

## Research Paper

**The Autonomy Dilemma: A Case study****Dr Geeta Sharma**Associate Professor ,  
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Takshila Campus, Khandwa Road, Indore (M.P.)**ABSTRACT**

*The advent of globalisation has changed the focus of traditional higher education institutes in India, resulting into requirement of a major transformation, so that they can meet the demands of global market economy. The exposure to 'global village' has opened new vistas of challenges for these institutes and they are encountering problems relating to academic governance, leadership styles, organizational culture and values, etc.*

The case study is about a department (School of Management and Technology) started in 1989 by northeastern university, with the objective of imparting professional education in management and technology discipline. Being a university teaching department, through it was established as cost center, but with hard work, devotion and passion of Dr Indrakumar, SMT not only became popular for offering quality professional courses but also started generating surplus revenue within a short period of time.

The case highlights how Dr Indrakumar contributed in bringing the School of Management and Technology to its heights and now he is struggling further for department's autonomy. The authors in this study has attempted to examine the role of a leader in institute of higher learning in changing paradigm

"My department has come out with flying colors and it is almost half the decade down the line, it has started generating surplus money. Due to quality of professional courses offered coupled with good placements; number of students is constantly increasing resulting in larger revenue year by year. But, what I feel is that the university is not ploughing back the profits generated by the institution in its development. Now, it is the time for me to look back into my contribution in development of this institute and at least get my institute's money reinvested here". Said Dr Indrakumar, Head, School of Management and Technology, a UTD of a North Eastern University.

**INTRODUCTION****The University**

The university was established by an act of State Government in the year 1976. Being a state university, the prime objective of university is to promote higher education in the state. An Executive committee, headed by Vice Chancellor, who is nominated by State Assembly, governs the university. Vice-Chancellor nominates the members of the executive committee in consultation with Chancellor, who is also the governor of the state. The council consists of 21 members, who are taken from academia, industry and state administration. The members are elected for a term of 3 years. Over a period of more than three decades, the university has reasonably expanded its operations and achieved its basic objective of promoting higher education in the state. At present, it has 28 affiliated colleges, 3 UTDs in Science fraternity, 5 UTDs in Arts and Commerce fraternity and 1 UTD in Management and Technology fraternity. The fee collection from students of various UTDs and expenses of various departments is on centralized account basis. All the financial matters are controlled and monitored through a centralized audit department. Though the university has centralized accounts and finance System, it identifies receipts and payments of each department separately. Apart from fee from students, the university also has inflows from various sources like affiliation fee, return on investment, penalties, examination fee and grants from various governmental and other agencies.

**School of Management and Technology (SMT)**

SMT was established in the year 1989 with the basic objective of imparting professional education in the area of management and technology. Initially, it started with two under graduate courses in management. In the year 1992, it extended the under graduate courses to computer science as well. Till that time, the institute was making losses. In 1996, it started with post-graduate professional courses in management and later on in 1998 in computer science as well.

There was no separate bank account for SMT and it has to follow a rigorous pre-audit system to get the expenses approved and released from the university. Dr Indrakumar tried to convince executive council many a times regarding the need of a separate bank account for SMT for improving operational efficiency, but could not succeed. Most of the receipts and payments of SMT were identifiable separately and it was possible to assess the contribution of the institute in the accounts of the university.

Being a part of the university, there was no compulsion on SMT to keep the expenses within the limits of the receipts, but Dr. Indra Kumar wanted to avoid any sort of criticism on the working of his department. So, he started working in the direction of self-sustainability of SMT. Owing to his latent concern of self-sufficiency and its impact on functional autonomy of SMT, he initiated all his efforts in the direction of increasing revenue of the institute. During recent past, the revenue of SMT has not only increased manifold, but its contribution in total revenue of the university has also increased considerably.

