

BESU: Another Ploy to Strangle the Voice of Democracy

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Submission of blank answer-scripts by the examinees is not great news. But, a section of BESU (Bengal Engineering and Science University) students wrote in their scripts: "Save BESU from becoming a Nandigram". This has stunned the society.

BESU, formerly known as Bengal Engineering College, Shibpur, is not only a big name in the history of Engineering education in India, it stands for democratic, value-based education system, it's a confluence of traditional and modern education. It is one of the most prestigious institution of India and the Govt. of India is going to confer it the status of Institute of National Importance shortly in the form of Indian Institute of Engineering Science and Technology.

In the recent past we have been receiving many disturbing and shocking news from the BESU campus. The campus has never been an abode of peace; ragging, brawls, group clashes, inter-hostel rivalry, clamour for political space etc. are part of campus life. Nevertheless, at the end of the day the brush of harmony covers the traces of discord, students leave campus for a new phase of life with a degree and a treasure of unforgettable memories. But, recent disturbances have different dimensions, hellish colours and consequences.

For years the SFI has failed to win students' union election in BESU. The organization has to bite the dust in two other prestigious campuses of West Bengal— Presidency College and Jadavpur University. Party is now desperate to bring to its fold the Students' union in BESU.

The central govt. has sanctioned crores of rupees for the infrastructural development of the institute; many more projects are in the pipeline. Possibly from next academic session a new body will take over the administration of BESU. Representatives of students, teachers and guardians will be elected to this body. This body will control the academic and financial matters. The interest of the ruling party is obvious. The party doesn't want even a single dissenting voice in the new body. This is the immediate party programme.

The SFI is determined to implement the party programme at any cost. So, the university administration, local goons and the police have been pressed into service. They take resort to strong arm tactics. Strangling the voice of democracy, the nexus, it is being feared, wants to create a Nandigram – like situation.

Recent Disturbances: A Brief Account

On 19-03-2008 some miscreants attacked three students of the university. More importantly, they racially abused these students coming from some other states. It was expected that the authority would not hesitate to take stern measures against the offenders. The authorities played truant. But why? Because, many students claimed, the mastermind behind the crime was Afaz-Uddin Ahmed.

Afaz is the leader of SFI, the student wing of the ruling CPM. How he managed to get admission in BESU is a mystery. After all, Joint Entrance Examination system lacks transparency. Anyway, he has been inciting violence; it is alleged, inside the campus for the last one year. In order to achieve narrow political ends this fellow and his close aides are playing the cards of communalism and regionalism and thereby creating division among student community. This is indeed a new virus the SFI wants to bring in West Bengal students politics. Just a week ago, being defeated in the Presidency College Students' union election, some SFI members passed lewd remarks to some students from North-East region and attacked them. They also attacked the media personnel. Afaz is no exception, this year he just took a leaf out of their Presidency college guide book.

A large section of BESU students raised their voice against Afaz, as soon as his evil designs were unmasked. A mass petition was submitted to the Dean of Students (PICSA) detailing the inhuman, undemocratic and uncivil acts of Afaz on 12-12-2007. Circumstances compelled the authorities to form an enquiry committee on that day. But, by staging a rally next day, Students' Federation of India created panic among the students and, presumably, admonished the university authorities for constituting enquiry committee. And the result was imposition of section 144 in the campus. Thus the "Afaaz" issue was pushed under the carpet. The students were not taken aback. They wrote: "...unfortunately the University authorities are trying to overlook his heinous activities because of his outside political support." (*From a mass petition by the students*). Had the authorities have the courage and integrity they might have completed the enquiry to book the culprits and refurbish the sense of security among the students. Their meek surrender to the game plan of the ruling

party emboldened the culprits to show up their ugly faces once again on 19-03-2008. After a lull the campus witnessed yet another round of heinous, violent activities.

On that dreadful night two of the Wolfenden boarders were caught red handed with hockey sticks by the faculty members. But, on insistence of Prof. Bhawani Prasad Mukhopadhyay, the two were released with no charges being levelled against them. This act of forgiveness on the part of Prof. Mukhopadhyay might have been appreciated if it had helped to douse the fire or, if he was equally merciful towards all students irrespective of political identity. But, that was not the case. He knew that the miscreants had SFI connections and it was his pious duty to protect them!

