

THE student nurses of All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), began an indefinite strike on December 2, 1983. Their main demands were for shorter duty hours, medical leave, a lowering of the attendance requirement to 80 percent and return of sums deducted from their stipend for absence. Other longstanding demands are for a hostel, a college building, and facilities for recreational activities and for specialised training.

The student nurses enrol for a four year course. An external examination is conducted at the end of every academic year. The marks they gain in this examination constitute 50 percent of their overall evaluation. The other half is based on internal assessment of their clinical experience, that is, on what they learn by working in the wards.

All the students enrolled are girls, a majority of them from Christian families. Nursing does not enjoy the prestige that doctoring does in our society, though it is equally important to the medical profession. Parents do not send their sons into nursing, nor does AIIMS admit boys to the course. A nurse, even in the popular imagination, is a girl in white skirts and stockings, with a prim bonnet placed on her tidy head. Unfortunately, her life is not as prim and tidy as her apparel would suggest. As soon as she is enrolled to be trained, she begins to be exploited.

### **Not Even Medical Leave**

Like students in other colleges, student nurses are also given a month's summer vacation and a nine day winter vacation. However, unlike other students, the student nurses leave for their holidays in two batches, one in June and one in July. The same practice is followed in winter. The authorities decide on which days a student can leave for her winter vacation. They also get seven days' leave which is supposed to be casual leave, but is actually treated as medical leave.

The student nurses are expected

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## **Noble Profession Or Cheap Labour ?**

to have 100 percent attendance. They work from 7.30 a.m. to 5p.m., six days a week, throughout the year. They cannot take casual leave when they need it. They cannot even take this leave on a medical basis, until the principal is convinced that they are really sick. The student is required to produce a card from the hospital, as evidence that she is sick. There is no provision for unforeseen situations in a student's family or in her own life. For instance, one student, Madhavi Yadav, wanted leave because her father was ill but was denied leave and was told that nurses must leave their family problems behind when taking up a "noble" profession like nursing. Strangely, nobility and self sacrifice are traits of character expected only from the underprivileged and the poor.

### **Training Or Labour ?**

From 7.30 a.m. to 3 p.m., the students are supposed to learn the art of tending patients in the wards. Five patients are

assigned to each student. She is responsible for making their beds, bathing them, taking specimens, giving them medicines and so on. One tutor, is appointed in each ward to teach the practicalities of nursing. The students complain that these tutors have no specialised knowledge, and pay very little attention to them. But since the students' internal assessment is in their hands, the students are at their mercy.

In each ward there is a trained nurse and two staff nurses. They are supposed to help the students but according to the students, they merely keep an account of drugs and do other table work. In effect, the students learn little but labour much. Immediately after this tiring work, the students leave to attend lecture classes which continue till 5 p.m.

### **Labour Indispensable**

The manner in which students are made to take their vacation in relays suggests that their labour is



indispensable to the running of the hospital. Perhaps this is the reason why the authorities have made rules to ensure that students attend the wards regularly. The two hours of lectures each afternoon are not seen by the authorities as so important. The students have to complete 225 days of clinical experience in order to qualify for the certificate.

They are given a stipend of Rs 110 per month. This is increased by Rs 10 each year. According to the authorities, this stipend is given because the girls "are from poor families." For each day that a student is absent, Rs 4 is deducted from her stipend. Even when she makes up by being present on a Sunday or holiday, the deducted money is not refunded. A representative of the AIIMS said: "No work, no pay, that is the general policy." When a student makes up for absence by being present on a Sunday or holiday, the trained nurses who are on duty take it easy. This is an added deterrent against absence.

Each student has to sign a bond undertaking to work for the hospital for at least two years after completion of the course. If AIIMS fails to provide her a job within three months of completion of her training she can accept employment elsewhere. But if a girl chooses to accept a better paid job elsewhere she must return all the stipend money received in four years, which would add up to a sum of about Rs 6,000.

How does this fit in with the authorities' consideration for "poor students"? The stipend of Rs 110 does not eliminate the student's dependence on her family, since she has to spend nearly Rs 200 on food and gets no laundry allowance. She has to wash her uniforms herself and iron them on Sundays.

### **The Protest**

Despite repeated pleas to the authorities, the students received no more than verbal assurances from them that they would "look into" their problems. Grievances were common

and feelings acute. Towards the end of November the students absented themselves en masse, the day after their annual cultural function. The following day, they were given a questionnaire which required them to define a sick leave and a casual leave. This was a way of telling them that their action was unrecognised. They decided to take up the issue. The next day, they did not go to the wards but went to the lecture classes. They were told that lecture classes had been suspended since they had boycotted duty in the wards. This in effect became a strike.

The students approached the authorities as members of their Student Nurses Association. The authorities told them that this was only a cultural association, not a union, so they are now organised without any formal organisational structure.

Though initially all the students participated in the strike, some left to join duty, for various reasons. Those who are nuns left because they felt it was rebellion against the church to go on strike. Suman Varghese found verses in the Bible which said that one's duty should not be shirked. A father from a church, one girl said, had been called in to deliver a sermon, and she feels that might have had an effect on those who left.

The authorities did their utmost to thwart the efforts of the students. Apart from threatening disciplinary action and expulsion, they called the girls by the worst name that our society reserves for rebellious women—prostitutes. Aliamma said that her father had been told by one lecturer that some student nurses earn an extra income by devious means. Letters were sent to the girls' parents, asking them to pressurise their daughters to withdraw the strike but, by and large, the parents stood by the girls. The students agitated authorities by sitting in at the foyer of the administrative block, and by sticking innumerable posters all over the place. They also sought the support of other associations and unions within the

AIIMS. This support was extended to them.

Finally, on January 5, matters came to a head when the authorities ordered the girls to vacate the hostel by 1p.m. and called in the police. The students decided to resist eviction and the stage was set for a confrontation.

The place was swarming with press reporters and photographers. Since warrants had been issued for the arrest of the leaders, they were in hiding, and tension had mounted. The authorities decided to call the girls for negotiations, after giving them a written assurance that they would not be arrested during negotiations.

The girls finally agreed to 25 days' more vacation, five more days of casual leave which adds up to a total of 12 days. The girls can avail of this leave up to a period of seven days at one time, without having to make up for it, and without their stipend being cut. Their duty hours have been reduced from 54 to 40 hours a week. The snag is that though the authorities agreed to withdraw the cases filed against some girls, they have not yet withdrawn these cases. The girls apprehend that the cases will be revived after a year or two, when the incidents are remote in memory, and most girls have gone away to other places. The students are very bitter about this, and are even prepared for another confrontation on this issue. The students had filed a counter case against the Delhi police and the security officer of AIIMS on the charge of entering the ladies' hostel and manhandling a girl, the day before the college closed sine die. This case has not been withdrawn. "We did not promise to withdraw it", say the girls.

The leaders of the strike repeatedly emphasise that it was only the unity of the student nurses which enabled the strike to be carried on for nearly 40 days, and to come to a partially successful end. Now they say, their successors will know what to do when faced with injustice. They have shown the way. □