

5. THE TRAUMATIC BIRTH OF A NEW ACADEMIC MANAGEMENT SYSTEM: THE DIALECTICS OF CHANGE AND ADJUSTMENT IN AN INDIAN UNIVERSITY*

Introduction

Human relations in complex organisations are at the heart of this case study. How does change occur or how can it be made to occur among senior, highly qualified, experienced and articulate academics? Other matters outlined in the case include an exploration of hierarchical bureaucratic organisation in academic departments. For example, how effective are bureaucratic formulae in the identification of academic leaders? Another issue is the role of students as catalysts for change. As societies become more pluralistic all of us will be subjected to pressures from hitherto unlikely sources. How can universities accommodate to these situations particularly as universities continue to have an amateur as opposed to a professional administration? Does being a good professor automatically imply administrative or leadership ability in what are becoming increasingly difficult organisational settings?

The Case Study

In the academic management hierarchy, the department and its chairman occupy critical positions in most universities. The university academic department is a sub-system where most of the immediate and mediate purposes and goals of a university get processed and shaped into final end-products. In Indian conditions, there are, among others, two critical university functionaries who could, by both tradition and explicit sanction, indulge in monocratic exercise of authority - the Vice-Chancellor and the head/chairman of the academic department. While Vice-Chancellors come and go on a tenure basis, the chairman of the academic department enjoys a certain amount of permanency, unknown to most public organisations. As head, he is, as it were, an appointee for life. Inescapably, this office has been the target of attacks and a subject of frequent acrimony. Consequently, the proposition of introducing headship on tenure has become current. This idea, no doubt, has been unacceptable to most senior professoriate and many others found it a dubious and even an impetuous proposition. The question, however, is how a new management design survives in an otherwise traditional-conservative university system. This case study pertains to a provincial university and the enquiry attempts to focus attention on dimensions of change and adjustment and the modes of internalising and absorbing new designs and methods of management.

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Structure and Governance Pattern

Issues Precipitating Change

The university, by and large, has been a traditional one, without any substantial changes in the academic and administrative structures and processes. The successive Vice-Chancellors had enjoyed preeminent positions and authority in the system. Except for a small group of rebel senators and intermittent variant opinion in the syndicate/executive council, most recent Vice-Chancellors in this university have been in a powerful position. The administrative sub-system has been a highly inbred wing, without any significant outside recruitment. The processes are officious, formal and rule-bound and the procedures, mostly drawn from the State Government, are outmoded and obstructive. Earlier, the academic sub-system consisted of weak deans and powerful heads/chairmen of the departments. The head enjoyed numerous administrative and academic powers. On matters of recruitment, promotions, domestic and foreign assignments, transfers, work distribution, teaching load and most other matters his word was final. This kind of arrangement led to a considerable amount of frustration among the academics of various departments. The frustration was, relatively, more in the science, engineering and technology faculties where each academic department had more than one professor. Here, it is important to mention that the academic management system was sharply dichotomised, with the professoriate constituting a distinctly superior and privileged group and the rest of the academics (readers, lecturers, research fellows) falling into a numerically large subordinate category. As stated, most of the heads of departments and some powerful additional professors tended to monopolise most privileges, were found to be steeped in bureaucratic arrogance, indulged in large-scale suppression of information, were found to be partisan, some of them even openly showing caste favouritism and nepotism and some known for their corruption. Additionally, professors enjoying headships of departments, over decades, had come to develop strong disciplinary and transdisciplinary linkages at regional, national and international levels. The adverse consequences of concentrated power and monocratic exercise of authority over indefinite periods of time by one person (head of the department) were directly felt and experienced by the ordinary teachers, additional professors, research scholars and students.

Demands for Change

There were intermittent open protests by rebel teachers and articulate research scholars. Bold senators and syndics had also been voicing concern over this invidious position of concentrated power in the hands of one person. The University Teachers' Association had also been voicing a demand for the introduction of a rotation principle. Through the speeches and announcements of the Minister for Education, it became clear that the provincial government was also eager to introduce democratisation in the university's system of management. Examples elsewhere of elected deans and rotating heads of departments came to be quoted in articles and public speeches. Again, under changed conditions of politics of higher education, some universities had implemented a rotation principle in their academic

departments. In the provincial university under study, rotation of deans and principals among the professors was already in practice.

