

Challenging A Masculinist Culture

Women's Protest In St Stephen's College

IN February this year, St Stephen's college was splashed in the news. Having studied in the institution, I have felt the need to place the situation within that college in somewhat better perspective. There is a need to appreciate the context out of which the recent upheavals arose.

The kind of sexual harassment and discriminatory practices that have come to light in Stephen's are not restricted to his one college. Such harassment is common knowledge, but it is normally ignored, treated as trivial. The only reason it has today come to be a matter of public concern is that some women of the college have openly questioned it.

All over Delhi University, women students and teachers have been reporting harassment, insulting remarks, gestures and physical, assault, on campus and in buses. Women from all colleges, the "ordinary" as well as the "elite", have been experiencing such harassment, and they are supposed to adjust to accept, to "take it"; certainly to keep quiet about it.

Several men's colleges have recently opened their gates to women, and this is a welcome move. But the entry of women is being carefully screened; The percentage of women in the mixed colleges, including Sri Ram College of Commerce, Kirori Mal, R'amjas, Dayal Singh, Hans Raj, St Stephen's remains

abysmally low. Stephen's falls into the general pattern of male dominated colleges which have benevolently allowed a handful of women to enter, but not without strong resistance from a section of male students.

Earlier, Stephanians used to indulge in ritual harassment of women of other colleges, witness the annual striptease and nude dancing in front of the Miranda House and post graduate women's hostels, which continued up to as late as 1979. By and large, the venue has now shifted closer home.

The authorities have helped to create a masculinist culture by means of certain discriminatory policies. In certain courses such as the BA (Pass), no women students are admitted as a matter of policy. Nor is any woman admitted as a student unless both her parents live in Delhi. In 1984, a case was filed against the college authorities by Mallika, who was denied admission on the ground that her father was posted out of town and her mother was presumably not capable of "looking after" her. During admission interviews, women are frequently



Demonstrators at the college gate

subjected to questions like “Which perfume do you use, young lady?” and “How do you spend your evenings?”

The absence of hostel accommodation in all such mixed colleges puts women at a serious disadvantage. Over 300 men students live on the Stephen’s campus. A women’s hostel could well be built since there is ample space adjoining the college campus. This, in fact, is what the principal had promised ‘the students more than four years ago. Despite appeals, requests and a signature campaign three years ago, no steps have been taken in this direction. When we presented the sheet with over 400 signatures to the principal, he summarily dismissed it as being of no value : “We can collect 500 signatures saying that students do not want a women’s hostel.” He informed us that a hostel would be built as soon as the cement shortage due to the Asiad constructions was relieved, and also declared that the hostel would have very strict rules. However, no hostel building is yet in sight.

The students’ unions in all these mixed colleges are predominantly male. In Stephen’s there is always one woman on the union and she is the “member for women’s affairs.” According to unwritten rules, union members are chosen from among the hostel residents.

During Holi time, 1981, anti women attitudes were starkly revealed. About 60 armed ruffians from outside broke into the college and remained inside for over half an hour, during which time they molested the women students present. The principal was in his office, several staff members were present and also a few hundred men students were on the college campus, yet no one did anything to prevent this assault. Nor did they call in the police, though there was ample time in which to do so. Indeed, the actual incidents would have remained concealed had not some women, including many of those assaulted, made an effort to expose and record what had happened. Later, some of these women

wished to file police cases against some of the identifiable hoodlums. However, the college authorities actively discouraged them. It was Indraprastha women’s college that organised a demonstration in protest against sexual harassment immediately after this incident. Some Stephanians, most of them women, joined the protest.

Similar incidents could well have occurred the next year, had not some students, most of them concerned women, taken concerted preventive action. During the months preceding Holi 1982, several of us actively campaigned against sexual harassment. We perceived



—Joke

it to be a widespread problem, the solution to which could only lie in the direction of collective struggle, and thus extended the campaign to many other colleges.

Joining hands with women from other colleges, we participated in a great deal of patient and wide ranging discussion, and devised action which included a recounting and sharing of experiences and solutions at the personal level, general body meetings and assembly addresses in colleges, lessons in self defence, a television programme on sexual harassment, and leafletting in several colleges. Suggestions from

women of different colleges were collated and given to the DTC and the police, as also to the vice chancellor. Steps were taken to form joint vigilance committees of students, administrative staff and teachers, which were active before Holi.