The next day, that is, on 20th March 2008, party cadres assaulted a few students in front of the first gate of the university in presence of the R.A.F. The incident encouraged the R.A.F., the peace keeping force, to greet the innocent students with "lathicharge". Entering the Richardson Hall they assaulted the boarders, including a physically challenged boy. Boarders of some other Halls also had experienced the same barbaric unlawful act of the R.A.F. To ease tension, the authority declared that the senior students must vacate the hostels. They had to comply, they had to leave the hostels around midnight, and immediately police arrested some 2nd year students who were left behind. They were falsely implicated. The design was loud and clear. The police practically seized the campus allowing only ruling party-backed miscreants to go on rampage. This time the indulgent gracious Prof. Bhawani Prasad Mukhopadhyay didn't appear to protect his students from police harassment! Police didn't care to observe the minimum courtesy or formality to seek permissions from the superintendents of the hostels to enter. Possibly they were armed with prior permission from the "higher authorities" and the higher authorities by that time might have taken the quota of tranquilizers supplied by their party bosses to smoothen their nerves. Students were left to the mercy of hooligans.

Normally, in West Bengal we despise police presence in an educational campus; it is contrary to our culture. There was no threat to law and order situation in the campus, not a single glass-pane was broken. Then why was police asked to enter the campus, why section 144 was imposed? The BESU authority gave some queer reasons. It is told that some drunken students vitiated the campus life and created troubles. Is it really good enough reason to invite police force inside the campus? It is true that the new generation students are picking up drinking habits fast. It's a social problem indeed; BESU in isolation cannot solve it. It has another interesting dimension also. The govt. of West Bengal is liberally distributing the liquor shop license with the hope of increasing its revenue. Alcoholic beverage is now available in many stationary shops also. Combatting the problem of drinking habit with police force is simply an absurd idea. BESU authorities know it well; after all they are not strangers in the state of West Bengal. They are well aware of the govt. policies as well as the policy of the political party they are connected to.

Students had to face another blow from an unexpected corner. Some friends of the govt. in the industry have appeared in the scene and asked students to quit the path of agitation against the rulers. Otherwise, they threatened, the employers may not recruit students from this turbulent campus. This is very funny indeed. These industrialists do not care about society, culture, tradition, let alone the education. They only consider this centre of excellence as an institute that supplies quality engineers. If there is any trouble in the campus, trouble that may delay production (of engineers), trouble that may embarrass their friendly govt., they will simply shut their doors for BESU aspirants. They sent caution notes to the prospective job-seekers without paying attention to the causes of disturbances. They don't bother, they don't take responsibility. Even if the BESU authorities, in connivance with the ruling party, itself fuels trouble they have to support the authorities. By this very act they confirmed that they are loyal and true friends of the party indeed. But, they failed to impress the students. The Students rejected the veiled threats of these biased employers.

Who is to blame?

The common students did not bow down to the undemocratic and uncivil acts of miscreants and have blocked all their roads to success. Students who were at the receiving end squarely blamed the authorities for their sufferings. More specifically, they observed that the V.C., the Registrar, and the gracious Prof. Mukhopadhyay were instrumental in creating disturbances in the campus. They asked the authorities to take immediate action against the culprits. Further, they demanded that Prof. Mukhopadhyay must step down from the Disciplinary Committee "because of the several allegations and complaints brought against him in the past

few months....”

In support of their demand the aggrieved students stepped up their resistance. They staged a sit-in-demonstration at Esplanade, organized hunger strike followed by a relay hunger strike. They went to the Chancellor of the university to vent their grievances. Meanwhile, the result of the opinion poll organized by the BESUTA (BESU Teachers Association) was published. The teachers, by overwhelming majority, asked the V.C. to step down.

Precisely, the conspiratorial and heinous act of the authorities have given birth to recent unrests in the campus. The question is: why the authorities are desperate to pursue the party line? These people cannot do anything against the wishes of the party because they have secured the office of honour and responsibility only by virtue of their political connections.