Resistances to Change

Yet, it was clear enough that the old academic management system was so entrenched and strong that any attempt to dislodge it would have appeared a foolish venture. This kind of thinking was noticeable among the heads, the senior professors and their supporters. The whole idea was dismissed by many heads as preposterous and untenable. The Vice-Chancellor, an internal academic and a man known for his sobriety, equanimity and hesitant behaviour orientation, was also considered by many teachers as unsuitable for bringing about any drastic reform in the system. From the standpoint of the political environment, the return of the Congress(1) Party to power with massive majorities and powerful Chief Minister in the provincial government meant some respite from student agitations and campus revolts. Most of the objective conditions, both within the system and around it, tended to indicate a possibility of undisturbed perpetuation of the old academic management order.

The Course of Events

Student Protest

While there were intermittent demands for the introduction of a rotation principle over some years, few considered implementation to be imminent. But the first shot was fired when a group of students beat up several senior professors of science departments. The immediate provocation appeared to have been the selection of someone for a teaching post while overlooking the claims of someone else who had already been working in the department concerned. It was thought that this selection was one more instance of the head's favouritism. The above incident led to a widespread protest and the resignation of professors from the administrative charge of departments. It was also rumoured that some other disgruntled professors were involved in instigating the beating incident.

Academic Protest

The second important event was that a delegation of the University Teachers' Association met the Vice-Chancellor and demanded the introduction of a rotation principle. The Teachers' Association which had been pleading for the implementation of a rotation principle for some years, intensified the movement after the students had beaten up the professors. Teachers and students also began to talk more freely about the desirability of introducing a new system of management. The deciding factor came when a group of student leaders began a hunger strike, demanding the immediate implementation of the rotation principle. It was again openly alleged that some disgruntled teachers were behind the hunger strike. The situation became grave after a week-long hunger strike and the syndicate/executive council took a quick decision to introduce the rotation of headships with immediate effect. However, it could come into effect only after about four months when the re-constituted senate approved the syndicate's earlier decision.

Dialectics of Change and Adjustment under Headship on Tenure

The then statutory position was such that if an academic department had a professor, he alone could be the head of department. In other words, a reader or a lecturer could occupy the position of head of department only when the department did not have a professor among its staff members. In departments with more than one professor, the most senior professor remained the head till he retired from service. The position was similar in departments without professors, that is, the most senior reader or lecturer held the office of head of department.

Principle of Rotating Leadership

The introduction of rotation principle gradually brought some changes but with considerable restraint. According to the new rules, rotation of headship would be only among professors if there were more than one professor in a department. This rule sealed the fate of all non-professors in departments with more than one professor on the staff. In a department with only one professor it was stipulated that the next most senior reader would be entitled to be the head, subject to him fulfilling qualifications laid down for a professor. In a department where there was no professor and only one reader, he could be head subject to him fulfilling the qualifications for the reader. This rule was also made applicable to departments without readers in the sense that a lecturer who fulfilled the qualifications laid down for readership could become the head. The situation now obtaining is that there are several lecturers who do not fulfil the qualifications laid down by the University Grants Commission for readership and there are several readers (usually those who have become readers by internal promotion) who do not fulfil the qualifications laid down for professorship. Thus, there are two sets in each of the cadres - readers who are eligible to become professors and those who are not eligible and the same for lecturers. The rules further stipulate that the appointment of a teacher to the office of headship is on the basis of selection.* The appointment is to be for a period of two years, extendable by one more term. With these rules, the rotation principle became operative.

Identification of Leaders

The old heads were asked to collect lists of eligible candidates and send them to the Registrar with their comments. This policy gave some old heads the opportunity to make last minute bids to retain their positions of power. To illustrate, a candidate could be declared ineligible if he did not strictly have marks of 55 per cent (B+) at Master's degree level. If a candidate had more than ten years teaching experience, out of which he had four years and nine months postgraduate teaching, he would be held ineligible, as he had three months less than five years. To give an example, in one department, three senior reader applicants for the office of headship were rated ineligible by the old head - one had 0.5 per cent too few

*See Appendix I for the qualifications laid down by the University Grants Commission for different posts which were adopted by several universities.

marks for an MA degree, obtained a quarter of a century previously, the second did not have experience of guiding PhD scholars although one of his research scholars submitted his doctoral thesis a couple of months later and the third was made ineligible since he had 3 per cent too few marks for an MA. All three were otherwise eminently qualified. Interestingly enough, it was said that some old heads wrote such comments as "except me, no one is qualified to be the head". The lists of eligible and ineligible candidates were, however, subjected to independent scrutiny by the Vice-Chancellor, the Registrar and the syndicate. In several instances the observations of the old heads, mostly based on legal and procedural trivia, were set aside and orders were issued for the rotation of headship. The pertinent point is that the procedure invoking the services of the old heads in identifying eligible candidates was an attempt to assuage their feelings of deprivation, and to assure them of continued privileged status in the system.

