

IT STARTED as a minor argument. Staff nurse Shiela Massey was filling in forms at a table in the intensive care ward for surgery patients in Delhi's Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital, on the morning of May 21. She asked the doctor on duty, H.B. Routray, who was sitting across from her, to pass her a register. The doctor refused. An argument ensued and hot words were exchanged. What followed is a gruesome illustration of the kind of violence that women are subject to, both in the workplace and in the home.



Shiela Massey

Routray got up from the table, moved across to Shiela and gave her a violent push. She fell forward, her face hitting the table hard. Recovering from the blow, she lifted her head, only to be beaten down twice more. A patient came running to her assistance and prevented the doctor from inflicting more hurt. A shocked Shiela Massey was bleeding profusely from the nose and had badly sprained her right hand. Subsequently X-rays revealed that there was a crack in her nasal bone. The nurse was six months pregnant at the time.

The other nurses in the ward rushed her to the office of the Medical Superintendent Dr. P.B. Majumdar. As news of the attack spread, angry nurses from all over the hospital gathered outside the medical superintendent's office. Hospital staff and doctors also rushed to the place.

The hospital workers' union, to which nurses and other class III and class IV staff are affiliated, demanded that immediate action be taken against the errant doctor. With scores of agitating

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nurses at the doorstep, the Medical Superintendent was forced to order an inquiry. The Deputy Medical Superintendent Dr Siddiqui promptly conducted an enquiry, cross-questioned everyone concerned and concluded that the doctor had been at fault. Since he was a resident and as such, his was a temporary job, the hospital terminated his services. A case was also registered with the police. The resident doctors' association then alleged that the enquiry was "unfair" and held under pressure. They went on strike to protest against the dismissal of Routray,

Meanwhile, Sister Massey was admitted to the hospital for treatment of her injuries. Her relatives were afraid that she might miscarry: "Shiela's first child was born through a caesarian operation and we were apprehensive that some complications might occur because of this incident"—but luckily this has not so far happened

When a Manushi representative visited her in hospital, Shiela Massey lay in bed, tired, bandaged up and in pain. Outside, a few nurses spoke angrily about the incident. When asked if this was an isolated instance or reflective of the general attitude of male doctors to nurses, a nurse said heatedly: "These doctors treat us as if we are there just to fetch and carry for them. 'Nurse, get me a glass of water', 'Sister, make some tea', 'Go and get the case sheets'—their damn demands are endless. Why don't they realise that we are here as employees trained to do a specific skilled job?"

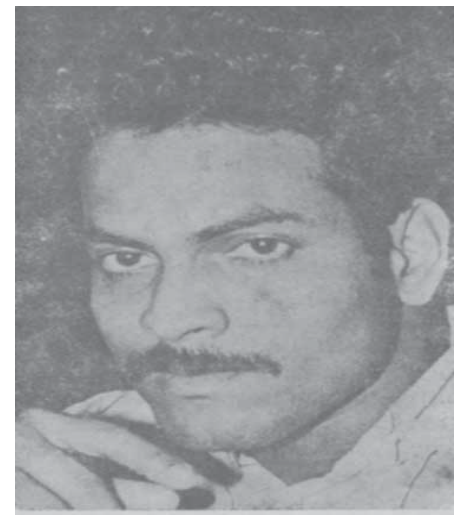
Another nurse added: "We get treated badly but it is worse for class IV employees. They are treated like domestic servants. They are sent on the doctor's private errands—to the bank, the post office, to pay electricity bills or get ration cards for doctors' families."

The hierarchical system of work allotment in hospitals with sweepers and *ayahs* (untrained women who attend patients) at the bottom rung, nurses in the

middle and doctors at the top, clearly breeds its own discontent. And when the hierarchy is not merely doctor-above-nurse but also coincides with the male-over-female hierarchy, antagonisms are sharper.

Nurses, because of the nature of their work, and the timings they are required to keep, are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment at the hands of both doctors and patients.

The doctors of the hospital,



predominantly male, have decided to actively support one of their tribe, instead of supporting the injured woman. Again, it is important that even within the workers' union, it is the nurses themselves who have displayed more anger and militancy than their male colleagues.

Routray said: "It is only because she is a woman and there was so much blood that everybody is creating such a scene." The resident doctors decided that Routray had been victimized. They went on strike till the authorities were pressurized into reinstating him. Dr. Routray's political connections also helped him a great deal and now we hear there is going to be an enquiry into the "rude behaviour" of the nurse!

—Suji