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UGC wakes up to animal rights, clamps down on dissections

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The University Grants Commission (UGC) has issued a notice to all universities and colleges under it to desist from dissections "wherever possible".

Drawing attention to the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 and the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1960, the notice has called for evolving a road map to replace animal dissection in class work.

The UGC, which has received several petitions to put a stop to dissections, has noted that the rising number of students, courses and institutions has raised the demand for animals for dissection.

Animal rights activists impressed on the UGC how these demands are compounding problems such as depletion of animal population, habitat loss, pollution and climate change. In its directive, the notice said, "All educational institutions coming under the purview of UGC shall prescribe laboratory curriculum involving animals in such a way that is compassionate with the animals, avoid experiments on animals, wherever possible, and use alternatives in their place."

It has sought to reduce the number of animal dissections and wants the experiments to be contained to only laboratory-bred animals, both in under-graduate and post-graduate studies. In fact, it has listed out specific guidelines for the two levels of studies.

The UGC's guidelines have come after a committee, formed to look into the possibilities of tackling the situation, gave its report. "This would entail large-scale participation and interdisciplinary discussion," pointed out a zoology professor, who did not wish to be identified. "Use of virtual labs will be difficult, but not impossible. The guidelines are currently being avidly debated," he added.

The UGC has also called for a 'Dissection Monitoring Committees' to be set up at all higher education institutions. These committees will explicitly ensure the animals for dissection are procured in an ethical manner, not removed from the wild and also transported to the laboratory without stress or strain. For live dissections, the animals have to be appropriately anaesthetised. "The UGC guidelines are welcome, but the changes called for cannot be implemented overnight, though we have already started taking cognisance of them," said Prof B B Nath, head of the zoology department at the University of Pune.

Nath also rushed to clarify that the scope for live dissections has already become insignificant at the University of Pune. "Dissections here are done on dead animals. Anybody wanting to use an animal for research or experimentation has to undergo strict scrutiny of a committee formed for such work. The syllabus has also been revised in a way to minimise the need for dissections," he explained. He also defended that the university breeds animals for its experiments and no animal is plucked out of the wild for research.

Echoing Nath, Dr K D Pendharkar, head of the zoology department at Fergusson College, said, "Experiments are done on dead animals as there is not too much zoological research happening in the university nowadays."

Welcoming the move, conservation biologist Pooja Bhale pointed out, "Though animal dissection is critical to study zoology, today there are equally good options such as virtual laboratories available to avoid the process."

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