

**Evaluation of Doctoral Thesis by Foreign Examiners: A Case Study of Complexities,
Implications, and Defensive Arguments**

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Abstract

The study deals with a problem encountered by a Ph.D. scholar in the evaluation of his thesis by a foreign examiner. This was grossly in contrast to the evaluation report of the Indian examiner who graded the study as highly commendable. The thesis submitted in 2013 was recommended for redrafting in 2015 by the foreign examiner and the difficulties that formed an integral part of the administration, rules, and regulations severely consumed larger quantum of time causing mental stress, monetary loss, academic humiliation, and etc. Hence the study draws a framework of Ph.D. related rules and seeks to discuss the common anomalies. Following that, he introduces the adverse remarks made by the foreign examiner wherein an objective overview is effectively made. This logically leads to the defending views made by the scholar. In conclusion, the second and third parts of the writing are weighed and hypothesis verified.

Keywords: Scholar, External Examiner, Research, Study, Assessment, Ph.D.

Introduction

Association of knowledge with the type of degree a person holds has become a universal phenomenon since the first decade of the twenty-first century. Earlier a person with an M.A. or

M. Phil degree serving in a higher educational institution was mentioned as professor and those with a Ph.D. degree as doctors as if the latter is a designation and is superior in hierarchy. But hardly anybody distinguished between the ability of the two categories as far as teaching and knowledge transmission was concerned. A person holding a doctoral degree was made eligible for special increments in salary and he held the eligibility to become a professor – direct and promoted – a designation remained available only in the few universities of that time. But the trend started to change in a swift manner and the doctoral degree started gaining importance. The ‘National Knowledge Commission’ that tabled its report in 2006 Compared India with countries like the UK, the USA, China, and etc and pointed to the low number of doctoral degrees the country produces in proportion to its population. At that time, the certificates issued after passing the ‘National Eligibility Test’ conducted by bodies like the Universities Grants Commission, the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, the Indian Council of Agricultural Research and etc were accorded higher status followed by the State Level Eligibility Test than doctoral degrees. To cope with the issue of the standard at par with the holders of National Eligibility Certificate for lectureship some of the universities laid down strict parameters for assessing Ph.D. degrees among which evaluation by a foreign examiner was one. The present study seeks to examine issues in that context with a particular case study.

In the present case, a candidate who entered teaching career with the NET certificate issued by UGC dedicated about eight years of his life working for a Ph.D. degree. Starting in October 2005, he submitted his thesis on 12th September 2013. But the valuation of the Indian examiner and the foreign examiner varied grossly that prevented the scholar from being awarded

the degree. The focus of the present study is based on that. In order to avoid speculations and controversies, the names of the foreign examiner and that of the scholar were avoided from being mentioned. The reports of the examiner, the thesis of the scholar, the prospectus of the University and the opinion of the scholar form the source material for the study. The hypothesis of the study maintains that ‘the evaluation by an examiner with a proven research record in the field of the scholar alone should be employed to evaluate that thesis.’ With this as the binding idea, the study explains the Ph.D. norms followed by the remarks made by the foreign examiner and the defensive rejoinder of the scholar.

The Complex Premise and Insensitivity

In India, the provisions that govern a Ph.D. degree are much different from other degrees. Whereas other degrees enable a smooth sailing from admission to appearing in the last exams of the final semester, a Ph.D. degree above all mandates an absolute command over rules, regulations, and amendments laid down by the university as and when the latter deemed it necessary. A minute violation of the rules affect the research process and causes friction between the guide and the candidate on the one hand and the officials of the university on the other. Research supervisors of the yesteryears more often than not are hardly well versed in internet operations and poorly update information posted by the research section of the university on the internet. In some cases – as in the case of the Bharathidasan University – all the functions of the research section are carried out by the secretariat of the ‘Controller of Examinations.’ As of the rules were concerned it distinguishes among registered research scholars variously into categories such as ‘independent,’ ‘full-time,’ ‘external’ and etc. Rules are not uniform for all

categories as also the fees. Nevertheless, parameters fixed for a research supervisor are almost uniform although the limiting of the number of candidates they could guide varied from university to university. But there are no rules that speak about the method that should be followed in writing except fixing the minimum number of pages and format of presentation.

Taking into cognizance the basic training undergone by the scholar over a period of time as also the expertise of the supervisor the need for outlining the method to be adopted is ruled out. Moreover, the supervisor admits a candidate without M. Phil degree after conducting a qualifying test even if he holds the prestigious National Eligibility Test certificate. From the beginning, the candidate's performance vis-à-vis research methodology is continuously assessed by the examiner in which he is supported by the university appointed doctoral committee member. After a period of time, both together evaluate the efforts of the scholar and his ascertainment of knowledge in the area of his or her research and recommend to the university to issue a confirmation certificate in effect authorizing the research potential and intellectual caliber. No doubt, at this stage the errors and mistakes are subjected to correction. Once after going through this process, the candidate carries out his or her research in consultation with the supervisor and further corrects the writings. Finally, the researcher presents the synopsis in the public forum of learned scholars exposing his work for further correction following which a meaningful time is spent on final drafting. Of late, developments online pertaining to checking plagiarism and grammar have immense benefits for the scholars to personally proof-read and rectify errors. As far as the present case was concerned the 'Ubuntu' external software certified the work to be one hundred percent plagiarism free and original contribution.

