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# IIM-Calcutta Faculty Letter to Education Ministry a Last-Ditch Attempt to 'Save the B-School'

The letter alleged that the institute has seen drastic faculty and staff shortages and reduction in spending on research, which have resulted in a decline in the academic and research environment.



The auditorium at IIM Calcutta. Photo: Lakeside Lens Lovers/CC BY-SA 2.0/Wikimedia Commons



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EDUCATION GOVERNMENT 3 HOURS AGO

**Kolkata:** Even as the faculty association of the Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta (IIM-C) awaits a response

from the Union education ministry to their December 2 letter, simmering tension between the management and the faculty continues to build up at the top business school on the eve of its diamond jubilee year.

The standoff has reached a state where a meeting of the academic council – consisting of all full-time faculty members convened by the institute director on Friday (December 11) – had to be cancelled because none of the teachers agreed to attend it.

The letter addressed to Amit Khare, secretary, Ministry of Education, signalled the tipping point in the faculty's strained relationship with institute director Anju Seth over the past couple of years. It expressed “grave concerns about the current state of affairs at the institute, accumulated over the current director's tenure, the result of a style of functioning that is arbitrary, discriminatory and having a very narrow vision”.

Signed by Ashok Banerjee, secretary of IIM-C Faculty Association, on behalf of 75% of the institute's teaching staff, the letter alleged that the institute has seen drastic faculty and staff shortages and reduction in spending on research, which have resulted in a decline in the academic and research environment. Post-doctoral research fellowships have been altogether stopped. Without mincing words, it said that the present director, who believes in “over-centralisation”, is trying to run the institute “with complete disregard for extant norms, rules and processes, thereby attempting to erase” its legacy.

The letter then stated the gross violations of norms in the functioning of the director, including systematically undermining the academic council. As chairperson of the council, the director “unilaterally sets the agenda, dictates decisions, and controls the minutes, disregarding the views of

the overwhelming majority of the members of the academic council”, it added. The director has also been accused of regularly harassing faculty members and “compelling them to work under duress”.

When *The Wire* spoke to a number of senior academics on Friday and Saturday, it became clear that the letter was a culmination of at least two years of pent up frustration against the management, which includes not only Seth, but also the chairperson of the board of governors (BoG), Shrikrishna Kulkarni. A number of senior academics felt that the present management was out to destroy the liberal, democratic nature of the institute.



“The rot that we are seeing in IIM-C has two aspects – the financial-administrative-academic aspect and the political aspect. The two complement each other. The rot starts from the chairman of the BoG. The new IIM Act that invests immense power on the BoG made us hopeful that the institute will now have greater autonomy, but that never happened, thanks to the chairman. It was clearly a political appointment done with a purpose,” said a professor who has taught at IIM-C for over 15 years.

The faculty members *The Wire* spoke to said they had gone public with their problems only after all other options were exhausted. They had written to the chairperson, the board and the alumni association. The chairperson did not respond to their communication. In December 2019, the BoG was forced to form a two-member committee to look into the grievances. The committee finally submitted its report in August 2020 and brushed aside all the allegations by the faculty saying they had been resistant to positive changes in the system initiated by the director. The report was shared with the faculty only in October this year.

Meanwhile, in June 2019, an anonymous letter from ‘Save IIM-Calcutta Forum’ was sent to the then Ministry of Human Resource Development which made various allegations, starting from the director’s smoking habit and misuse of IIM corpus to curtailing of library funds. The letter mentioned that there was widespread discontent among the faculty not only against Seth, but also against dean (academic) Bodhibrata Nag. Nag is one of the professors who did not sign the December 2 letter.

Anju Seth, an IIM-C alumna who had taught at Houston, Illinois and Virginia Tech, was appointed as director in November 2018. “She did not realise that in the 40 years she

had been away from IIM-C, the institute had made much progress. We received highly respected international accreditation from AMBA in 2013, AACSB in 2014 and EQUIS in 2015. It became a member of the prestigious global CEMS alliance of business schools in 2013. Since she had no experience of working in India, she failed to understand her role as the director,” said a senior faculty member.

