form groups on communal or party lines, teachers in central universities are islands by themselves. For convenience they may enter into alliances, but these alliances are not permanent. One therefore finds every department divided into warring factions. This factionalism adversely affects the research scholars. Once a student joins as a scholar under a professor, he or she loses personal identity and comes to be seen as a person belonging to the enemy camp by other teachers opposed to the professor. All factional fights come to the open once the faculty positions are advertised. Discussions within the departments as to who would get recruited as lecturers start from the day the posts are advertised. While every professor tries directly or indirectly to promote the candidature of his or her scholars, the adversaries would do all that is necessary to frustrate such attempts. The scholarship of the candidate becomes virtually irrelevant here. Support or opposition to a candidate would be based on pragmatic considerations as to who would join which faction after he or she gets into the department. Each faction devises appropriate strategies – both legal and illegal – to promote their persons and to prevent other potential candidates who they think are not with them. Usually the faction that is close to the VC and hence more powerful has its way. But at times situations may arise where no faction is potential enough to push its own candidates. In such situations the external experts play an important role in the recruitment of teachers.

### **Farce of External Experts**

The external experts virtually have no say in the state universities. They merely sit on the selection committees and put their stamp on decisions already made by the departments or the VCs. This has been the case in a couple of central universities as well. But in some universities, where the VCs choose to remain neutral and factions within the department find it difficult to arrive at a consensus, the external experts play a crucial role in the selection process. In the universities where the

experts get a chance to decide, we see the selections to be somewhat open, in the sense that some candidates from other universities can also get selected for faculty positions. But one would be making a mistake, if he or she thinks that the recruitment would be fair if the experts are allowed a free hand to select. For, the experts have not fallen from heaven; they are academicians in other universities. In knowledge and experience, they are usually on par with the senior professors of the host department. It is the host departments or merely the heads of the host departments who recommend their names as experts. It would be too much to expect that just because they are invited to act as experts, they would remain fair and impartial. Like any other professors, the experts also have their own prejudices, preferences, commitments and hidden agendas, which they may or may not be aware of. These limitations do come in the way of objective assessment of the candidates. Especially in humanities and social sciences, where ideologies influence and there is ample scope for bias and subjective preferences. Cases of liberal academicians recommending leftist scholars, Marxist intellectuals adhering to one party line choosing scholars opposing that party ideology, sympathisers of Hindutva accepting dalit or feminist scholars are rare. In practice the external experts show preference to the scholars in tune with their ideological positions. Some even expect candidates to have interest in areas they are interested in and expect the candidates to be conversant with their books and articles. This apart, we come across quite a few external experts who believe that the best scholars are found only in Delhi or abroad. The interest that they evince in interviewing candidates coming from Delhi or having a PhD degree from foreign universities and the scant respect that they show to scholars coming from state universities would amply prove the point. Although most experts usually keep themselves away from departmental politics of the host universities, at times we come across a few acting blatantly as agents of a particular group. Some exploit their positions as experts to extend their domain of influence by implanting their own students or persons of their liking in different universities. If external experts happen to be members of several selection committees, enjoy high position in UGC circles, had gone abroad several times and are tipped for VCs' posts sooner or later, their recommendation do carry considerable weight in the selection committees. Even

if their selections are not fair, the VC and other members of the host university would approve of their choice to please them.

For several other jobs, performance in the interview board constitutes only a component in the overall assessment of the candidates. In banks and in civil services interviews are normally preceded by written tests. In IITs the candidates are supposed to present a paper and face the faculty and the students before he or she takes the interview. But in the state and central universities, the interviews become the basic factor determining the selection of teachers. In application forms of all universities there will be columns where the applicants are asked to fill in the information regarding their extra-curricular activities, contributions to society, campus life, etc. The applicants are also instructed to send testimonials from experts regarding their character and contributions. The universities insist on being sent three or four copies of the candidates' publications for scrutiny. Aspiring candidates follow the instructions meticulously, take all the trouble and spend enough money to furnish the information sought by the universities. But does anyone in the universities bother to go through all the information provided by the candidates? Virtually none. The establishment or the recruitment section in the university prepares a list of all candidates with their qualifications and experience. What the screening committee at best does is to draw a cut-off point for selecting the candidates for the interview based on the information supplied by the administration and leaves the task of judging the worth of a candidate to the selection committee. The selection committees in the universities are entrusted with the powers not only to judge the performance of the candidates in the interview board, but also to assess the candidates' qualifications, publications, experience and personality. If all these tasks are to be fulfilled in a fair manner, it is essential that the VCs remain neutral, the departments rise above petty politics and the external experts avoid pushing their own candidates. Before interviewing the candidates, the members should carefully go through each of the applications, examine the testimonials and read at least one or two articles written by the candidates to have a fair understanding of the worth of each of the candidates. In the interview board the members should give sufficient time and attention to all the candidates competing for a given post and try to bring out the best in the candidates by making them feel at home.

