

In A Hostile Environment

—The Case Of I. T. College, Lucknow



HAVE you ever visited a prison ? Even if you have not, you must be aware that a prison is a place where people whose free movement are considered to be a potential danger to society, are kept and deprived of the fundamental right to freedom of movement. But have you ever heard of any group of adult, educated, civilised people who have not committed any offence but live like prisoners and are allowed to go out only twice or thrice a week, even then not alone?

In the towns and cities of our country, many young women studying in colleges and living in hostels are in such an imprisoned state. They are allowed to go out only a couple of times a week, in the company of their local guardians. No such rules are implemented in boys' hostels.

In spite of all these restrictions, however, college going girls are looked at askance. Their developing some ability to take decisions regarding their own lives, to mix with boys, to be indifferent to hostile opinion, causes middle class society to view them with aggressive suspicion.

Today, the students of the famous Isabella Thoburn women's college, Lucknow, have been made the victims of an extreme form of such aggression.

For the last two years, former and present managements of the college have been locked in a dispute over bungling of Rs 5,000,000.

To save herself, the present dean of

the hostel, Ms J.T. Broadway, gave a statement to the press, saying that there was a large scale call girl racket operating in the hostel and that the management regularly supplied girls to police officers and other highly placed men. Though there was not a shred of evidence, the papers, without making any enquiries, seized on her statement, and blew it up in the most sensational manner. All of Lucknow now talks about it as a proven fact, the college is viewed as a brothel and every student as a call girl. Day scholars find it difficult to tell a scooter driver that they want to go to IT college, because the name is enough to damn them.

The Lucknow university students' enquiry committee investigated the matter and produced a report, showing that the accusation was baseless. Ms Broadway produced two useless documents as evidence. One was a letter purportedly from a man in Delhi asking when a certain girl was coming. This letter had postal marks of Lucknow on both sides, and the girl's parents confirmed that it was from a relative of theirs. The other document was a letter of apology extracted from a girl by the dean. This girl had gone with a teacher at 11 a.m. to buy some stuff for a college function. The dean scolded her severely and, two months later, forced her to write a letter of apology. On this basis, the dean gave the girl's name to the papers and tried to defame her.

When asked by the enquiry committee why she was further persecuting the girls who, according to her, were being sexually exploited by the management, the dean had no answer.

As soon as the dean released her statement to the press, the hostellers went in procession to her house and protested, demanding that she either release the names of the girls concerned or withdraw her statement which was having an adverse effect on all of them. Broadway reacted by threatening to give the names of the protesters to the press, and to have them sent them to jail.

The students then released a memorandum signed by 350 girls but not a single newspaper printed it. Even after the enquiry committee released its findings and the dean was suspended, the papers continued to publish sensationalised, defamatory reports about the girls. So the girls decided to conduct a rally on April 17, to appeal to the chief minister. The teachers helped them in making preparations such as banners and posters. But just as they were ready to start, the present manager of the college forbade them to go out. They were told that men might throw

acid and stones at them. The papers had already proclaimed that the proposed rally was a trick of the management to save itself. The girls were intimidated into giving up the idea and the management was satisfied.

The management and the dean have not yet been able to explain the financial bungling. The sufferers are the girls who are now under extremely severe

restrictions from their guardians and from hostel authorities. They are not allowed to step out of the hostel gates, even for shopping. Their guardians, although worried that no one will want to marry the girls, do not want them to show any signs of protest because they feel girls should be patient and longsuffering.

Colleges like IT college, with a tradition of producing a somewhat

greater proportion of professional women, whose students tend to develop somewhat greater assertiveness and ability to deal with the outside world, come in for far more slanderous attack than colleges which enforce more seclusion and breed submissiveness. Hence the intense viciousness of this campaign against IT college women.

(translated from Hindi)