

Follow Up Report on a Case of Sexual Harassment in Delhi University

by

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In the last issue of Manushi (No. 68) we reported serious allegations of sexual harassment against the Head, Department of Adult Continuing Education and Extension (DACEE), Delhi University, Dr S.C. Bhatia. Since then, in the last week of March the DACEE staff went on a relay hunger strike to protest against the non payment of their salaries as well as against the University's inaction concerning their charges of sexual harassment against Dr S.C. Bhatia. Delhi University Teacher's Association (DUTA),¹ also joined with the DACEE union in demanding action against Dr Bhatia on the basis of the charges made against him.

On March 26, 1992, in a meeting of the Academic Council, the Vice Chancellor, Upendra Baxi, told those present that Dr Bhatia would be asked to go on leave and would also be removed as Head of DACEE, while retaining his position as Director. On learning of these developments, we assumed that Delhi University was beginning to take the necessary steps in this case. However, a few weeks later, Professor Shukla of Delhi University's Faculty of Education phoned to say that he was disturbed to find Dr Bhatia in attendance at a meeting of the Board of Research Studies in Social Sciences on April 9 and April 10, 1992. Professor Shukla subsequently wrote a letter to the University protesting that: "if the University has sent him [Dr Bhatia]

on leave, as a matter of decency and discipline and out of legitimate concern for the dignity of its women members, and, indeed, its own, it is not permissible for Professor Bhatia to be participating in meetings."

On receiving a copy of this letter from the author, we thought it



necessary to find out from the University what action it had taken regarding the charges against Dr Bhatia. I phoned the Vice Chancellor and was informed he was out of Delhi. I was advised to contact the Pro Vice Chancellor, Professor Nagar, to obtain information on the latest developments in this case. I phoned him several times and left messages asking him to call me back. He did not return my calls. Finally, after trying a few more times, I phoned him at his residence and spoke to him.

As soon as I mentioned that I was calling to find out if an enquiry committee had been established to examine the allegations against Dr Bhatia, he exploded: "You have been taking too many liberties and publishing a lot of rubbish. I refuse to tell you anything." That seemed a strange response from somebody who had been assigned the task of enquiring into the allegations.

I then asked him: "Since you are asserting with such confidence that the women's allegations are 'rubbish' does this mean you have already completed your enquiry?"

His response: "I don't need any enquiry to know that those charges are rubbish. You had no business to publish such nonsense."

I persisted: "Please tell me whether or not an enquiry has been instituted and whether Bhatia has been asked to proceed on leave." He exploded again: "Why should I tell you anything? Did you consult us before you published that rubbish? You had no business to publish such nonsense."

I replied: "Do you mean that I should have sought the University's permission?" (I had sent an advance copy of the charges to the Vice Chancellor Upendra Baxi and had several lengthy phone conversations with him on the subject prior to publishing the article.)

Professor Nagar repeated angrily that he wouldn't tell me anything since

I hadn't 'consulted' him earlier. He also cast aspersions regarding the veracity of the two women of DACEE who made the original complaints.

I then asked: "Does this mean that you see yourself as a defender of Bhatia rather than someone who is to investigate impartially?"

His final reply: "I don't want to talk to you since you did not consult me." That is where our conversation ended.

Professor Nagar's outbursts and vehement defence of Dr Bhatia are all the more disturbing as he has apparently been assigned the task of organising some sort of enquiry into the allegations. A day or two before my telephone conversation with him the two women from DACEE who had made the sexual harassment complaints against Dr Bhatia received letters from him saying that, "in order to investigate [their] charges, it has been decided to institute an enquiry." The two women were "advised to send [their] complaints... giving all details and any documentary evidence in a sealed cover to [Professor Nagar] in confidence as soon as possible, but not later than 10 May 1992."

Having failed to get any

information about the status of the enquiry from Professor Nagar, I phoned Professor Veena Das, who is serving as temporary head of DACEE, and asked her the same two questions. She said she knew nothing about Dr Bhatia's having been asked to proceed on leave. Nor did she have any information about an enquiry committee having been set up. All she knew was that Dr Bhatia had resigned from the position of Head of DACEE, but not as Director, and that he continued to function as a Professor on the faculty.

In the meantime Dr Sushma Merh, one of the complainants against Dr Bhatia, in her letter dated May 4, 1992 in response to his letter of April 28 referred to above, has refused to submit any further evidence on the following grounds:

"I am afraid that after the experience of the... Baviskar Committee... I am rather sceptical about the honesty of the University in respect to such 'enquiries'.... let the University prop-erly appoint an enquiry clarifying the following points:

1. Nature of the enquiry
2. Composition of the Committee
3. Terms of reference of the Committee

4. Procedure of enquiry

Only when the above points are clearly stated by the University there can be any further correspondence on this count as I am not sure that this time also the University shall indulge in another scandalous eyewash..."

Since the allegations in this case have a long history, are of a very serious nature, and the University's own efforts at investigation have not been vigorous and swift, we demand that:

- the University ask for an enquiry by a high court judge to look into the charges of sexual harassment and ensure that due process is followed.

- the terms of reference and structure of this investigation be made public.

- Dr Bhatia not be permitted to participate in the work of the University pending the completion of the enquiry.

- the charge of sexual harassment be investigated separately and independently. It should not be confused with the other charges of corruption and mismanagement, or any other long standing problems in DACEE, such as job regularisation.

- the enquiry be completed within three months and the report be made public soon thereafter. □

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