“She was sceptical about everything and everyone. She stopped appointments, changed recruitment policies, rejected almost all Indian PhD candidates, even randomly cancelled casual leaves of senior professors. She started casting aspersions on the integrity of professors who had already taught here for decades. If a faculty member wanted to go to a conference, she asked for his papers from the last five or six conferences. These made no sense to us. The relationship started worsening from the very beginning,” said another faculty member on condition of anonymity.

A large section of the professors were of the opinion that Seth could have her way only because she had the backing of the chairperson. “That the chairperson did not act on the letter of grievances makes this apparent,” they observed.

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## **The chairperson and his appointment**

Shrikrishna Kulkarni, the chairperson of the IIM-C BoG, is an electrical engineer by qualification. He held top positions at Panasonic India before being appointed as the chairman in October 2017. The selection raised a few eyebrows because the chairman’s position is generally occupied by noted industry leaders. For example, the IIM-B board is headed by Dr. Devi Shetty; IIM-A has Kumar Mangalam Birla as its

board chairman. The last two chairpersons of IIM-C board were Ajit Balakrishnan (the founder of Rediff.com) and Y.C. Deveshwar (the chairman of ITC). Kulkarni certainly did not belong to the same bracket.

Kulkarni, who happens to be the great grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, received sudden media attention in March 2014 when he wrote an **open letter** to Rahul Gandhi where he slammed him for connecting the RSS ideology with Mahatma Gandhi's assassination. Accusing Rahul of 'politics of hate for selfish reasons', he wrote, "Stop this opportunistic usage of the Gandhi name. You are not from the Gandhi family. You have fooled too many people for too long in India. Stop it now."

In 2019, Kulkarni wrote another such **letter** to actor Kamal Haasan heavily criticising the latter's description of Nathuram Godse as 'the first Hindu terrorist'. "I understand your dire need for votes; for media attention; for a controversy to bring national attention to you... Your statement is proof to me that you have little or no comprehension of our 'spiritual heritage' – Sanatana dharma – the life breath of Bhaarat mata," the letter said, adding that Godse was an assassin, and not a terrorist.

Further, in February 2020, he wrote an **opinion piece** in the *Indian Express* supporting the CAA-NRC. The Act is in sync with Gandhiji's views and opposition to it distressed the author, the piece said.

Unlike any of his predecessors, Kulkarni as the chairperson has his office on the campus. The first flashpoint between him and the faculty was regarding a proposed change in the pension structure which sought to use the institute's corpus fund. The chairperson had to backtrack in the face of opposition from the faculty. (Details in the timeline below)



On October 8, 2020, the teachers had written to the chairperson and the board of governor about their differences with the director, but there was no response from Kulkarni, let alone any action being taken.

## **Conflict over new regulations**



The latest bone of contention at the institute is over three specific regulations proposed by the chairperson consequent to the IIM Act. While the Act applies to all IIMs, the regulations are specific to the individual centres.

The first and the most crucial of these is regarding the teachers' representation in the BoG. Since 1974, the faculty council has had two elected representatives on the board (Sougata Ray and Leena Chatterjee were the two faculty representatives in the BoG until December 3, 2020). One of the proposed regulations is that the teachers will now elect only one representatives to the BoG, the other one will be selected by the chairperson. This, a large section of the IIM faculty members feel is a concerted effort to corner the teachers further.

Second, the BoG seeks to invest unlimited power on the director over all academic and administrative matters without any checks and balances, which the faculty feels will be detrimental to such a large institute like IIM-C.



Third, the new regulations seek to make fundamental changes to the recruitment policy. So far, there was an inter-personnel committee (IPC) which conducted the recruitment process. It was chaired by the director and had representation from all groups or departments. The proposed system seeks to replace it with a new committee which will be headed by a new dean (faculty) and will have four nominees of the director and two nominees of academic council as members.

