

UNSAFE CAMPUS, SAFE HARASSERS?

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Delhi University, which has under its ambit 79 colleges and which caters to more than 7.5 lakh students, and which has remained in the forefront of many a democratic demand of the people in general and teaching community in particular, is today very much in the news, albeit for totally wrong reasons.

Let us call him Prof X.

A respected faculty in URDU department, a man of (they say) letters, harasses one of his girl students. The poor girl who has fought against heavy odds to reach there, finds her world crumbling down.

A lady teacher in the department (Let us call her Dr Salma) decides to take up her case. Fights a lonely battle. Forces the university administration to conduct an enquiry. But three years on, the enquiry committee has yet to come up with any conclusion.

The respected faculty, supposed to be an Urdu Alim is firmly ensconced in his seat. And the poor girl, with lot of promise has lost her mental balance.

But can it be said that the matter has ended there with a single tragedy. Little did anyone realize then that daggers were already out for the lady teacher for standing upto this 'respected faculty'.

It has been more than three months that media reported about the campaign which is being run on the net targeting Dr Salma wherein '...Some unknown persons have compiled a piece of literature, pornographic in nature, which stars the Urdu lecturer and mailed it to Urdu faculties and also to Urdu magazines and newspapers.' (metronow, 7/3/07 Vanita Chitkara, Porn Assault on DU Urdu Teacher)

In an interaction with the reporter Dr Salma has revealed what she says as the 'unpleasant reality of Urdu Department of Delhi University' where 'there is sexual abuse, there is an apathetic and unresponsive university body and there is the age old attempt to force a woman into her place by attacking and maligning her character.'

As of now there has been no breakthrough in the investigation, despite Dr Salma's lodging a formal complaint with the police.

For all practical purposes the 'respected' family still keeps singing paens to Urdu language repeating it umpteen times that it is a language of tehzeeb (culture) and the poor girl, who is undergoing psychiatric treatment, is still trying to come to grips with the real meaning of tehzeeb.

The case of one Prof Chakrabarty, is more blatant. A section of the media has already reported that Prof Chakrabarty, faces a serious charge of sexual harassment. [City pages of Times of India and Hindu (mainly in the week beginning April 16, 2007, but there are also reports today. May 1, 2007)]

It is now history how the dilly-dallying and initial attempts at cover-up on part of the university authorities forced a lady employee working under him to rush to the media to explain his depredations.

Once the case made headlines the university administration had no other option than to appoint an enquiry committee to look into the case. But it was immediately clear to even a layperson that the top authorities of the university were not very serious about the investigation

itself and were keen to save one of the senior members of the faculty from any aftermath. This despite the fact that Policy on Sexual Harassment (Ordinance XV (D)) passed by the university itself a few years back specifically emphasizes the fact that the alleged perpetrator—in all such cases of sexual harassment at the workplace—relinquish all his positions of power or the university administration (temporarily, pending enquiry) relieves him of all or suspends him.

Incidentally the said policy was formulated by the university administration in the backdrop of the Supreme Court Judgement on cases of Sexual Harassment at workplace (August 1997, Vishakha and others vs, the State of Rajasthan and others) and the guidelines issued by it to make all such 'workplaces' free of genderbased violence.

One can oneself imagine the awe inspired by any such head of the department, head of any institution who wields tremendous influence in making/breaking careers. And one can easily gather the outcome of the case if the alleged perpetrator is allowed to remain in his post.

Recently this penpusher came across an urgent appeal sent by senior members of the department of political science itself who have taken upon themselves the onerous task of helping the valiant woman, in her struggle for dignity and self-respect.

Both the cases demonstrate a few things very clearly.

- Despite noble intentions of the Supreme Court in issuing the guidelines, fact remains that they are observed in breach and all the talk of making the workplaces free of sexual violence is still a mirage.
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- Looking at the fact that persons in authority (who normally happen to be the harassers) can never allow any impartial enquiry into their own acts of sexual behaviour, one needs to revisit the guidelines themselves and make third party intervention a must.

It raises serious questions about the prime institution like Delhi University itself which has refused to lead by example. Gone are the days when it raised its voice in unison against voices of insanity and illiberalism. Gone are the days when it led the teaching community for better quality of life.

One still remembers the sexual harassment case filed against one Prof Bhatia who happened to head one of the departments of Delhi University in mid-nineties. There were many complaints against him but very few women dared raise their voice against him. Most of them either left the department unannounced or remaining few continued to suffer in silence. But there was another brave woman who dared to raise her voice. She exposed Prof Bhatia's depredations and the manner in which he was instrumental in 'spoiling many a budding career'.

The case caught imagination of a wide section of university community. There were protests and rallies to take action against Prof Bhatia. Despite the high profile campaign and the support it generated in a section of the media, there was only some symbolic action against him. The man who 'spoiled many a budding career', the man who was a habitual harasser was allowed to retire with 'dignity'.

As things are, the same tradition continues. □□□