

Headship and orphaned departments in the universities

A cursory look at various departments of the science faculty in universities today begs any pleasing description and one feels pity for lifeless and near empty laboratories. Though there are various reasons for this state of affairs, the crisis of headship is one.

The institution of headship of various departments in universities has not received due attention from statutory bodies for its mode of appointment and for effective working of the departments. Till 1973, perhaps in all the universities, the Vice-Chancellor appointed the senior-most teacher who invariably happened to be the Professor, as Head of the department and to remain Head till his retirement. This was known as permanent headship. In some of the departments, there were more than one Professor but the other Professors reconciled with the principle of seniority and considered their ineligibility for the headship a *fait accompli*. There was no working difficulty in such departments. When in the late fifties and early sixties, several new universities were started in the country, the Vice-Chancellors appointed teachers of known ability and experience as Professors and Heads to build-up and develop departments with appropriate faculty and infrastructure for teaching and research. In a decade's time the big departments had several competent teachers with qualifications better than those required for higher positions. Unfortunately the vacant senior positions were few and new ones could not be created, more for bureaucratic reservations than for want of funds. The heads were not directly responsible for fewer senior positions but they never sincerely desired nor made efforts to create them. Such a situation resulted in frustration for teachers and the disgruntled teachers of various departments and different universities combined and raised their voice to change the headship.

There is yet another aspect of the situation. A dynamic, resourceful and ambitious head may provide good leadership to the

department but the fact of being permanent made the system degenerate after sometime into self-aggrandizement and decreasing enthusiasm for the progress and involvement in the department. The permanence of a position sometimes breeds dictatorship. Even if the head is competent and is one amongst a few other equals, a change is desirable in order to provide an opportunity to others to get the benefit of their leadership.

'Rotation of headship' was adopted first by Rajasthan University in 1973. The system operates now in one form or the other in many universities of the country. In general, teachers of the department serve as 'Head' in order of seniority for three years. Those of us who have known and seen the working of the two systems – permanent headship and rotation of headship in operation have been pained to notice the difference and the gradual decline in the work-culture and sense of involvement of the teachers in the department. Teachers worked then in the old system, though under pressure and with less facilities but in the new system when the teachers are free to work in their own way and are provided with more facilities, they do not work or do less work. Here work means involved teaching and research.

The present system of rotation of headship has resulted at times in appointment of the incompetent head and consequent inefficient working of the department. The tenure of headship of three years is insufficient for even a competent head to consolidate the fruits of any promising project or policy. In some cases, the head is not able to serve for more than two/three years, sometimes it is even less than a year owing to one's retirement. The greatest sufferer in such situation is the department and its development.

The greatest drawback of the present system of rotation of headship is that there is none to own the department and no rotating/short-term head has any interest in

the future development of the department. All that he wants is that the working of the department may not stop. Therefore one has to evolve a system in which the head has qualities that encourage research, improve facilities and understand the difficulties of students like a father-figure. A new position of Professor and Head should be created and the post and appointment should be statutory and in a better pay-scale than that of a Professor. The incumbent at the time of appointment should be of the age between 45 and 55 years. It should be term-appointment for ten years. The Vice-Chancellor may also review his performance after five years if more than fifty per cent teachers of the department so desire.

In spite of several shortcomings of the old system, the department of a university was known by the name of the person who headed the department. Who can forget Birbal Sahni, Meghnad Saha, P. C. Mahalanobis, A. N. Jha, Radha Kamal Mukherji and many others, and the names of Allahabad and Lucknow Universities that enjoyed the high reputation in the country before 1950? It is true such teachers of calibre are rarely seen today but whatever their number, they prefer to serve in the National Laboratories, Institutes and IITs. Therefore we must create the top position of Professor and Head in the departments for direct recruitment to attract such talent who can then nurture the departments and revive the university – excellence which has now sadly become a fact of the past. The UGC may objectively look into the matter at length and give an appropriate shape to the above proposal in order to recommend it to the universities.

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