This new committee will process applications and advise the director. The director, however, is not obliged to follow its recommendations in recruitment. The regulations even allow her to reject or modify the recommendations of the faculty selection committee. The faculty is resisting this because it once again gives the director unbridled power to decide on faculty recruitment.

“We decided to fight one battle at a time. And since we have to interact with the director on a day-to-day basis, we highlighted our differences with her in the said letter. But there is no doubt that without the chairperson’s unequivocal support, she could not operate like this. Given the professional background of the chairperson, if he is asked to run an academic institution of this size and stature, he is bound to mess up. They both are to be blamed for the sudden decline in the academic environment of the campus,” said another faculty member.

“The IIM-C has always been an apolitical liberal democratic space which has accommodated all thoughts and cultures. Leftist stalwarts like Ashok Mitra taught here. Historian Ramachandra Guha studied here. At the same time Amitava Bose was our director and he was no leftist. There never was any conflict. But today, across the nation, democratic academic spaces are being targeted, and the IIM-C scenario is no exception,” he added.

All efforts on part of *The Wire* to reach out to the dean, director and chairperson failed throughout Friday and Saturday. This report will be updated if either of them responds to emails sent by *The Wire*.

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### A timeline of events at IIM-C leading up to the present standoff

Date / Month	Event
25 October, 2017	Shrikrishna Kulkarni takes over as chairman, BoG.
14 November, 2017	The chairman meets faculty members for an interactive session.

Date / Month	Event
31 January, 2018	The new IIM Act (2017) comes into force. The new act gives considerable autonomy to the board and the chairman.
8 April, 2018	On the day of convocation, contrary to the popular expectations, the then full-time director Saibal Chattopadhyay is not given an extension and B.N. Srivastava takes over as director in-charge.
April-June, 2018	Initial bonhomie between the faculty and the chairman is broken on the issue of converting the earlier retirees' CPF into a pension scheme, imposing heavy burden on the corpus of the institute (as the government won't pay for this burden). This was a pet project of the chairman.
13 June, 2018	Faculty representative on the board, Sougata Ray, briefs the faculty on the formation of a resolution committee on the above issue formed by the board.

Date / Month	Event
15 June, 2018	Letter from 33 faculty members seeking open communication and checking the legality of the CPF-GPF issue. This was the first direct confrontation between the chairman and the faculty.
April- November, 2018	B.N. Srivastava runs the institute as director in-charge. It was rumoured that he might take the IIM board to court and stake his claim as future director till his retirement.
16 November, 2018	In a dramatic move, Anju Seth is appointed as director and is flown from the US overnight to take charge and B.N. Srivastava is completely taken by surprise – this is apparently done so that Srivastava doesn't get time to approach the court.

Date / Month	Event
17 November, 2018 to 27 January, 2019	Immediately after taking charge, Anju Seth proceeds on leave; Leena Chatterjee, a senior professor and faculty representative on the board becomes the director (acting). B.N. Srivastava continues as a faculty member till his retirement in May, 2019.
28 January, 2019	Anju Seth rejoins as director. From the very beginning she is very sceptical about the internal processes of IIM Calcutta and starts holding/delaying various routine matters like approval of leave, grants for research proposals and conferences. In one of the academic council meeting she mentions brusquely that she is unable to calibrate in Indian rupees. The board effectively gives Anju Seth the power to unilaterally change extant processes of the institute till the new regulations under the IIM Act come into force.

Date / Month	Event
14 February, 2019	Email from doctoral committee chairperson states that research policy is put on hold; but in a faculty meeting held on November 18, 2019 “the director intimates that there has been no change in policy of research funding”
14 February, 2019	The doctoral committee chairperson (in-charge of research policy) is asked to send an email to group coordinators (HoDs in common parlance) asking for a list of internationally reputed conferences in each area – nothing comes out of this exercise.
4 March, 2019	Dean (academic) Runa Sarkar resigns from administrative position citing personal reasons
5 March, 2019	Bodhibrata Nag is appointed as the new dean (academic). He has been instrumental in implementing many of the changes.