The college authorities responded to this initiative by cracking down on the active students. There was, however, an atmosphere of sympathy and support created by the entire body of women students in the college and also by sympathetic men students, and teachers. So the authorities were forced to see the issues as serious, but their response was to close down the college not one but five days prior to Holi. They did not consider that such a return to seclusion on the part of women is an admission of defeat at the hands of unbridled ruffians.

Later, the active women were blatantly refused admission into post graduate courses. Jyotsna was specifically asked why she should study in the college, when she did not like the way women were treated here, and was denied admission to MA despite a consistently good academic record. Our room, the “big” ladies’ common room, a spacious one in which we had been able to relax and also to hold meetings and discussions, make posters and learn songs, was taken away from us. Women were relegated to the one poky little room, the “small” ladies’ common room which has seating space for precisely half a dozen persons, the big common room was simply locked, and remains locked today.

An age old Stephanian tradition is to bring out scandal sheets regularly. *Katy* (Kooler Talk) and *Spice* are, they proclaim, “devoted to clean wholesome scandal.” Both have a record of unashamedly concocting untrue and humiliating stories and comments. Neither students nor teachers are spared this particular brand of humour which uses not sexual allusion but rather sexual insult as a means of gratification. They are produced by a coterie of students

along with staff advisers.

In 1984, some women initiated a debate on these scandal sheets, which culminated in the demand that the publication of *Spice* be stopped forthwith. A sizeable chunk of students raised this demand. Yet it was not considered seriously. Instead, Alka, one of the more active students, was hauled up, and asked to call her parents to meet the college authorities, which she flatly refused to do.

Sexist abuse is manifest in the practice of “chick charts” which have been regularly put up not only on walls but also on the official notice boards. Male students evidently see it as their right to vivisect and rate women colleagues in terms of figure and face. On the charts the “top ten chicks” were named. Names were distorted (Mimi becoming Menude and so on). The remarks made on the charts reduced the women to the status of objects: “It’s a cool, cool experience”, “Miss Innocence”, “Big surprises come in small packs” and so on.

During 1984, several women made it clear that they do not enjoy being thus rated. Some women took the initiative to organize a general body meeting to discuss the issue. The entire body of women expressed strong resentment at the charts, and asked that the men responsible discontinue the practice or else that the authorities forbid it. Neither the miscreants nor the authorities paid any heed, and “chick charts” continued, even, blossoming into “hen charts.” During a slide presentation in mid January, on “Women and popular culture”, a student raised the question whether “chick charts” are demeaning to women. The questioner was aggressively hooted at and told to shut up, since that was an “internal” matter.

Such charts are not an exclusive prerogative of Stephen’s—they have been a feature of life in other institutions too, including the Indian Institutes of Technology and Sri Ram College of Commerce which has produced charts



of the top ten “uglies” of the college. According to a student who has recently passed out from the college, the “uglies” charts are even more horrible than the “chick” charts, since they humiliate the concerned women much more. Although most of the women in the college have felt very bad about this custom, yet there has been no concerted protest against them.

On January 31, 1985, some male Stephanians played a “practical joke” by breaking into the ladies’ common room, raiding the women’s lockers, and hanging out clothing, including under clothes. Early the next morning, people were startled to see these clothes hanging on the cross that surmounts the college tower.

Two angry and upset teachers called in the press, but mass hysteria ensued because a “domestic matter” was being made public. The handful of students who did talk to the press and reveal the facts were virtually *gheraoed*.

The authorities made statements like, “Boys will be boys” and “If a bride is burnt in the house you won’t call in outsiders, will you?” were made. Whereas the behaviour of the “boys” was thus rationalised, the women who protested were treated to various repressive measures. Five of these “girls” were asked to call their parents. Moreover, armed police guarded the gates of the college. When asked what

the purpose of calling the police was, the authorities said it was to prevent militant women’s organisations and “riff-raff” students from other colleges, who were said to be jealous of Stephanians, from entering the premises. Women students were forbidden to hold meetings on the pre-mises or even to talk to each other in groups of more than two,

Equally disturbing to us was the fact that gangs of male Stephanians took it upon themselves to “guard” the college. This included staging at the gates with policemen, and eavesdropping on those who were likely to protest against the incident. These self appointed guardians of the “*college k izzat*” enjoyed the open patronage of the college authorities.