#### **Dr Indrakumar Trivedi**

Dr Indrakumar, a science graduate, joined SMT as an administrative in-charge in the year 1992 at the age of 31. He is from a small town in Mathura in Uttar Pradesh. He was born in a middleclass family in 1961, the mother being a teacher in government school and father being a senior clerk in a pharmaceutical company. He started his career as a clerk with a private company in Mathura. Although he was passionate about his career and future life, he decided to explore the possibilities of his career in education, as inspired by the life style of his mother. In 1989, he resigned from his clerical job and joined as under-graduate teacher in an English medium school in Mathura. Looking to his interest and capabilities in administrative activities, the school also utilized his services in the area. Based on his experience with the school, he applied for the contractual post of administrative in-charge, which appeared in employment news in September 1991. And this made his way in SMT.

SMT being a new department, he could explore sufficient room for his contribution in the growth of the institute. He could properly exploit this opportunity along with self-development. Dr. Indrakumar's passion and hard work proved to be a boon for newly established UTD, which was exploring its way to survive. On one side, it helped the university in attainment of its objective, and on the other side, it could bridge the gap between traditional and professional education in the state. Dr. Indrakumar could manage this in spite of lack of infrastructure and faculties. He could give a direction to growth of SMT because he believes in centralized decision making. So, he tried to keep things under his control, right from the days when he was administrative in-charge to till recent.

As he started looking after placements, he started pursuing his PG in management through an evening program. In the mean course of time he started engaging classes in SMT and in other departments also. As he completed his Ph. D. in 2000, he was taken on the regular roll of the university as reader in management. He was reappointed as professor through an advertisement in 2005, as the then director retired in the same year. Considering the hard work and devotion of Dr. Indrakumar, the Vice Chancellor was convinced to take Dr. Indra Kumar as the new director of SMT.

Dr Indrakumar always talked about increasing the staff with growing size of SMT. But he actually never put in serious efforts for the same and managed his work pressures individually most of the time. In fact whenever it was proposed by the university to increase the staff, he opined that this might come up as a hurdle to focused, closed and direction based administration of SMT.

Along with his being passionate about his work, he is also passionate about owning land. He currently owns lands in all the fore corners of the town. He has also acquired few acres of land in interiors of adjoining villages. He also has a spacious, well interioered house to live in. He is very much concerned about his personality, including fitness and dressing.

Dr. Indrakumar was initially comfortable with the salary received from SMT, but soon he realized that this amount is not sufficient to fulfill his aspirations to lifestyle he wanted. So, he started engaging consulting and visiting assignments in private institutions and industry houses in the town. His typical day starts at 6:00 o' clock in the morning and ends around 11:00 in the night, where out he normally devotes around 10 hours to SMT's working. In spite of being eligible for so many leaves as per university norms, he hardly takes any of them, except for outstanding reasons.

#### **THE SUCCESS STORY**

It was the inauguration ceremony of new computer lab, the Vice Chancellor acknowledged the contribution of hard work and passion of Dr. Indrakumar in the growth of SMT. He addressed this issue from the dais and the audience present, including university authorities and heads of various departments, reciprocated it with a big round of applause.

“SMT was started as any other department by the university assuming it to be a cost center for promotion of professional education in the state. In the year 1989, it started its move towards this objective with only 28 admissions in under graduate programs in management. It offered undergraduate programs in computer science in 1992 and intake reached to the level of 300 students. In the year 1996, my department offered postgraduate program in management and the intake reached to 500. In 1998, it also offered postgraduate programs in computer science and student strength touched 600. In the year 2001, my school became 1st of its kind in northeastern states to offer 5 and 6 years integrated programs in computer science and management. By the time, it had not only become self-sustainable, but it also started generating good amount of surplus and its' presence on the national scenario of this country started gaining recognition. Presently, this school is imparting education to more than 1000 students.” Said Dr. Indra Kumar addressing the audience.