Emergent Structure of Leadership

The introduction of the rotation principle led to the emergence of three categories of heads of departments. The first one, numerically small, consisted of old heads who could retain their positions since no other teacher was qualified. A category of new professors, mostly younger people and several of them recent recruits, displaced the old heads. The third category consisted of several senior readers who took over from the old heads in single-professor departments. So there were now old professor heads, new young-professor heads and reader heads of departments.

Support Structural Changes in the System - Formal and Informal

This management system introduced at the academic department level warranted several other important changes in the total system. Apart from this, the new management system, based on headship on tenure, resulted in certain natural changes, both in the system and in the processes of administration. In the first category of official concomitant changes came the bifurcation of the powers of the head of the department.

Bifurcation of Power

While in the old system the head was the chairman of the Boards of Studies (postgraduate and undergraduate), in the new system the chairmanship passes to another member of the department. The Boards of Studies which are concerned with syllabi, nomination of examiners and other academic matters have been generally given over to the old displaced heads. The old heads have retained their offices because of this responsibility. Departmental committees, consisting of professors and representatives from readers and lecturers, have been constituted for each department, with the head as the chairman. The departmental committee will take decisions on all departmental matters - academic, administrative and financial - and the head has to implement them. Technically, the departmental committee is all-powerful and the head merely has to implement its decisions. In addition, departmental councils, consisting of some teachers and student representatives, have been constituted for each department to take decisions pertaining to matters affecting students.

Decentralisation of Power

Alongside the new academic management system, substantial decentralisation of powers has also been introduced. The deans of the faculties and the principals of the university campus colleges have been armed with new administrative, academic and financial powers. While the old heads dealt directly with the Registrar and the Vice-Chancellor on most matters, the new heads are brought firmly under the tutelage of the deans and principals.

Responses to Shift in Power

The informal changes which have come into the system as a result of the official changes began to manifest themselves rather gradually. Firstly, the old displaced heads became extremely self-conscious; some stopped talking to the new heads, some maintained the minimum level of official communication, some collided head-on with the new heads. A few transferred full powers in the sense of handing over books, equipment, telephone, stationery, bank account, official files (both routine and confidential) and some others held on to them under conditions of deadly verbal acrimony before finally surrendering. Secondly, four known staff splinter groups have emerged in departments: one supporting the old head, the coterie of the new head, the group that supported the aspirant future head and a neutral rebel group, depending on the number of staff. Floor crossings and new configurations have become common. Thirdly, the Vice-Chancellor and the Registrar, by and large, have tended to support and protect the new heads through various decisions against different destructive onslaughts. As a passing reference, it may be mentioned that a group of senior displaced heads proclaimed that the new system would come crashing down within three months. This, however, has not happened even after two years. Fourthly, several departments, under the unified leadership of permanent heads, have acquired big research projects, national and international collaboration schemes, outside-funded sophisticated laboratories, buildings, air-conditioners, costly furniture, equipment, training centres and specialised academic teaching programmes. Most of these projects and schemes provide large sums of money and opportunities for extravagant discretionary spending on the part of the heads. Questions have been raised as to who should be the directors of such on-going programmes under the new system. The situation is rather complicated in the sense that some are personal projects and some are given to the departments. Under the old system the head became director for all the programmes in the department, without relation to his specialisation. It was contended that for all projects given to departments the head should be the ex-officio director. But the university has taken care to retain most of these projects, schemes, programmes and centres with the old heads. As a result, several old heads have become chairmen of Boards of Studies, retained projects and also membership of various local and national committees. As things stand, non-professors cannot be members, however eminent they may be, of a committee at the national level, including the committees of the University Grants Commission. As the deans and principals, armed with the newly transferred powers, tend to bureaucratise the system from below, the new heads come under a system of multiple bosses - the dean, the principal, the Controller of Examinations, the Registrar and the Vice-Chancellor.

Finally, a practice of inviting all professors to the meetings convened by the deans has come into vogue, so that in meetings convened by the deans, the new heads, the old heads and other professors are invited as a policy.

