

Need for a Thorough Probe

Complaints from Department of Adult Continuing Education and Extension, Delhi University

Delhi University has had its own share of scandals. In the past few years there have even been cases of women scientific researchers committing suicide because they were unable to cope with the level of sexual harassment. The scientific institutions and departments within the university are particularly infamous for the frequency of such incidents. Recently, extremely serious charges of sexual harassment have come from another source, women staff of the Department of Adult Continuing Education and Extension (DACEE), Delhi University.

In January 1992, members of his staff accused Dr S.C. Bhatia, Director,

DACEE, Delhi University, of physical assault on a staff project officer who was protesting against non-payment of his salary. Immediately thereafter the staff began a dharna and agitation against the Director seeking his ouster for this and a number of other reasons. In the course of this agitation, a detailed written accusation was prepared by members of the protesting staff alleging that the director had committed numerous instances of sexual harassment and abuse of women staff members. Additional aims of the agitation include getting their temporary posts made permanent and exposing the Director's alleged financial irregularities.

In an interview with Dr Sushama Merh, Assistant Director DACEE, she told us that years previously, in September 1987, she and some others had made written complaints to the then Vice Chancellor Moonis Raza regarding the malfunctioning of the Department. In addition, she verbally communicated to him some of the instances of sexual harassment they had to put up with. The university had appointed Professor Baviskar to head an inquiry committee in 1989 but that report had never been released so she did not know their conclusions. She told us that, as in the present case, those complaints had also been supported by many other members of the Department's staff.



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Given below are extracts from the allegations made in a written statement signed by 14 members of the Department's staff, submitted to Manushi in the first week of February, 1992:

The present situation is the result of what has happened in the Department over a span of time longer than the past decade. It was sparked off when S.C. Bhatia manhandled and verbally abused a staff member in the first week of January, 1992. The major charges against him are sexual abuse, molestation and exploitation of women staff members over the past ten years or more. Many of the incidents had been reported to the university during approximately the last five years. Out of the 22 women who joined the Department as staff members from its inception to the present, almost all of them have left. Over 80 percent of them suffered some or the other type of physical vulgarity and harassment from Bhatia. At present only two women staff members remain in the Department. These two are now fighting back against him and are struggling for their professional survival. Except for the head of the Department, Dr Bhatia himself, the entire academic staff has been either in ad hoc or temporary positions for more than eight years. This situation is being manipulated by S.C. Bhatia, who was himself made permanent without any advertisement or a selection committee. He has been the only head of this Department over all these years, and he has both misused and abused these powers. The other charges relate to professional and academic harassment. Whatever is being reported is based on personal and empirical evidence and experience, and the exchange of notes among female and male colleagues who are staff members. A majority of the appointees when the Department was founded and over the following years (1979-1988 approximately)

were women. Most of the women he chose for the positions in the earlier years were young, attractive and unmarried.

The pattern he followed in order to lure female staff was often similar. He would start out by creating the impression that he was an extremely important, competent and able professional in order to impress the new woman with his power and pull. He would find some occasion for calling the woman into his office on the pretext that he had some



assignment for her. His office is at the extreme end of the building. It is not directly connected with the rest of the rooms; the other doors in the office are permanently closed except for a single entry door. Adjacent to his office there's a small, dark room that is supposed to serve as a stationery and publications storage room. The only way anyone can enter this room is through Bhatia's office.

He would start by taking a special interest in the new woman, treating her to tea and lunch, and praising her in front of the other staff. He would often take her along with him to seminars and conferences both in and outside Delhi. He would also find ways of putting a lot of contingency money in her hands for use on transport or other 'official' work. These perks were not

available to any other of the female staff. If she indicated any tendency in that direction, he would try to dissuade her from marrying. If he could not convince her to break off seeing anyone else at all, Bhatia would blacklist the unfortunate woman. She was rebuked, all her privileges and perks were taken from her, and humiliated both when alone with him and in front of other staff. He would sometimes ask her to sit on her chair from 9 a.m. to 5.30 p.m. without allowing her to get up even to go to the bathroom.