As the university got constructed a new valuation center in 1988, SMT was given the premises of old valuation center to begin with. Looking to the future requirements, the university allotted a piece of land for SMT in 1990 and ground floor was ready by mid of 1992. So the school was shifted to new premises from the academic session 92-93. As postgraduate program in computer science was offered in 1998 and new faculties were also appointed on contractual basis, the school started facing the problem of shortage of classrooms and faculty rooms. Considering this stand of Dr Indra Kumar, the university permitted the construction of first floor with good number of classrooms and faculty cabins, although many a times people, including faculties, used to question on size, facilities and overall utility of faculty cabins. The construction of this floor was over by year 2000 before offering integrated programs in 2001. This phase of construction in the school opened new lines of relationship of Dr. Indrakumar with university engineering department, as he was emotionally and devotedly involved during the entire phase of construction.

Later, Dr Indrakumar undertook hard efforts to convince university authorities to seek the permission for

construction of second floor. During 2000-2002, the second floor was also constructed as per the aspiration of Dr Indrakumar. Presently the school has beautiful three-storied building, with a well-equipped computer lab, a rich library, and a modern conference room, along with other necessary amenities, including a spacious well-decorated director room with an attached reception, waiting lounge, restroom and pantry.

With his intentions to build a different image of the school, Dr Indrakumar sought the permission from executive committee (EC) to offer admission in various programs of the school through an entrance exam, and the same started in the year 2001. This exam proved to be an excellent platform for Dr Indrakumar to open new vistas of public relations and communication with privileged and common masses of the state. This helped him to sought advices and sources to create right type of infrastructure and facilities in the school on one side, and to develop his profile as corporate consultant and trainer on the other side.

#### **THE AUTONOMY CLAIMS**

Although the school was rightly moving on the path of self-sustainability and growth, Dr Indrakumar was uncomfortable with procedural hassles while interacting with the university for operational and financial matters. He explored the practical ways of improving smoothness in the routine working of the school. As the school was growing year by year, Dr Indrakumar felt that this is the time to reconsider the working procedures and discuss with university authorities about more autonomy of the school.

Dr Indrakumar explained his strategy of maintaining his own autonomy. "It is tough to negotiate with the executive committee members and buy computers for the school, because their concern is not just for one department, but university as a whole. Not only this, any petty financial requirement has to go through long procedure of inviting multiple quotations, getting a pre-purchase audit done and later being answerable to audit authorities. The surplus revenue earned by SMT is also getting diverted to other departments and purposes. Recently it just so happened that hard earned Rs 20 lacs of SMT were utilized to construct a new 'Yoga Bhavan'.

As it was difficult to get more teachers and non-teaching staff into the school, because posts had to be approved and appointments had to be made through state machinery, Dr Indrakumar found an innovative way to overcome this problem. He started inviting expert teachers as visiting/guest lecturers from various departments and private colleges/institutions of the city. Reciprocating this, he offered his services as a consultant/trainer to their institutions. Gradually, a large number of expert teachers from various departments and local colleges/ institutions started offering their services to SMT and Dr Indrakumar was successful in solving the problem of shortage of teaching staff to a manageable extent. Due to his developing relationship with mentors of these institutions, he could explore a number of ways to officially interact with these institutions from the university platform. This further strengthened his relationship with these institutions. He became a regular member of inspection committee for grant/renewal of affiliation. But, as the operations of the school were getting more and more scaled up, it was getting difficult for Dr Indrakumar to manage his day to day problems in this manner and there seemed to be a requirement for procedural change.

As a state university, Northeastern University need to develop in several directions including arts, science, commerce, management and technology. Management and technical education wing of the university during the last decade has significantly grown. As SMT was already doing well, the focus of the university has diverted more towards development of other disciplines like arts and science faculties. On development aspect, the university had invested in opening traditional departments like one for adult education and one for women education during the last couple of years. Investments were also undertaken to further strengthen the central library and laboratories for pure sciences. A close look to financial statements of university clearly revealed this fact that there was a constant increase in expenses incurred by university on other departments over last more than half decade. Also there was an increase in government grants during past few years, but none of these were meant for SMT in any way. On the contrary, as the university was not able to generate surplus revenue, surplus generated by SMT was being utilized to meet the expenses of other departments and for developmental activities as well. This was just opposite to what was happening with university funds a few years ago. "So, my concern for further investment in SMT and financial and operational autonomy should not only be appreciated but be given due weightage too" said Dr Indrakumar.

