

Doubts over Kerala VC's PhD

By John Mary

KERALA University Vice-Chancellor John V. Vilanilam became the professor of journalism in the university department at Kariavattom in 1982, by submitting among other testimonials, an unrecognised PhD he got for £ 159 from a blacklisted university in the UK, it is reliably learnt.

Evidence has also emerged that within six months of joining as professor in 1983, Mr Vilanilam became the "research guide" in journalism on the strength of a doctorate from the University of Amsterdam which was conferred on him only in 1986.

The dubious Sussex degree, printed in Latin, was conferred on Prof Vilanilam in 1976 by the Sussex College of Technology. According to the prospectus of the self-styled university, the degree would have actually cost Prof Vilanilam 4 pounds more for the Latin in which it was printed.

The address of the educational mill was: Sussex College of Technology, Dane Hill, Haywards Heath, Sussex. In 1976, the 52-year-old proprietor-governor of the college, Dr Bruce Copen, "PhD, D.Litt, Fbra", operated from a 20-room Victorian mansion in Haywards Heath.

Copen rose from a corporal in the air force to the director of a string of universities after the war, selling certificates in unorthodox treatment in homeopathy and radiesthesia which he explained as the "science of pendulum detection".

Soon the gentleman spread out to the realm of arts and letters. Anyone could have for £ 84, a 15-lesson course which the degree-mill owner claimed "offered a complete guide to the development of the English language, the gamut of English literature through the ages, plus tips on grammar, spelling, punctuation and public speaking".

Another 15-lesson course in economics was available for £ 74. At the end of the course the student is given a certificate in Latin "suitable for framing". It was this ex-corporal "prof" Copen who awarded the Kerala University Vice-Chancellor his first-ever PhD in 1976 roughly

five years after Prof Vilanilam landed in the US.

Known in his standard letter to the prospective students, Copen used to admit "the degree awards are not recognised by the educational authorities in the UK "and their use may be restricted "to non-academic activities".

This worthless Sussex doctorate was apparently included by Prof Vilanilam in his list of qualifications to enhance his chances of selection as the professor of journalism. In the event of a close race for the post the dubious doctorate would have served as the clincher.

For Kerala University, which is a member of the Association of Indian Universities affiliated to the Association of Commonwealth Universities, the PhD in "prof" Copen's bad Latin should have been untouchable. It is not recognised even

in the UK where it originates.

Within five months of joining the Kerala University, in 1983, the University Syndicate Selection Committee, headed by Dr N. Narayanan Nair, cleared him as a research guide on the strength of his new PhD from the University of Amsterdam. But the directory of the Commonwealth Educators in Journalism and Communication (1987, states on the basis of information provided by Prof Vilanilam himself that he was awarded the Amsterdam PhD in 1986 exactly three years after he began guiding the faculty of the Kerala and Calicut journalism departments in the PhD programme.

Prof Vilanilam had mentioned in the application for recognition as a research guide that he has a doctorate in journalism and three years later he states in the directory that his doctorate degree is in mass

communication.

The minutes of the Syndicate panel meeting in 1983 (wherein the Amsterdam PhD is mentioned well before he got it) also show that by then he had put in 17 years as a teacher, with exactly 12 years in the US. Prof Vilanilam left for the US in 1971 and returned in early 1982 which gives him only 11 years to teach even if he really plunged into teaching soon after he reached Philadelphia.

By his own admission, he had spent 18 months doing an MS programme in Temple University. He completed the course work in 1972 but got the degree only in 1975 which renders it well nigh impossible for him to become even a part-time teacher at the degree or post-degree level in any of the recognised American universities. At the time of landing in the US, he was a Postgraduate in English from the Banaras University.

Prof Vilanilam's disinformation at the entry point as the Kerala University professor is not limited to the Sussex decoration. His application showed that he had actually worked part-time in the universities of Rutgers, Temple and Pennsylvania and the Bucks County Community College. The tenure stretched concurrently from 1979 to 1981. Incidentally, only Temple University conducts an accredited course in journalism.

As for the D.Litt from Bhagalpur, the university does not have any faculty in journalism or mass communication. The 25th edition of the Handbook on Indian Universities refers to the D. Litt Dsc and PhD in several disciplines but journalism and mass communication are not one among them. According to Prof Vilanilam, his D.Litt in development journalism/media history.