He would insistently comment on the breasts, waist, blouses, of the Department's women staff and try to squeeze their breasts; he often asked to see the colour of their panties. He also asked them about the kind of bra they wore. Bhatia has even gone to the point of lowering his pants in front of some of his female colleagues, catching them totally unawares! He often tried to pressurise them to have sex with him. There were instances when he asked one or another of them to provide him with comfort by caressing him while he laid his head on her lap.

In instances where the woman did have some courage and talked about Bhatia's sexual harassment to others, either to colleagues in or outside the Department or to the university authorities, he would try hard to fire her as well as to insult her academically and professionally.

When many of the women staff Bhatia hired left the Department and his behavior became more public and known, he started defending himself in front of the male staff members to impress upon them his professional steadfastness on the one hand, but at the same time using vulgar, demeaning and voyeuristic verbal expressions. Some of the male staff testified in writing that he often made statements such as the following when referring to women working under him:

• *"Oh that lady! She would come in low cut blouses, bend in front of me*

...contd. on pg.9

...contd. from pg.7

provocatively, her "furrows" showing and breasts quite visible and inviting. ...she wanted it... she got it."

• "Oh! That one? She was available over just a cup of tea. I know the colours of her panties too."

• "You people just see, when women will come for interviews for various posts to be advertised, how many of them will be ready to open their blouse, lower their salwars or lift their skirts to get the job."

He has not regularised any member of the academic staff over the past eight to ten years, only a few from the clerical staff, because in this way he could prevent anyone else from becoming Head of Department under rotation.

The Vice Chancellor is known to be sympathetic to women on these issues but thus far he has not taken any action. Up to now, many of the specific instances of sexual harassment and abuse were not written down and reported to the university, though a lot of information was provided them over the years, with no ascertainable result.

In addition to the charges of a pattern of sexual harassment with women staff members given above, we also present two individual case histories prepared from the original complaint document:

Case A

Under the pretext of official work, Dr Bhatia called her into his office. He stood up as though he needed to reach for a book on a shelf, but instead came around behind her, put his arms around her and squeezed. She got up in a decisive manner, pushed him away, and told him to behave himself and stick to the work he said he had called her in to assist him in doing. He laughed off her protest but stopped his harassment and started to attend to the work.

In the next incident he called her in, ostensibly for helping him with some official work. He was sitting on the sofa. Sheets of paper and some booklets were lying on the table in front of him. He asked her to come and sit down next to

him. She sat down on a separate sofa instead. While he was talking about the work materials on the table in front of him he told her he wanted to show her something in them and asked her to sit next to him and look at it. She came over and found that he was asking her to look at a brochure with a picture of a mother feeding a child on the first page. He pointed at the woman's breast in the picture and told her, "Yeh Kya Hai? Ma doodh pila rahi hai... hum bhi bachhe hain, hamain bhipilao." (What is this? The mother is breast feeding. I am also a child. Breast feed me!). As he got up, he tried to grab her breast. She quickly avoided his hand and left the room. For days she went about dazed and nervous. At first she wouldn't tell anyone what had happened. Subsequently, however, she refused to go to Bhatia's room alone.

A month or so later she had to get some stationery that was usually kept in a very dark room adjacent to Bhatia's office. She informed Bhatia that she needed some stationery; he told her she could get it from the storage room. She went inside, switched on the light and went to pick up the stationery. Bhatia has a refrigerator in this storage room. While she was in the room getting the stationery, Bhatia entered as though he were intending to take a bottle of water out of the refrigerator. Instead, suddenly, the lights went off. As she nervously turned to leave the room, she felt a pair of hands catching hold of her hand. A moment later she felt a penis in her hand. She pushed him away and ran. In the streak of light that came from outside she saw Bhatia with his pants down in a strange state.

From that day onwards, she no longer went anywhere that he might find an opportunity to harass her. However, she was still not able to tell anyone about what had happened to her.

