

# Damning disclosure

Kerala University Vice-Chancellor accused of buying a degree

**F**OR years, Kerala University Vice-Chancellor Prof. John V. Vilanilam had taught students the rudiments of journalism. An expert on the media, he had espoused on the art of reporting, editing and investigative journalism. And his wards had gone away with a fresh insight into the world of the pen-pushers.

But not even his vast experience would have shielded him from being the target of a marvellous piece of investigative journalism. Two of his former students, J. Rajasekharan Nair and M.R. Hari, found that the professor had secured his appointment as professor and subsequently as a research guide through dubious degrees and false claims.

When the story appeared in an English daily, it shook Kerala's conservative academic community to the core. It was for the first time that an allegation of such magnitude had been raised against a vice-chancellor in the country. The solid evidence unearthed by the investigators bared a bigger scandal than the Kerala University's 'mark scandal' of 1982, when a well-trenched gang systematically tampered with pre-degree marklists to enable select candidates to gain admission to professional courses.

The main charge against Prof. Vilanilam was that he had secured appointment as professor and head of the department of journalism in 1982 by submitting a bogus Ph.D. among his testimonials. It had given him an undue advantage over the other aspirants, M. Thankadurai and Ravi Varma Thampuran, readers in the department of journalism.

The investigations proved beyond doubt that the Ph.D. is bogus. Prof. Vilanilam had got the degree in 1976 just by paying 159 pounds to a UK-based educational institution, Sussex College of Technology. A mill for bogus degrees, its notoriety had spread far and wide and in June 8, 1972, the *Times* of London had carried an article 'Sussex degree factory sells Ph.Ds for 155 pounds' in which the status of the degrees from the institution and the background of its founder, 'Prof.' Bruce Copen, were given in colourful detail.

In a standard letter to 'prospective students', Copen himself admits that "the degrees offered are not recognised by the educational authorities in the UK" and "the degrees may be restricted to non-academic activities". From a humble ex-corporal, Copen became a very rich man by floating a number of 'educational mills', the foremost among which was Sussex College of Technology. The institute offers degrees for measly amounts: a BA degree costs 80 pounds, MA 98 pounds, doctorate 120 pounds and a Ph.D. 155

empowered to offer UK degrees."

Faced with the allegations, Prof. Vilanilam's stand was highly ambiguous. As soon as the scandal broke out, he said that he had not applied for the Ph.D. and someone else had done it for him. Later, he told an interviewer: "How can you call it fake? I realised much later, sometime in 1983, that it was unrecognised." After adding that he was ignorant of the *Times* articles, he remarked: "After all, what is wrong with the degree? What do other universities do? They evaluate your work. This one

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pounds (Vilanilam's degree certificate cost 159 pounds because it was in Latin).

The *Times* in its 'higher education' supplements in June 1975 had severely criticised the functioning of the Sussex College of Technology. Moreover, many educationists in the UK had voiced concern about its operations. Said Barbara Stock, head of the British Council, Brighton Regional Office: "Sussex College of Technology is a bogus college and the degrees awarded by it is not recognised." Adds David Kirkham, of the British department of education and science: "The college is not included in the list of recognised institutions drawn up under the Education Reform Act and is not legally

also did that."

The statement issued by the Kerala University registrar was even more quirky. The major argument in it was the Sussex college degree was "awarded" and not "earned". "Since Prof. Vilanilam had specified that the Sussex degree was awarded and not earned, he had not cheated or misled the university," the registrar said. Of course, there is a distinction between 'earned' (through research work) and 'awarded' (honouring a person for some special ability), but it holds true only in the case of a recognised varsity.

The second charge against Prof. Vilanilam is that he made false claims when he was appointed a research guide in 1983. The application he had



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submitted to the university stated that he had a Ph.D. in journalism from the University of Amsterdam, while the fact is that he got it only in 1986. Vilanilam himself says: "I cited the Amsterdam degree in 1983 because I had by then finished the work." But such practice is against established norms.