The January 31 incident sparked off concern and anger in the wider university community. Early in February, a joint demonstration was staged by nearly a thousand people, mostly students from various colleges, particularly Indraprastha, Jesus and Mary and Miranda-House women’s colleges, expressing solidarity with those being victimised in Stephen’s and demanding punitive action against the miscreants. The demonstration, noticeably diverged from the pattern of the average political demonstration, and was remarkable for its verve and visible emotion. Slogans included newly coined ones like “*Hum Bharat ki nari hain, Chick nahin chingari hain*”, and “We are neither pretty nor ugly, we’re furious, We’re neither chicks nor hens, we’re furious.” Only a few Stephanian women actually joined the demonstration. Although many more had expressed a desire to do so, quite a few were scared at the measures the authorities might use against them. Teachers of the university also issued a joint memorandum to the college authorities in which they voiced shock at attempts to “privatise” what was in essence a social problem, of concern to all.

Within a short while, the authorities put a ban on the publication of *Spice*

and *Katy*. They also identified those who had raided the common room, and punished them by disallowing them to enter the college compound except to take exams.

St Stephen's is no exception the women-abusing ideology prevalent here

is very much in line with norms and realities in other colleges. In Ramjas, for instance, in early February, a woman student was blatantly threatened at knife-point by an outsider within the college premises and during college hours. In Khalsa there may be a protective attitude

towards "their own" women, yet some students terrorise women from other colleges, particularly Miranda House which is across the road. Dayal Singh is notorious for having some knife-wielding students who play havoc with women in public places.

Give Women An Informed Choice

THE injectable contraceptive, Depo Provera, has been banned in the USA and the UK. The government of India does not allow its import. Recently, however, another injectable contraceptive, under the brand name of NET-EN (Norethisterone Enanthate), is being tried out on women in India under the direction of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR).

According to research findings in western countries, this contraceptive causes menstrual chaos, weight gain, hair loss, severe depression, headaches and other side effects. Its long term effects are unknown. It has not been approved for use in any western country.

On March 30, Stree Shakti Sanghatana came to know that a NET-EN camp was to be inaugurated on April 1, at the rural health centre, Patancheru, under the auspices of Osmania Medical College, with the local collector to grace the function. Without being given any information about NET-EN, illiterate village women were to be injected with it.

There was not enough time to mobilise all our supporters, so five of us left for Patancheru, armed with a petition requesting the collector to stop the camp and with placards describing the dangers of the drug.

We tried to persuade the doctors there that they would be doing harm by conducting such a camp. All of them felt it was safe because ICMR had conducted an experiment on 2,600 women. Yet not

one of them had read the report of this study, even though Dr Anjaneyulu had been to ICMR, Delhi, several times, in connection with the programme.

Even women gynecologists felt that the use of this injectable was justified since the pill had proved harmful. Dr Sundari Krishna agreed that NET-EN would produce side effects but said that western women, being educated and well off, complained too much. Dr. Anjaneyulu was of the opinion that everything has side effects, even walking down the road to get drinking water.

The question of informed choice kept cropping up but the argument could not be resolved. The collector intervened and said that both sides should present their views to the women at the camp so that they could judge for themselves. About 75 women had assembled. After hearing both sides, about half of them walked out. The collector was visibly upset. He had not expected this to happen. He said that the camp had to go on since government had decided to hold it, but that we would be provided every support to follow up the cases 'and study the after effects on women.

He also insisted that if we objected to the injectable, we were morally bound to support the government's tubectomy and laparoscopy camps. We were told that we were not justified in disrupting this camp unless we provided an alternative.

We feel such blatant experimentation has to be stopped. We plan to appeal to



the supreme court to order a stay of this ICMR project. We appeal to women's groups in other parts of the country to find out whether medical colleges have already begun NET-EN experiments and, if so, to campaign against them.

Sumati Nair, Vimal Balasubrahmanyam