Prof Vilanilam who became the Vice-Chancellor after a hot chase a few months ago, has been a senior travel fellow of the Association of Commonwealth Universities, Dean of the Mass Communication Faculty in Calicut, member of the UGC panel on junior research fellowship in mass communication, PhD examiner and member of several State advisory committees on education, arts and journalism.

'How can you call it a fake degree?'

KERALA University Vice-Chancellor John Vilanilam has strongly rebutted most of the charges raised in the accompanying report during an interview with ENS.

Prof Vilanilam claimed that the so-called university, the Sussex College of Technology, had in fact conferred on him the PhD in 1976 and he himself did not take the initiative. It was a pastor in Philadelphia, the beneficiary of a doctorate from the degree mill in Haywards Heath, who advised him to send some of his works to Sussex for the PhD.

He would not say he applied straight away. Someone did it for him. He did not pay any money. But he got the PhD in 1976 and that too his first-ever doctoral degree.

Q: But did it occur to you that it could be fake?

A: "No, I never knew. How

can you call it fake? I realised much later, sometime in 1983 that it was unrecognised. During a brief stopover at London in 1983, I tried to contact these Sussex people. I asked the telephones staff to locate the college for me. They failed to do so. So what could I do?"

Q: But, Professor, you had said you didn't go to the US just to get some PhD but you had your own view of things. Even by 1976, the year of the Sussex decoration, it is surprising that you had not learnt of the Sussex business. Even as early as 1972, the *Sunday Times* and later in 1975 the *Times* higher education supplement had carried detailed investigative reports on the degree mills belonging to the likes of "prof" Copen.?

A: "No, frankly I didn't know. Nobody told me about (Turn to page 6, col. 7)

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'How can you call it a fake degree?'

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that. But after all what is wrong with that degree? What do other universities do? They evaluate your work. This one also did that. But my selection has not been on the basis of the Sussex PhD. I did not submit it to the University."

Q: Who submitted it then?

A: "I don't know. Someone must have done it." On being shown a copy of the degree, he said: "But why do you worry. I had a D Litt and a whole lot of other published works on the basis of which they selected me. Ask the selectors Isaac, Bahseerudin and S. Ramachandran Pillai."

Q: Why did you cite in your application the Sussex PhD, even mentioning the name of "Dr" Copen? Weren't you aware at the time of applying for the job that the degree-giver himself had warned in a standard letter to prospective awardees against using the award for academic activities?

A: Frankly, I didn't know about the Sussex University, and the type of the degree given."

Q: Are you suggesting that it happened merely due to ignorance?

A: "You believe what I say. It was sheer ignorance on my part. I never wanted to make use of it. Ask the selectors. They took me after considering my other qualifications like the D.Litt and other published works".

Q: Did the Syndicate Committee, headed by Dr N. Narayanan Nair, decided to recognise you as a research guide on the basis of your Amsterdam PhD and not the D.Litt nor any other qualifications? You also did not use the Sussex degree?

A: "Yes, the committee did it on the basis of the reputed

Amsterdam degree."

Q: But there is an apparent discrepancy. You mentioned about Amsterdam in 1983 and the degree is in journalism. But later in the directory of Commonwealth Educators in Journalism and Communication, you say you got the Amsterdam degree in 1986 in mass communication.

A: "What is the difference between PhD in journalism or mass communication. It is the same. They are interconnected. I cited the Amsterdam degree in 1983 because I had by that year finished the work though the actual degree was awarded three years later in 1986".

Q: Here in Kerala, if someone finishes his doctoral work he has to wait for three years for possible award of the degree. Will he be selected as a research guide in the meanwhile?

A: No, here things are different. It is for the university to decide. I cannot say anything more".

Q: Is it possible to get a D.Litt in development journalism or media history from Bhalgalpur University which has no faculty in either?

A: "There is no bar. Though it may not be the practice in Kerala University, North Indian universities allow registration for many topics and give degrees after being cleared by experts within the country or outside".

Q: Why was it that you didn't cite the D.Litt in the bio-data?

A: "You look at my application. I have mentioned it there. The application is in the university file".

Q: Can you allow me a look?

A: "I don't know where it is".