

## **STORY OF AN ABORTED EXPERIMENT**

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Within days of my joining Gulbarga University as its Vice-Chancellor in February 1999, I was told of an anecdote. One of the previous Vice Chancellors of the university was going to the city to visit a college at around 3 pm, and on the road saw a professor of the university returning from the university. The Vice Chancellor caught up with him and asked where and why he was going at that hour. The VC was a terror to people who were indifferent and insincere in their work. The accosted professor trembled in his pants, fumbled and admitted that he was going home after finishing his class as he had to attend to some work. Nothing doing, said the VC, and ordered him to go back to his Department and resume his work. It seems the next day itself, the professor received a note of warning from the VC. Some of the prominent members of the syndicate and senate, who narrated this episode, gave me a well-meant advice that I too should be strict like my predecessor and adopt a no-nonsense attitude with all, adding that I should be very watchful since a soft VC would not succeed here!

I did not like the notion of spying on the faculty and other staff, but talked to them and students in a free and informal exchange of thoughts to learn about their problems. I got the impression that a majority of the members of the faculty were sincere and committed to their work of both teaching and research. I initiated the practice of getting annual reports from individual members of the faculty about the academic work done during a year, papers published, and the like. I felt that so long as they taught well regularly taking classes, published at least one or two research papers in referred journals, made themselves available to students for consultation and research guidance, and helped the university in general, I would not very much worry about when they go home. However, only some faculty members used to send these reports, and I responded to them promptly, thanking and encouraging them. My informal talks with students revealed, however, that quite a few, may be about one-fourth, of the teachers did not take their classes regularly, and even when they did take, finished their teaching for the period within about 20 minutes and left the class. The students would not name the teachers doing so, for fear of being victimised in the examinations.

I was thus struggling to find a way of keeping myself well informed about faculty progress, but there was still a major gap about how each faculty member took to teaching and making teachers know how they were perceived and appreciated by students so that they can be motivated to improve themselves in the basic task for which they were appointed. It struck me that students are the best evaluators of teachers particularly in postgraduate departments of a university. I thought that if only such an evaluation was agreed upon, it would make the teachers think twice before they cancelled their class without taking leave, and would make them take to their teaching more seriously. I prepared a very simple questionnaire of less than a page. Students could fill it at the end of the year when the classes close for the summer vacation. The answers would be sought in absolute confidence without having to sign or showing their handwriting. It consisted of 'Yes or No' questions like whether the teacher took classes regularly or not, took for the full period or not, made available for consultation to clarify doubts or not, and whether there was scope for discussion in the class to seek clarifications or not. The students had only to tick 'Yes' or 'No', and drop the questionnaire so answered in a box. I planned that the contents of the boxes would be analysed and evaluation finalised jointly by the Registrar and Controller of Examinations in VC's office, so that proper confidentiality would be protected.

There was no question of imposing this on the teachers. I had to first informally at least appeal to them to accept the idea of teacher evaluation by students. I called a meeting of all the professors and heads of departments, and proposed the idea. I assured them that this evaluation would be informal, having no legal status, and would not be used against them in any way. It was only to make the teachers know where they stood in the eyes of the students, and motivate them to improve themselves. The evaluation of each teacher would be confidential and would not be made known to others. After some discussion, they approved the idea, and assured that they would co-operate. I said that if they felt it necessary, I would bring it before the next meeting of the Academic Council as a proposal.

Within a day or two of this, the matter was taken up in a meeting of the University Teachers' Association. It summarily rejected the proposal, though after lengthy discussion. I was informed about it by a few professors. I was told that though the proposal was well-

intentioned, it would not work in Gulbarga University. Caste factors would, it was feared, come in the way of honest and objective evaluation, and even the postgraduate students were not mature enough to honestly answer the questions. Some teachers questioned the very necessity to have such an evaluation, when other means were available. The examination results, for example, would reflect some impact of teaching after all! Moreover, the number of books and research papers published by the faculty members were an indication of their academic and research commitment. It was also argued that really speaking teachers were more serious about teaching and lectures than students. Teachers often admonished students for failure to be attentive and serious, and such students would take it out vengefully on teachers in the process of students evaluating the teachers. Moreover, if not the present VC, some other VC could always use the evaluation to harass any teacher. Such were the arguments advanced and fears expressed during the meeting, against teacher evaluation by students. Basically, many teachers had no faith in the competence and maturity of students to do any such evaluation. But I had faith in the moral integrity of students, and had believed that an evaluation of teachers by them would discipline teachers more than anything else, promoting a more balanced relationship between students and teachers. Research output is not necessarily a reliable indication of commitment to good teaching, and examination results too are not very helpful for this purpose. It is only when graduates of a given university do well elsewhere in getting jobs or admissions into other universities for higher degrees that the quality of their education in their earlier university would have a chance of proving itself. A scheme of teacher evaluation by students in a university would greatly promote the prestige and teacher reputation of that university, and not diminish it. Arguments advanced by teachers in their Association meeting left me utterly unconvinced.

It was thus that my experiment with teacher evaluation by students was aborted even before it took off. It left me thinking if such a proposal would ever be approved by teachers, unless imposed from above by a University Act or by UGC and made applicable to all institutions of higher education.

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