To provide an adverse remark to a Ph.D. thesis after crossing these many levels is a definite embarrassment. The university before sending the thesis sends the synopsis – along with two research papers published in refereed and peer-reviewed journals – for the examiner to go through and have a rough idea. If the examiner finds the work of the scholar to be unconvincing he can take the liberty to either halt the submission of the candidate and make corrections or as in many cases reject the evaluation offer. But to repeatedly recommending for correction is nothing less than making a mockery of the native scholarship. This may tantamount to the souring of the relationship between two countries academically. It is more so when the candidate is in qualified employment in the academic field and noted as an emerging scholar. But regardless of all these an external examiner valued a thesis in a high-handed manner.

The Evaluation and its implication

The foreign examiner in his first report identified the problems in the thesis categorizing them into major and minor issues. Among the minor issues, he first outlined the lack of the section ‘terminology’ which could have – in his opinion – explained expressions like Sangam Age, Bhakti Literature, and etc. He added that there was literally nothing included in the Appendix section and the grammar and usage was identified as not convincing. Missing information in footnotes and it being given continuously without a break after every chapter were identified as spoiling the status of the thesis. In the ‘bibliography’ section books were numbered

while articles were not. Time periods were noted to have mentioned in AD and BC against the expected CE and BCE. The major problems were many. Two works, one a Ph.D. thesis and another a book were said as ignored by the scholar. Some of the original sources maintained in the Archives of Goa and Lisbon have to be referred to in which place only translated and edited works have been used. Neither the 'review of the literature' did explicitly express the research gap, nor the 'statement of thesis' clarifies the intention of the research. Limiting the scope of the study by fixing a period i.e. 1500-1600 AD is problematic if the intention of the said researcher was to explain conversion and change. Only two chapters were dedicated to post-conversion changes said as the main agenda of the thesis. The foreign examiner was also skeptical about the use of hypotheses formed by the scholar.

Further, he provided a framework for the scholar to follow. Accordingly, the first chapter will be entitled 'Introduction' wherein statement of the problem and thesis, review of literature, the significance of the thesis and its contribution –to the scholarly world – methodology, source materials, limitations, and caveats were to be explained. He also stressed the need to induct a section on strategy engulfing the main argument of each chapter that builds up to the conclusion. Brief furnishing of the historical and geographical context without violating the course of the main thesis was also recommended to form an integral part of the introduction. This was to be followed by the second chapter entitled 'Social and Economic Standing' followed by the third chapter named 'Religion and Caste, and Political Context.' In these two chapters, he expected the scholar to discuss the trends in particular fields prior to their conversion. The fourth chapter was suggested to be entitled 'Portuguese Catholicism' under which the religious conversion of

the coastal people and the contributions of noted missionaries like Francis Xavier, Henri Henriquez and others could be effectively discussed.

The fifth chapter was to be on the ‘Impact of Conversion.’ Herein it was stated to classify ‘impact’ as long term and short term capturing in both sides the influences and effects. The field data collected by the scholar was to form the basis for analyzing the long term effects and impact whereas Portuguese primary sources were to be utilized to make an account of the short term ones so that the main justifications for the thesis were presented. The sixth chapter was to be maintained as ‘Latinization at the Crossroads.’ In this chapter, the main subthemes to be included were the ‘impact of conversion and the converts as Portuguese Catholics’ outlining “the main contentions of the reasons for presenting the case” vis-à-vis the main thesis. Following that the ‘Conclusion’ forms the seventh chapter that sought to restate the thesis and chapter-by-chapter reconstruction of the thesis and leaving a brief statement for the future. The foreign examiner mandated the changes to be carried out in a period not less than twelve months in which the scholar has to learn the Portuguese language and reshape his writing. It was also required that the revised thesis to be resent to himself for evaluation. But the norms under which the scholar was governed by the university provided scope for only one-month extension in the case of a recommended revision.

Before the report could reach the university – after more than two years from the date of submission – the supervisor expired. The candidate did not want to make the changes

recommended by the foreign examiner and requested the university for revaluation. But the university insisted on a person who could take responsibility for the candidate. The doctoral committee member assumed the responsibility and again the same request was placed. But if the foreign examiner had adjudged the thesis as failing in expected standard then the rules provided space for revaluation. But a recommendation to entirely redraft a thesis can only be resent to the original examiner. Therefore, the scholar had no other way than making corrections. The foreign examiner again recommended changes in the effect of which the candidate had to submit three different theses spending 6 more years from the date of his submission. The scholar underwent a lot of financial loss, mental stress, and career-related challenges to the extent of giving up the pursuance of the degree of doctor of philosophy. But these were no one's concern.