Dr Indrakumar had his own views on the matter. Although he was convinced that the university is meant for promoting all the departments equally, it was specifically required to promote the activities of SMT, providing professional education in technical and management discipline. With the advent of globalization of Indian economy during 90s, growth of professional education was gaining momentum.(see annexure-C) The products of professional education were getting absorbed in the industry at national as well as global level. The employment scenario of students passed out from the institute was improving year by year. The youth was no longer attracted towards traditional courses. The education facility in the town during the last decade had significantly increased. Private colleges and institutions are now serving the mass professional education market on massive scale. Dr Indrakumar had realized that every year, so many students from surrounding towns join private colleges for management and technical education, which are not only costly but poorly rated as well, primarily because most of them are unable to get admission in SMT due to limited availability of seats. SMT can generate additional resources by increasing number of seats and introducing new courses in management and technology. "And what I feel is my school is not getting due attention of university authorities in spite of all these facts" said Dr Indra Kumar.

#### **EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE V/S DR INDRAKUMAR**

The university authorities responded that as Dr Indrakumar never approached them for any such issue of SMT, the matter was never put in front of Executive committee. Further, as the school is doing well, there was no reason for them to think about SMT. Rather, for this reason only, their attention was diverted to poorly performing departments. If SMT was falling short of teaching and non-teaching staff, university has no issue in solving the problem, except for considering the best way of solving this problem. One important issue is, if permanent posts are sanctioned, would SMT be able to continuously generate sufficient revenue to fund them? As far as purchase of equipment is concerned, the university always had a concern



that each UTD get what it required, even if receipt and payment are maintained through a single account of university. Further, as Dr Indrakumar was doing great job over last few years, and they were happy with the way SMT is running, they thought that SMT should move ahead as per the aspiration of Dr Indrakumar, therefore, his complaints are not acceptable.

As the matter was raised in Executive committee's meeting also, committee members expressed that they never questioned or interfered with the day-to-day working of SMT. On the other hand, whenever Dr Indrakumar came forward with any dynamic and concurrent proposal, they have always supported it. In spite of knowledge of the informal ways that Dr Indrakumar found for solving the problems of SMT, they never raised the issue perceiving that it is Dr Indrakumar, who has to face day-to-day management problems of SMT. This shows that SMT has operational autonomy for all practical purposes.

“As my school has become a profitable department, my next challenge is to take the school to newer heights by introducing relevant professional and vocational courses, and this will demand channelising the surplus of school in school itself.” Said Dr Indrakumar. “and this demands more functional autonomy”. If the school aspires to cater to the growing needs of concurrent education, it will need more teaching and non-teaching staff and other infrastructure. During last half a decade, the number of admissions and fee collection in SMT has sufficiently increased, but not a single appointment in teaching or non-teaching category has taken place. Since so many years, the school is working with permanent teaching staff including one professor and four lecturers only. In addition, there are few teachers on contractual basis. There is a great dependence on visiting faculties, which generates practical problems on regular basis. Many a times, visiting faculties express their inability at the eleventh hour to come for class. At times, visiting faculty discontinue their services in between the semester. Considering eleventh hour needs, Dr Indrakumar arranged many visiting faculties through his own relations and sources, many of who could not perform up to the expectations. All this has a drastic impact on quality of education for which SMT is known.

Dr Indrakumar has to look after the entire administration, including placements of the entire school, with the support of a few contractual non-teaching staff. New appointments in any category will require approval at number of levels, right from state government to executive committee. In spite of prolonged working hours of staff, there is no provision for over-time payments. Above all this, consolidated salaries of teachers and others on contractual basis have not increased for long.

