

SPOTLIGHT

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Besides the VCs, the registrar of Barishal University (who has since been fired) is under the scanner for sexual harassment of a student. The UGC is looking into a video that has been submitted into evidence regarding this case. Also being investigated for sexual harassment is a professor of biochemistry and molecular biology at Hajee Danesh. This is a much-publicised case, in which the students and teachers of Dinajpur's Hajee Mohammad Danesh Science and Technology University has been protesting to bring justice to a victim of sexual harassment for the past two years, as per media reports. The accused perpetrator is a professor of the biology department, Romjan Ali. The student claimed that she was coerced into sexual relations under threat of being failed in her courses. The professor's wife, too, sided with the student bringing the allegations, in a letter submitted to the university authorities on January 16, 2018. The university's protestors held a press conference as recently as September 30, 2019, demanding the professor's removal.

Meanwhile, Rajshahi University's professor Dr Asit Roy is being investigated for having a fabricated certificate. A professor of English at Khulna University is also being probed for "student allegations".

But the list should not end there. Over the last year or so, the media has been rife with allegations of corruption and nepotism of teachers and vice-chancellors towards political parties, opening up the possibility for a vast number of probes.

Last week, Mymensingh's Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam University became a laughing stock when it was discovered by the media that an eight-member delegation was going to Switzerland and Spain for 10 days to inspect some elevators that they would be installing at the university.

"This venture probably got accepted through some loophole by the UGC. We pulled the plug on it the minute we found out. The money for this would have gone from the UGC, after all!" comments Dr Dil Afroza.

While a teacher of Rajshahi University is being investigated, far more serious allegations exist against their pro-VC. Just last month, the media reported a leaked call recording between Rajshahi University's pro-VC Choudhury Zakaria and the wife of a candidate, where he was attempting to extort them. "Sadia, I am Zakaria pro-VC. Ma, tell me something, I really want to hear from you. How much money are you ready to give?" he was heard saying on the recording.

Sadia was heard replying, "Sir you know what his situation is like, and you also know how strict-principled he is..." The pro-VC then cut her off by saying he wants to talk face-to-face. Zakaria has since held a press-conference claiming to be innocent, and then further revealed that the candidate, Nurul Huda, had given Tk 2 lakh to the chairman of the department of law. The chairman quickly denied the allegation as well. The one person who has remained completely silent is the candidate, Nurul Huda, who had won the Prime Minister's Gold medal for his academic performance in 2018.

Earlier in the year, two more similar incidents of call recordings leaked to the media brought the limelight on teachers of Islamic University in Kushtia (which

is not in the UGC's current list). The call recordings revealed four teachers extorting candidates in exchange for teaching jobs at the university.

"Sir you had told me that I will need to pay Tk 18 lakh. Sir you have said I am like your younger brother sir, I am trying sir, I did not say I will not pay sir. How am I supposed to gather Tk 10 lakhs in three or four days sir? I am trying sir, please believe me. Please give me time, sir. If you do not give me time, then where will I go?" a candidate entreated to SM Abdur Rahim, associate professor of the department of electrical and electronic engineering at the university. The other teacher implicated was Ruhul Amin, associate professor at the department of finance and banking, for a similar phone call. Interestingly enough, he was once suspended in 2017, for the same offence—that time too, the university authorities had come across a phone recording of him trying to extort a candidate. The two other teachers are associate professor of Bangla, Dr Baki Billah, and professor of English, Dr Shahadat Hossain. All teachers have been demoted by a step to assistant professor or associate professor respectively.

When asked why corruption charges were not brought forth by the university, Alamgir Hossain Bhuiyan, the general secretary of the teachers' association said, "One of the candidates filed a writ petition with the court, so currently the issue is sub-judice. They are continuing their jobs at a demoted rank."

A candidate (choosing not to be named) who had sought a position as a lecturer in February last year, came forward to share his experience with this correspondent. "I failed the written exam but I was still called for an interview. The adjudicators grilled me for an hour and 20 minutes but it was evident

to me that I was not going to be selected. After I got out of the interview, the political student leaders of the campus approached me, saying that if I pay Tk 25 lakh, then the job is mine," claims the candidate.

"They called me on my phone several times between February 3 and February 4, 2018." They even met him on campus.

"I declined to pay for a job, but another female candidate did—she paid Tk 10 lakhs. Later she told me, 'You should have given something, whatever you could,'" states the candidate.

Alamgir Hossain Bhuiyan confirmed that this is still indeed a problem within the university. "Not all the teachers extort candidates, but you will find that a handful have been doing it routinely. This cannot be allowed to continue," he states.

Meanwhile, while two of Jahangirnagar University's professors are being probed, the recent allegations against the VC are not yet being addressed—a matter which Chairman Shahidullah attributed to the fact that the ministry had not given any orders regarding this institution. "We can inspect a university on our own, but it is more effective if the ministry directs us to do so. Then they will be duty-bound to implement our recommendations," explains Dr Shahidullah.

Sylhet's Shahjalal University of Science and Technology is in a debacle of a different kind—two professors have sued the university last month for forcefully making all faculty purchase a private health insurance package.

Abdul Hye, an associate professor of mathematics, who is one of the two faculty members to file the lawsuit, spoke to this correspondent about his case. "All faculty members are covered by a group insurance. But the authorities are making it compulsory for us to purchase a policy

from Pragati Life Insurance. Even though many of us do not agree to it, they are subtracting Tk 271 per month from our salary," he says.

In addition, he says, the company is extracting another Tk 271 out of the university's fund per professor, because the premium is actually Tk 542, and according to the policy, the professors pay half and the university pays half. Furthermore, he questions why this particular insurance company was selected, and on what basis the university was giving them business.

Dinajpur's Begum Rokeya University's VC Nazmul Ahsan Kalimullah was criticised last year when it was found that he does not devote time to the university. The media reported that he had spent as little as eight days on campus the month before. Recently a list of allegations was handed to the UGC and the Prime Minister's Office, among others. This correspondent saw a verified copy of the letter in which it alleged that the VC had spent 123 days of the last six months in Dhaka, away from campus. He spent 295 days in Dhaka in 2018, and 131 days in 2017. The letter alleges that when he is not on campus, there is nobody acting in his stead, and he is also absent from teacher recruitment board meetings, of which he is chair, leading to corruption during recruitment of teachers.

Older cases have also fallen through the cracks of this probe. Take, for example, the University of Dhaka's former vice-chancellor, Prof AAMS Arefin Siddique, who had been accused of several irregularities during his tenure in 2017.

These probes however will take time, states UGC chairman Shahidullah. "If the allegations prove to be true, we will recommend that the ministry take action against the perpetrators," he states.