The Affidavit of the Scholar

The scholar does not hesitate to accept his failure to include the section of glossary of terms as part of his thesis as also numbering the books in the bibliography section. But grammar and usage were checked through effective software such as 'Grammarly.' The language of presentation was not subjected to criticism for the scholar was a civil services aspirant after passing out of college, and hence, was exposed to other disciplines in social sciences such as political science, and sociology by way of which he professes to have reached a style of presenting matters in a language style suitable for history writing. In fact, the study is an unconventional one with an interdisciplinary approach. Moreover, the scholar is of the opinion

that the appendix section includes field photos and the map of the 'Pearl Fishery Coast' with descriptions on the importance of the images captured. In fact, these are new addendums that could enrich historical understandings and should not be rejected as insignificant. Similarly, some of the footnotes were not provided page numbers because those ideas and information were borrowed from cyclostyled and photo-stated material which does not depict them. Hence, it should only be appreciated as part of intellectual honesty. The difference in mentioning AD in the place of CE and BC against BCE are the basic freedoms available to scholars and pointing them as erroneous is harassment and authoritarianism. Similarly, the Indian academia prefers the classifying of historical works into classifications such as ancient, medieval, modern and contemporary. Therefore, the doctoral committee recommended including 1500-1600 AD as part of the thesis during the presentation of synopsis.

The foreign examiner had done reasonable work on the internet to assess the thesis. The two works thus he went across was works of scholars not unknown to the scholar. One author's work was proscribed by Indian historians for charges of plagiarism. Another work was a Ph.D. thesis which later became a book. The book is referred by the scholar, and therefore referring to the thesis is not necessitated. These books have employed Portuguese language primary sources extensively and have minimum work done on the field. Rather, typical to 'intellectual history' the scholar had taken the fictional works of noted writer Joe d'Cruz and correlates his memory with select sources. He dedicated a chapter on theoretical framework wherein the major views on religious conversions were discussed indirectly hinting at the review of literature being separated. But it sadly failed to capture the notice of the external examiner. Similarly, there were

nine interlinked hypotheses each forming the main substance of every chapter and ensured coherence, continuity, and flow. Unlike, the external examiner's design, the scholar's introduction and conclusion were not attributed chapter numbers.

In the section on historiography that formed part of the introduction, the scholar clarifies that “new interpretations like what has been postulated by Robin Horton cannot be arrived at merely through intensive rereading of the sources.” Robin Horton – who had worked on the religious conversion among Africans – stresses the need to study the life pattern before conversion extensively and compare it with the changes after conversion and assess whether the conversion is extensive or only marginal. The scholar includes the Marxist method and enquires whether there had been any change introduced in the basic tools of production and observes corresponding change taking place in the spheres of society and religion in a style akin to ‘Sanskritization.’ Thus his chapters were ordered in line as Historical Geography, Economy, Religion, Society, Sixteenth Century Socio-Political Ruptures, Arrival of St. Xavier and After, and Latinization at Crossroads. In conclusion, he discusses the results and findings of the thesis based on the hypotheses wherein he states that the basic tools of production were not subjected to change, and therefore, the change of religion is only symbolic. The external examiner in his two evaluation reports hardly had made any criticisms on the methodology followed by the scholar. Yet he found fault and projected himself as a staunch advocate of the Rankean method as the only possible approach and experimenting on other methods to write social history are invalid.

Conclusion

The foreign examiners neither realize the conditions available for research in India nor do all of them have a comprehensive understanding of Indian history and society. In the present case, only with familiarity on M.N. Srinivas's views on Sanskritization and Westernization, a scholar could adjudge ideas encapsulated within the concept 'Latinization.' Although some of the Indian supervisors argue that they have benefitted from the evaluative opinion of the foreign examiners, the committee on minimum standards of 2009 did not make it mandatory to get a Ph.D. thesis corrected by a foreign examiner. The UGC regulations of 2016 also left evaluation by a foreign examiner as optional. Even those supervisors who receive highly commended certification from the foreign examiners rarely receive a chance to evaluate a foreign thesis which goes only to show the academic complexities vis-à-vis developed and developing countries. Particularly when the views of an established Indian academician strikingly vary with that of a foreign examiner it provides scope for confusion and speculation. More so in the present case, as the viva-voce examination was held for a thesis that was altogether different from that valued by the Indian examiner grossly undermining native scholarship. In such a context, the hypothesis 'the evaluation by an examiner with a proven research record in the field of the scholar alone should be employed to evaluate that thesis' stands valid.

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