Because of quality education coupled with growing economy, the school could provide good placement to its graduating students, but the growing size of the school was not able to keep a pace with it. The track record of placements was directing the young talent of the state toward SMT, but on the other hand, lack of resources was generating quality issues for the school. Many a times, lab sessions were either delayed or suspended. Many batches complained that most of the times there was no instructor in the lab. Many of the visiting faculties were not acquainted with modern teaching pedagogies. To the height of this, arrangement of visiting faculties was too depended on the goodwill of Dr Indrakumar. The school was doing only bare minimum academics and there was no environment for research, consultancy and training. Executive committee was also not very keen to initiate the process of new appointment of teaching and non-teaching staff, as it was not only SMT but other schools as well, where this matter is pending.

#### THE AUTONOMY DILEMMA

1. The basic thing, which Dr Indrakumar was claiming for, was some more autonomy for school, so that free hand decisions can be taken up. This will demand some separation of SMT's financial transactions from that of university, which Dr Indrakumar was not sure that Executive Committee would agree for.

Dr Indrakumar took up the matter informally with executive committee members on one to one basis. When he was speaking to Mr Sudhiraj, one of the Executive Committee members, he laughed at the proposal and opined that SMT already has more functional autonomy than any other department of the university. As far as channelising the surplus resources of SMT in its own activities is concerned, he argued that the university is a non-commercial organization and SMT is not the only department to be thought of. The university has a responsibility of taking care of all the departments. Further, the university is always concerned about solving the teaching and non-teaching staff problems of SMT. Earlier also, the university has deputed couple of faculties and office staff from commerce and other departments. The Vice Chancellor has also indicated to explore the excess staff and faculties with various departments and university office, so that they can be deputed to needy departments.

His individual discussions with various Executive committee members diverted the mindset of Dr Indrakumar to a new dimension of discussion. What would happen if he negotiates with executive committee on his leaving SMT? Time and again charismatic personality of Dr Indrakumar has been reckoned with institution building of SMT. The entire system of SMT was built around the individual characteristics of Dr Indrakumar, although, being a UTD, the school should be able to stand on its own irrespective of number of academicians and administrators, who may or may not command a type reputation which Dr Indrakumar was enjoying. And as such no other department of the university was either generating surpluses or has a potential personality like Dr Indrakumar, on its roll.

2. “What can be the alternate option that I can propose to Executive committee members?” Thought Dr Indrakumar. Is it technically possible to sever the SMT from financial control of the university by separating its management and handing it over to altogether different legal body – possibly a trust or society, where some of the Executive committee members could be trustees or directors? But Dr Indrakumar was not sure that whether or not this is legally possible. Being a government body, can a university handover some of its operations to a different body which is altogether a separate legal entity? But if possible, it will for sure make the operation of SMT more professional and independent. It would be possibly agreeable to Executive committee members also, as the functional management of SMT was more or less with Dr Indrakumar and Executive committee members would never like to be seen as interfering with internal affairs of the school.

But then there is a doubt. What will happen if school starts generating losses in future? Would it come from university funds to make up the deficits? Then why should university agree to a proposal where it has only to bear the cost and sacrifice the benefits? Further, if the university decides to wind up this body in future somewhere, upon whom the assets created by it would devolve? In any case, this proposal will also require Dr Indrakumar to first convince the Executive

committee about the absolute necessity of autonomy for SMT.

3. Dr Indrakumar was also considering the option of constitutional autonomy for proposing to Executive committee members, but he was not sure whether or not it is technically feasible. Although he could recall that one of his friend working abroad talked about constitutional autonomy of the university he was working with. Dr Indrakumar was ignorant about legal provisions in the state in this regard. He knew that with growing globalisation and privatisation, the government of India has been constantly liberalizing the provisions, rules and regulations regarding governance of public sector bodies, but was not really aware of the provision in this regard in his state.