Normally, a teacher or a scholar of some repute is selected for the very prestigious post of V.C. of any university. Mr. N.R.Banerjea, the V.C., had taken some part-time classes in management institutes for a brief period. The govt., of course on the basis of the recommendation of the ruling party, gifted him the post discarding existing norms and tradition. For the post of Registrar the minimum essential qualification is 15 years' teaching experience. The incumbent does not possess it. So what? He is also chosen by the party. The V.C. and the Registrar do not know the culture and tradition of B.E. College, nor do they have any experience in educational management. Therefore, they have to depend on others. Who should they depend on? The Board of Governors? That's an ornamental body. So, it is their sacred duty to follow the dictates of the party lieutenants. Who are they?

Prof. Bhawani Mukhopadhyay is there. Prof. Mukhopadhyay is a faculty in the department of geology. Originally it was the dept of Mining and Geology, a century-old dept. The Dept was bifurcated as soon as Prof. Mukhopadhyay joined and he, being the only member of that dept at that time, was made the head. Being head of the dept. he has been automatically elected to several important committees.

Young enthusiastic Prof. Mukhopadhyay is the editor of a journal of popular science. Bijyan Manch, controlled by the ruling party, is the patron and sponsor of this journal. Prof. Mukhopadhyay is a regular contributor to the party organ, the GANASAKTI. He was awarded the Satyendra Puraskar in the year 2005, the International Year of Physics. Why! One must not question his eligibility; the General must be decorated with laurels to earn respect from his brigade. He is looking after the interests of the SFI in the campus. He is also trying his best to persuade his colleagues to accept the politics of his party to live a better life. And for obvious reasons he belongs to the core group of the BESU administration.

Some contractors, developers, land dealers have also share in the power since they are close to party hierarchy and they contribute to the party coffer.

The call of conscience

It is very unfortunate that in order to serve the political bosses the V.C., the Registrar, one member of the faculty and a few others in unison have destroyed the democratic tradition, vitiated the academic environs of BESU. Society cannot be a mute spectator to such crimes. The resistance put up by the students and teachers is commendable indeed. But that is not enough. The accused are no ordinary people, and the crime is no ordinary crime.

The post of Vice Chancellor is not like the post of a Managing Director of a business house or a departmental secretary. The post of Vice Chancellor is kept in high esteem in public eye. If Vice Chancellor's integrity is questioned by a large section of students, teachers and guardians, if he fails to command respect from all quarters he has no moral right to continue. He cannot be allowed to earn disrespect for other Vice Chancellors.

If a writer protects the hawkers of regionalism, communalism it's a shame. If a teacher involves himself in student politics, tries to protect interests of a particular political outfit, it's a shame. Prof. Mukhopadhyay, a teacher and a writer, owes an explanation to his fraternity.

If the Vice Chancellor, the Registrar and Prof. Mukhopadhyay can hear the call of the conscience – conscience of a civil society, they must quit or, at least apply for leave before it is asked for. But that will not happen. They are planted by the party to create trouble and they successfully played their roles. They are looking for awards, not punishment of any sort. Soul-searching is a word they are not familiar with. They wrap

their conscience with a party overcoat.

The conscience of the society demands expulsions of those people engaged in organized crimes in educational institutes, demands explanations from the govt. that has given indulgence to the nefarious activities of these people.

Enquiry Committee: The only ray of hope

Fortunately, the Governor expressed his deep concern over the BESU disturbances. He met the BESU authority, representatives of the aggrieved students, BESUTA and guardians. He is the Chancellor of BESU. He made an appeal to all to bring back normalcy. Students responded to that appeal, they have gone back to their classes suspending their agitation. The govt. was virtually forced to constitute an enquiry committee. Prof. Sparshamani Chatterjee heads the one-man committee.

But what this committee can do? If the govt. sincerely wants to go to the roots of the causes of disturbances and wants fair trial it must ask the Vice Chancellor and Prof. Mukhopadhyay to go on leave, at least, till the enquiry is over and they are exonerated. That will not happen.

However, we trust Prof. Chatterjee. He was the V.C. Of BESU and the person who almost single-handedly elevated the status of the B.E. college to that of a university. He enjoys the confidence of the ruling party. At the same time the students and teachers of BESU have confidence in him because during his tenure he did not allow the hooligans and the sycophants to dictate terms. A section of the BESU authority is visibly perturbed over this appointment. They will certainly put pressure on Prof. Chatterjee by all means; they will scuttle all his attempts to unearth the truth. It's a great challenge for Prof. Chatterjee. We wish him all success, we are living hopefully...