Discussion and Summary of Observations

The birth of a new management system, based on tenure of headship in an otherwise traditional bureaucratic type of university is something of an innovation. Although there is considerable support from various quarters, the university organisation, its internal processes and the general ethos of imposing power oligarchies are hardly conducive to absorbing and internalising the new management system. The birth of the system itself has been traumatic in the sense that it was started by student agitation. It is a management system which was introduced rather abruptly, especially in the absence of any serious preparatory studies. For one thing, the principle of tenure of headship is almost wholly foreign to the Indian higher education tradition. It appeared, prima facie, a preposterous proposition for an otherwise thorough-going authoritarian-ascriptive culture. In most developing societies experience shows that exogenic and exotic systems and contrivances when hastily introduced led to unwholesome results. Hence, the usual a priori forecasting would be that the new management system will either fail or produce negative consequences for the total system.

However, the case under review demonstrates in unmistakable terms that an imposed new management system can work well enough if it is introduced with skill, sagacity and practical wisdom. Here, it will be in order to briefly examine the reasons for the successful implementation of the rotation of headship principle.

Issues in the Implementation of Innovation

Firstly, as the rotation principle came to be introduced efforts were made to bifurcate the powers of the head of the department for the first time. It led to the collapse of unified and monocratic types of management at the departmental level. To be more explicit, the spirit of tenure of headship has destroyed that obsessive and dysfunctional concentration of power and authority in the head of the department. At the same time, the displaced old heads have developed less hostile inclinations since they have been made chairmen of Boards of Studies. Secondly, the departmental committees have brought significant changes to the whole ethos of the functioning of academic departments. Senior and junior teachers have found the departmental committees useful instruments for articulation and getting things done more honourably than ever before. Younger professors and readers as heads of the departments under the new system mean more effective control by superiors over management processes. Hence, the Vice-Chancellor and the Registrar are in a more commanding position than when dealing with seasoned and entrenched old heads. Fourthly, the creation of departmental councils with teachers and student representatives has provided an opportunity for other teachers to participate (especially those left out from departmental committees). In this way, both departmental committees and councils have absorbed a

significant number of teachers and given them an opportunity to participate in some sort of management. Fifthly, after about a year, it can be seen that the rotation principle is satisfactory since many powers and privileges still remain with the old heads (their opposition having slowly died down); the deans and principals have gained considerably with new and inexperienced heads depending on them for information and guidance; senior teachers aspire to headships which are now just round the corner; and the old heads and big professors continue to enjoy their old privileges and discretions pertaining to projects, schemes and programmes, even though these privileges are transitory. Finally, the restructuring process and the pattern of power dispersion has been such that the whole academic system has benefited under a new democratic spirit for the first time in the history of the university. The most significant aspect of the change has been the accommodative and adjustive elements introduced almost simultaneously to absorb angry old heads into the new system. It is a classic case of a change which was not planned but has become a profound reality, to the utter surprise and bewilderment of many. In view of its unplanned and sudden character, the change has produced serious and traumatic disturbances to all concerned. While it created profound disturbances initially, the masterly way and the care with which it has been implemented brought down opposition rather quickly. So much so, the change has come to be accepted gradually and internalised. The conclusion appears to be clear: the process of change and development can be accelerated and adequately internalised by well conceived and carefully implemented new designs, institutions and practices and by avoiding drastic breaks from the past. It is even more important to note that the capacity of a system to absorb change is far greater than hesitant social engineers envisage.

APPENDIX I

Qualifications for the Posts of Professors/Readers/Lecturers

Professors

1. At least a Second Class Master's Degree in the subject concerned with 55 per cent (B+) marks in aggregate from an Indian university or an examination recognised as equivalent thereto from any other recognised university.
2. A research degree of a doctorate standard and/or published work of high standard.
3. At least ten years' teaching experience, of which at least five years shall be teaching postgraduate classes and some experience of guiding research.

Readers

1. At least a Second Class Master's Degree in the subject concerned with 55 per cent (B+) marks in aggregate from an Indian university or an examination recognised as equivalent thereto from any other recognised university.
2. A research degree of a doctorate standard or published work of equivalent standard.
3. At least five years' teaching experience at the university or in a recognised college with publications of a high standard.

Lecturers

1. At least a Second Class Master's Degree in the subject concerned with 55 per cent (B+) marks in aggregate from an Indian university or an examination recognised as equivalent thereto from any other recognised university.
2. A research degree of a doctorate standard or published work of equivalent standard.