4. Dr Indrakumar thought of a new way to achieve his target of promoting professional education in the city. Relying upon his contacts with state education authorities and relations with millionaires in the town, he started thinking of establishing a private education trust/society and starting a altogether new education institute, which he can develop as per his aspirations and dreams. But then there was an obvious doubt. If the SMT is expected to do well in coming years, where is the problem? With the existing level of autonomy, he is free to take all operational decisions, simultaneously keeping up the expectations of university authorities.

Getting into deep thought process for himself as an individual, Dr Indrakumar, at times, wondered that why he is in to this entire fix? Is he taking his life and career in right direction? Why don't he look into the opportunities available for him nationally and internationally? Can he take up any one of them? While he was confident that he could excel in his performance with any of these options, he was not sure about the length of their sustainability and other complex considerations involved, like contractual obligations with international assignments, working style of owners of private institutions, etc.

With this dilemma, Dr Indrakumar took up the issue with couple of Executive committee members informally. He noticed that the response of Executive committee members to the issue was somewhere between the lines. Although Executive committee members were not interested to interfere with day to day working of SMT, they were even not intending to give up the control of a milking cow. In the mean course of time, Dr Indrakumar was swinging in between the four corners of his claim for autonomy.

ANNEXURE -A												
NORTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY												
SUMMARY OF INCOME AND EXPENDITURE (IN LAC RS)												
Fin- Years -->	1995-96	1996-97	1997-98	1998-99	1999-00	2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003	2003-2004	2004-05	2005-06	2006-2007
<b>INCOME</b>												
Management UTID ( SMT)	125	132	149	160	175	210	258	294	324	349	361	370
Science UTIDs (3 nos.)	225	224	226	220	227	235	235	230	225	220	210	207
Arts & Comm UTIDs (5 nos.)	260	275	290	275	260	259	249	245	215	210	195	190
Affiliation Fee	65	65	68	69	70	70	71	72	72	73	73	75
Examination Fee	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	5	5
Miscellaneous	3	2	3	4	4	5	7	8	9	10	11	12
<b>TOTAL INCOME</b>	<b>680</b>	<b>700</b>	<b>739</b>	<b>731</b>	<b>739</b>	<b>783</b>	<b>824</b>	<b>853</b>	<b>849</b>	<b>866</b>	<b>855</b>	<b>859</b>
CAPITAL RECEIPT	120	140	110	110	140	150	140	120	110	80	75	75
<b>GRAND TOTAL INCOME</b>	<b>800</b>	<b>840</b>	<b>849</b>	<b>841</b>	<b>879</b>	<b>933</b>	<b>964</b>	<b>973</b>	<b>959</b>	<b>946</b>	<b>930</b>	<b>934</b>
<b>EXPENDITURE</b>												
Management UTID ( SMT)	155	160	165	170	173	190	210	239	244	255	262	265
Science UTIDs (3 nos.)	220	222	220	219	225	236	234	230	231	232	235	238
Arts & Comm UTIDs (5 nos.)	200	210	215	212	210	215	220	217	212	209	207	201
Administration	180	182	185	187	188	189	190	191	193	195	195	199
Miscellaneous	2	3	2	3	3	4	4	5	5	5	6	6
<b>TOTAL EXPENDITURE</b>	<b>757</b>	<b>777</b>	<b>787</b>	<b>791</b>	<b>799</b>	<b>834</b>	<b>858</b>	<b>882</b>	<b>885</b>	<b>896</b>	<b>905</b>	<b>909</b>
CAPITAL EXPENDITURE	20	30	25	15	40	55	60	60	50	40	20	20
<b>GRAND TOTAL EXPENDITURE</b>	<b>777</b>	<b>807</b>	<b>812</b>	<b>806</b>	<b>839</b>	<b>889</b>	<b>918</b>	<b>942</b>	<b>935</b>	<b>936</b>	<b>925</b>	<b>929</b>

ANNEXURE-B



