

Scholarships

Political Compulsions

TWO experts on Soviet studies, both lecturers in major universities, were informed late last month by the University Grants Commission (UGC) that their applications for short-term post-doctoral research trips to the USSR had been rejected. No reasons were given, but both lecturers believe it was because they were not considered politically acceptable.

Another lecturer in a Delhi college was awarded a Commonwealth Fellowship for doctoral research in a Canadian university. A postal strike in Canada badly delayed mail both ways. Since his departure was imminent, the lecturer quit his job. At the very last moment he was informed by the Commonwealth Secretariat in Ottawa that it had not been successful in securing admission for him in the university of his choice. The truth, however, was different. The Commonwealth Secretariat had left other scholars high and dry before. The unofficially communicated reason: shortage of funds.

Some months back, a group of Russian-language scholars from the Jawaharlal Nehru University's Centre for Russian Studies (CRS) left for the USSR on UGC-coordinated scholarships—two years after they were selected. One Ph.D. scholar had, probably because of the delay, lost interest and dropped out. But he went, nevertheless, to the USSR, on a year's paid leave from his bank—presumably only for sightseeing.

These, and many more irregularities, have become a characteristic of scholarly exchanges between India and 35 other countries with which it has signed agreements for Cultural Exchange Programmes (CEPs). Quite a few of these are supervised by the UGC, and the others by the ministries of Health, Agriculture, Information and Broadcasting, and bodies like the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT).

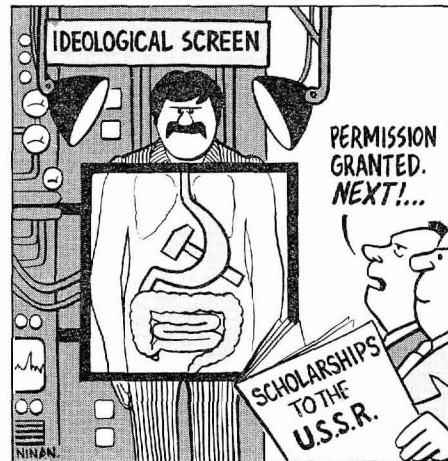
Investigation shows, however, that India is not fully utilising the number of scholarships and fellowships abroad it can avail of. Of a total of 278 scholarships offered by 30 countries, only 141 were 'availed' during 1980-81—because, says the Ministry of Education, 'approvals' were not received from the host nations. But against the availability of 141 scholarships, only 30 scholars were sent abroad.

On the other hand, scholars sponsored by the UGC going abroad have progressively dropped from 59 in 1979-80 to 55 in 1980-81 to roughly 50 in the current year. Some countries, like Canada and the UK,

have cut back on funds for CEP scholars.

Constraints: The UGC seeks to explain the low number of scholars being sent abroad by saying that it suffers from financial constraints (in many cases the Government of India has to bear the cost of air travel for outgoing scholars, while the host country bears hospitality expenses). And in its last annual report, the UGC says that it has "shifted its emphasis from the exchange of general visits to the development of bilateral academic links between institutions of higher learning in the two countries."

"Our major constraint is financial," says UGC Deputy Secretary L.R. Mal, who since 1975 has been the final authority on the selection of scholars for stints abroad. "For quite a few countries we have to pay air fares for outgoing scholars, and airfares have been



rising steeply." This, he continues, means that instead of sending scholars for an entire year, the UGC prefers to send them for 13 weeks at a time—hardly enough for serious research work—in order to make use of cheaper excursion fares.

Such pleas don't, however, always cut ice with scholars who have been turned down. While many candidates are not prepared to identify themselves because that might cost them future prospects of winning scholarships, they allege that decisions are taken arbitrarily. Worse, in the case of the Soviet Union, scholars allege that only those sympathetic to the Communist Party of India (CPI) or such organisations as the Indo-Soviet Cultural Society (ISCUS) and the Friends of the Soviet Union (FSU) stand any chance of making it. JNU's Devendra Kaushik and Nirmala Joshi of the Centre for Soviet and East European Studies, for example, found difficulties put in their way when they were awarded grants under the Ford

Foundation area studies programme. Kaushik argues that Mal needlessly prolonged departure formalities and insisted that Kaushik obtain assurances of cooperation from the Soviet Embassy which were not forthcoming. Kaushik eventually did go—but only after he had sought the intervention of the then education minister, S.B. Chavan. Says Mal by way of explanation, "I never contravene procedures, but I have to see whether the work a scholar is doing fits in with national priorities."

Study grants for Soviet bloc countries are sought after because of the paucity of primary research material outside of their state or party archives. Access to such archives is usually restricted to CEP-sponsored scholars. It is here, say academics, that UGC and ministry officials take it upon themselves to vet applicants on the basis of their political attitudes.

Mal is also in charge of the placement, itineraries and study programmes for visiting foreign scholars. Here again, he is charged with unnecessary interference with the visitors' schedules. He defends himself by saying that many visiting scholars plan to visit so many places that their intention appears more touristic than academic.

Red Tape: On its part, the Ministry of Education often drags its feet in processing applications—and bureaucratic delays from the other end scuttle many a trip. Sometimes, applications are sent abroad long after the closure of admission procedures there. The host country, too, often holds up things by failing to promptly approve candidates' work-plans, itineraries and schedules.

Dr Devendra Nath Misra, joint educational adviser in the ministry, who looks after all exchange programmes, says that each year the donor government sets aside money for visiting scholars and informs his ministry of the quotas. The ministry then invites, and gets, applications from all over the country. These are vetted by expert committees appointed for each subject. Five zonal experts are usually invited, but some of them often fail to turn up in Delhi. Or, the experts overstep their briefs, causing ministerial headaches. The US, for instance, offers six scholarships. The experts invite applications from scholars in 200 fields which means they receive thousands of applications from which they must ultimately choose six. In other words, they have made the process excessively complex and time-consuming.

While many questions may be raised on the scholarships offered through the CEPs—who gets them and why or why they are not used at all, and to what extent they advance Indian scholarship—one thing is clear: there is little point in signing cultural agreements if the scholarships thus established remain only on paper.

—CHAITANYA KALBAG