Date / Month	Event
26 June, 2019	BoG approves five critical regulations curtailing the power of the academic council (forum of all faculty members, the highest decision making body of IIM-C).
26 June, 2019	BoG approves new conference participation and funding policy 2019 which removes the research sub-committee from the process required for international and domestic conference funding approval, but this is sent to the faculty only on November 5, 2019.
27 June, 2019	Chairman meets faculty members and faculty expresses discomfort with levels of engagement and the lack of consultation; chairman categorically states there can be no room for discussion on regulations.
5 July, 2019	Email from 44 faculty members to director seeking a meeting of the academic council to discuss regulations.



Date / Month	Event
16 July, 2019	Convenor of faculty council Soumyen Sikdar writes to director seeking discussion on regulations in academic council.
17 July, 2019	Director writes to chairman (BoG) seeking advice on the request for discussion of regulations sent by convenor, faculty council to director as it is a board related matter.
18 July, 2019	Chairman (BoG) writes to faculty council convenor that there cannot be a discussion on regulations in the academic council meeting
25 September, 2019	A task force for MBA curriculum review formed without any consultation at academic council; 25 faculty members write asking for it to be discussed at the council, but to no effect. Anju Seth does not bring this important agenda to the council and the review gets stalled.
26 September, 2019	Vidyanand Jha, a professor, resigns as coordinator, Centre for Entrepreneurship and Innovation.


Date / Month	Event
5 November, 2019	Director informs faculty of the change in international and domestic conference participation and funding policy; faculty writes back to her stating that the new “process is more time-consuming, cumbersome and extremely bureaucratic.” But there is no response from the director.
17 December, 2019	In a board meeting, three representatives (Ashok Banerjee, Biju Paul Abraham and Runa Sarkar) from the faculty make a presentation on faculty concerns. The board forms a two-member committee with two board members: Harsh Chauhan (a BJP nominee to Rajya Sabha from Madhya Pradesh) and Sumant Sinha (Late Yashwant Sinha’s son); dean (academic) Bodhibrata Nag is made secretary.

Date / Month	Event
June 2020	This committee talks to some of the faculty members after six months and takes two more months to come out with its final report. The report brushes aside all allegations made by the faculty as these being an expression of anxiety and apprehension during the process of change which has been initiated by Anju Seth. The report is shared with faculty only in October 2020.
September 2020	The first regulations of IIM Calcutta are drafted by a sub-committee chaired by the BoG chairperson. The faculty member on the sub-committee expresses serious reservations and writes a dissent note to the chairperson.
7 November, 2020	Draft regulations presented at a board meeting and faculty members on the board say they may have to express dissent if the regulations are finalised in the current form.

Date / Month	Event
8 and 9 November, 2020	Chairperson and another board member have consultations with faculty members on the board and modify certain aspects of the draft.
14 November, 2020	Board adopts the modified regulations by circulation and there is no dissent from any member.
20 November, 2020	Director informs the two faculty members on the BoG about the guidelines for electing new board members from the faculty. The guidelines are designed by the chairperson.
21 November, 2020	Faculty members on the board write that the “interpretation of the regulations is in violation of both the letter and the spirit of the [unenforced] regulations recently adopted”.
25 November, 2020	Revised process for the election of the faculty members to the board is intimated.

Date / Month	Event
3 December, 2020	The election takes place. Only six out of 80 faculty members vote, but the entire process is cancelled because of 'glitches' in the e-voting process.
11 December, 2020	Director calls an academic council meeting to finalise rules relating to electing board representatives and forms a task force (without taking the consent of the faculty) to frame the election rules. All the task force members refuse to be part of it and the meeting has to be called off.

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