

Last Priority?

—Women In the IARI

THE Indian Agricultural Research Institute (IARI), Delhi, was founded in 1905 and is a premier agricultural institute. Financed by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research, it draws its students from the best all over the country.

The imposing entrance of the IARI owes its spruce lawns and roads to the prime minister's visit on February 6 for the convocation. The authorities were willing to allocate funds for this renovation but are apathetic to the lack of suitable accommodation for girl students.

The prospectus promises hostel accommodation to all students. IARI is a residential campus because the course, with its tight work schedule, requires students to work in laboratories till late at night. All the 400 male students live on the campus, in the three men's hostels.

But of the 120 girls, only 56 are staying on the campus. Delhi based girls have been denied this facility 'because the one girls' hostel, Varsha, has no room for them.

Varsha, constructed in 1936, started getting overcrowded and, from 1982, three girls had to share a room. The boys never faced such a problem because when the need arose a decade ago, a third hostel was built for them.

Varsha is in a dilapidated condition. In 1979, CPWD declared it unfit for habitation. Five years ago, part of the ceiling collapsed. The authorities ignored the girls' requests for a new hostel building.

In 1985, a girl narrowly escaped injury when chunks of the ceiling plaster fell. Two more such incidents occurred that year. Finally, all the girls moved out of the hostel and said they would rather camp in the open. The authorities were compelled to temporarily accommodate

them in the visiting scientists hostel annexe which has 46 rooms.

Varsha is now being renovated. The students say this renovation is a rough patch up job which will in no way alter the basic rotten structure. Further, Varsha can, in any case, accommodate only 42 students. The girls are afraid to voice their needs too vociferously, and insisted on remaining anonymous, because all the students of IARI are dependent on merit scholarships which can be withdrawn by the authorities. They also fear they will be denied admission for higher studies at IARI if they protest.

The students' union has written a series of letters to various authorities including a letter to the prime minister in January 1986. The reply via ICAR said that since the proposal was not forwarded by the director of IARI, it could not be considered. The agricultural minister, when approached, also said funds could be allocated only if the director forwarded the proposal.

The authorities propose to shift some girls into Sharad, the married students' hostel which, the girls say, is termite infested and badly out of repair. Married students are being shifted into a new hostel which is under construction. The girls say the new hostel was originally meant for them but has now been arbitrarily allocated to married students.

We spoke to Mr. N.N. Goswami, dean and joint director. He attributed the accommodation problem to "the sudden exodus of the fair sex" into IARI. He said that IARI had adopted a "pragmatic, objective and progressive policy" by merely denying accommodation to Delhi based girls instead of choosing to limit the admission of girls to the institute. He said the girls were making unreasonable demands, and dismissed the dilapidated

condition of Varsha by saying that one cannot be certain a new building will not also collapse. He

also categorically denied that Sharad was a married students' hostel. However, minutes and reports of meetings between students and the authorities refer to Sharad as a married students' hostel.

Why is it that girls' accommodation is treated as a last priority? As it is, girls are in a minority in most professional educational institutions. Instead of providing special incentives to women, IARI authorities seem to consider they are doing a favour to women by not restricting their admission. Delhi based girls now have to cope with the workload in shorter hours and spend hours commuting. The girls in the hostel live in crowded and unsafe conditions.

It is unfortunate that decision making procedures are so undemocratic that even when the entire student body is united on a manifestly just demand, they are powerless to implement it and can only plead with authorities, even while they are in dread of being victimised.

—Madhu Mehra, Sadhana Kaul

Challenged Again

The Lawyers' Collective has filed a petition on behalf of Sheh-naaz Sheikh, Kamila Tyabji and Anees Sayyad, challenging the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act as violative of the Constitution, on the ground that it discriminates against divorced Muslim women and prevents them from applying for maintenance from their husbands.

Hundreds of pending applications under section 125 CrPC are liable to be dismissed under the Act and it will also encourage men to divorce their wives.

The challenge to the Act is part of a campaign to strengthen the rights of women. This is not limited to Muslim women alone. Section 125 should be amended to give all women a better deal. The present upper limit of Rs 500 is absurdly low and ought to be increased to Rs 5,000. The amount of maintenance will then depend on the income of the husband and the standard of living of the parties.