But in how many interviews are all these necessary conditions fulfilled? We know that most members of the committee sit on the board with preconceived notions and undeclared agendas. They hardly have time to go through the applications, as most members reach the university only on the day of the interview. As the selections have to be completed within a day, it would not be possible to give sufficient time to the candidates even if they wish to do so. In such situations the board members prepare an unofficial list of candidates who should be interviewed seriously. This choice will be made on non-academic considerations, especially when the members have their own candidates to promote. If the external experts choose to side with the powerful faction within the host department, then we can see that the selection process would be tailor-made to facilitate the entry of a chosen few. In such interviews the way the candidates are received and interrogated changes from person to person. The board members will be extremely cordial to some and hostile to others. The members know how a potential contender could be eliminated and their own men or women made to perform well in the interview. A person's performance in interview depends not only on one's ability, but also on the atmosphere that is created in the interview board. Sometimes a good candidate also ends up performing miserably in the interview for different reasons. That does not mean that he or she is all that bad. Yet that is what decides the selections. What the candidates have done for years become irrelevant here; a few minutes' performance in the interview board is all that is necessary to decide the fate of the candidates.

At times, contrary to the expectations of the committee members, some candidates perform extremely well in the interview. But if the members do not want to take them, they do invent some other limitations and eliminate them. Nobody can question the way the interview is conducted and the selections are made. The members sitting in the committee by virtue of their claims to knowledge are above all criticism. They have the authority to punish or reward. As we usually find the same members sitting on different selection committees, one cannot afford to antagonise them, even if we come to know that they are biased and unfair. Both the interviewed and the interviewer know that it is not possible for an individual to be good at everything. Had that been a seminar or discussion, it is not at all difficult to expose that the persons sitting on the other side of the table also do not know many things in the subject in

which they claim to be experts. But that is something, which should not be done in the interview board, where Foucaultian power relations operate. As the selection committees are backed by the power of law, their decisions cannot be challenged in the courts. The judiciary, which also believes in the Socratic illusion that all knowledgeable persons are wise and can do no harm, avoids interrogating the decisions of the selection committees. Armed with legal immunities, the selection committees virtually become the final authority, against which there is no appeal. It is not that the selection committees always select the wrong persons. But given the limitations of the selection committees, will it be right to entrust all powers of selection to a handful of members in the selection committees? It is from this perspective that I would like the academic community to view the need for common entrance tests for the recruitment of teachers in the universities.

### **An Alternative**

When other categories of job seekers have to pass through several barriers to get jobs, why should those who aspire to become teachers in universities alone be exempted from additional tests? Is it not expected that a university teacher not only give lectures to students, but also write and generate knowledge? Given the fact that the quality of PhD differs from university to university, will it be wrong to expect candidates to have additional qualifications apart from producing the theses? For that matter, how many selection committees in the past have given jobs earlier on the basis of the quality of PhD theses? Which universities in India had earlier looked into the sociological and ethical qualities of the candidates before recruiting them as teachers to say that it has been overlooked today after the introduction of the UGC-NET? When we clearly know the politics that govern the selections, why do we still want to entrust all powers to the selection committees to decide the fate of the aspirants?

Giving enormous powers to the selection committees, which are neither competent nor reliable, can do more harm than good to the universities. As it is impossible to examine all the dimensions of a candidate in an interview, which would not last for more than 10 minutes, the responsibility of assessing the qualifications of the candidates should be entrusted to different persons or bodies. It is better to allot fixed credits for the past academic record, teaching experience and commu-

nity work. Wherever possible, the candidates should be asked to present a seminar paper before facing the interview board. If the aspirants are more in number, entrance tests may be conducted to assess the worth of the candidates. I agree with the critics that persons really dedicated to academics are finding it difficult to pass UGC-NET, whereas those interested in bank or civil service examinations are finding it easy to pass the tests. If our opposition to the UGC-NET is because of this reason, we need to demand that the entrance test pattern should be modified to suit the requirements of university teach-

ers. Those who pass such tests do carry fixed credits. However, keeping in view the fact that certain categories of people may not be in a position to appear for or pass in such entrance tests, a provision may be made to accumulate credits by insisting on a minimum number of research papers or publications. The scrutiny committee can decide on what should be the minimum credits that an aspirant should get to qualify for the interview. The candidates who have acquired the required number of credits should be called for the interview. The members in the interview board would only assess the performance

of the candidates in the interview. The performance in the interview also carries some credits, but that alone should not be the deciding factor. All the credits so accumulated should be added up to judge the overall potential of the candidates. Those who secure the highest number of credits should be recruited as teachers. The recruitment process that I am suggesting may be time-consuming, but I believe it can introduce an element of objectivity and openness in the recruitment process and help in overcoming the tyranny of the selection committees on the one hand and the elitism of the UGC-NET system on the other. **EPW**