Curiously, in his application Vilanilam also said that the Ph.D. was in journalism. But the *Directory of the Commonwealth Educators in Journalism and Communication* (1987), based on a questionnaire answered by Vilanilam himself, states that the Ph.D. from Amsterdam University was in mass communication. "What is the difference between Ph.D. in journalism and mass communication? It is the same. They are inter-connected," says Vilanilam. But this reasoning too falls apart as most experts say that the two are distinct. Says a professor: "An

expert like Vilanilam should have understood the difference so as not to confuse the matter."

prominent in the application submitted five months ago.

The D.Litt. in journalism and media history from Bhagalpur University itself is not without controversy. Prof. Vilanilam was awarded the degree only in 1984, but along with his application in 1982 he had submitted a certificate from one Prof. Mishra of Bhagalpur University's history faculty which said that he had completed his work in 1981. Besides, the *Directory of Commonwealth Educators* and an application in 1985 to the UGC for a research project say that the D.Litt. was taken in 1980.

The discrepancies do not end there. In his application for the post of research guide, Prof. Vilanilam states that he has had 17 years of teaching experience, including 12 (from 1971-82) in the US. But in the application for the UGC research project, he put down that he

journalism courses. But the question remains whether a reputed university like Pennsylvania, among the top 50 in the US, would conduct an unaccredited journalism course. Anyway, Bucks College has courses only in arts and graphics up to pre-university level. Moreover, in *Malayalam—A University Course And Reference Grammar*, a book authored by one Rodney F. Mog and published in Philadelphia in October 1980, Prof. Vilanilam's occupation is listed as "teaching Malayalam in Philadelphia and taking part in the works of Kala, a cultural organisation".

Prof. Vilanilam's claim in the 1982 application that he had been the editor and consultant of *Systems Research* too is open to question. *Ulrich's International Directory of Journals* (1987) clearly mentions that the New York-based *Systems Research* journal was known as *International Journal of Systems Research* till 1983. How could Prof. Vilanilam have foreseen the change of names? The answer could lie in the bio-data given to the media after he became VC—Prof. Vilanilam had worked in a company called *Systems Research*.

In spite of the allegations, the fact remains that Prof. Vilanilam had enough qualifications—like an MA first rank in English Literature from Benares University and more than 10 years of teaching experience—to become a professor. "In 1982, even without a Ph.D. he could have given a good performance before the selection panel. A Ph.D. is not at all mandatory to become a research guide. There are many teachers in Kerala University who function as research guides without Ph.Ds or D.Litts," says a senior professor.

Soon after the scandal broke out, Chief Minister K. Karunakaran said that "the allegations against the VC's credentials will be probed. As chief minister I cannot remain indifferent to the controversy," he added. But so far not even an explanation has been sought from Prof. Vilanilam.

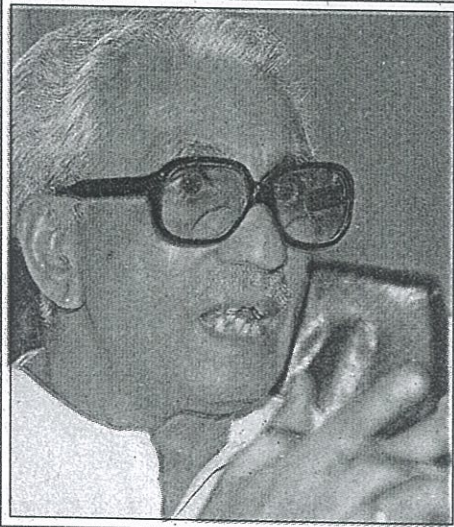
According to Kerala University statutes, only a High Court or a Supreme Court judge can inquire into the allegations against a VC. But the Governor can ask the VC to go on leave till the inquiry is completed.

Already the opposition, particularly the CPI(M), has made the scandal a major issue. With the new academic year having started, the pressure is mounting on the government to initiate some action. A student agitation is on the cards, given that the Kerala University students' union is controlled by the SFI.

—VINU ABRAHAM

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