During a staff meeting, he got up, came round behind her, and pushed her shoulder so forcefully that her chair overturned and she fell backwards. Her

spectacles broke, the back of her head was hurt, and she began crying. He giggled and said to other staff, "She is mad. She is an actress. She might take Smita Patil's place." After this incident, she refused to go to his office for any reason, and demanded that Bhatia come to her office if he wished to transact any official business. She also reported what had happened to the then Vice Chancellor, Moonis Raza, but nothing changed as a result of her complaint.

A few months later Bhatia came to her room shouting in an angry tone; when she responded by raising her voice, he started to advance towards her. But before he could reach her, she, fearing that he intended to hit her, pushed him away. He immediately left the room, shouting abuses and saying she had gone insane. He then locked her in her office from the outside, called the rest of the staff and told them that he intended to put her behind bars because she was insane. It took more than 15 minutes for the staff to rescue her. In the meanwhile Bhatia had left.

When she got home she described what had happened to her husband; it was also reported to the university in writing. Though at this point the staff openly took her part, Bhatia suffered no consequences as a result of his maltreatment of her.

Instead, she herself was placed in one of the south campus colleges of Delhi University without being provided with the necessary facilities to do her work. As a result of these experiences she contracted a variety of health problems, including angina and high blood pressure.

She says that she had to generate work for herself as without funds she could not carry out any of the activities in the south campus. She has now secured a fellowship at the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Simla. She asserts that she got this fellowship on the basis of her work which she carried on despite efforts on the part of Dr Bhatia to block all avenues of work

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for her. However, the university has not been able to sanction her leave (without pay) to take the fellowship because she is still in a temporary slot after eight years of service.

Case B

This woman is considered an ex-tremely efficient staff member. She would often stay late in the evening to complete work. Sometimes, she even came in on Saturdays and Sundays as well, when necessary. She was unmarried. For years, Bhatia had dissuaded her from marrying.

Some days she appeared very upset, her face flushed. She later revealed that the reason she looked like this at times in the office was that he was forcing kisses on her. He would also grab her, pulling her *palu* away and forcing her nearer to him. He would sometimes beg her to let him sit with his head resting in her lap and caress him. She also had to resist his attempts to take her for outings in his car.

Gradually, he began to realise that she was able to offer effective resistance to the more extreme types of sexual harassment he had already attempted. He then gave up these attempts and began to persecute her in other ways. He took back whatever work had been assigned to her and shifted her seat to the barracks behind the main office. She had to sit idle from 9.30 a.m. to 5.30 p.m. She felt humiliated and "punished" at this kind of enforced idleness. She says once she told him: "I will go and report to higher authorities all that you do in your room." His reply was: "*Turn aisa karogi to mein tumhe nanga karke corridor mein nikalunga.*" (If you do that I will parade you naked in the corridor).

In the meantime she found a nice person and married him. She now has two children and is quite happy with her family life. At the same time she fought back against Bhatia, and

refused to leave the job despite his attempts to get rid of her.

Bhatia's Defence

Shashi Khurana, on behalf of **Manushi**, interviewed Dr S.C. Bhatia soon after we received the above mentioned complaints from the staff of DACEE. In addition, Dr Bhatia discussed the charges with Madhu Kishwar on the phone. He ascribed these accusations to his staff's lack of job security, and their fear that he is not doing all that is possible to get their positions regularised within the university. He claimed that the staff is protesting because they wish to avoid facing open selection processes for the regular positions that will replace their temporary project related jobs. According to him, they are asking for preferential hiring on the basis of their having already worked for years in the present temporary positions. He emphasised, "There is definitely anxiety and fear among the staff about their appointments." In his view, there could be no other explanation for staff deciding to protest against him only after the university authorities prepared and attempted to implement revised selection processes.

Questioned about the earlier September, 1987 complaint report to the then Vice Chancellor Moonis Raza, alleging that he was involved in financial irregularities, sexual harassment of women staff members, and physical violence against men and women staffers, Dr Bhatia claimed that the Bavisker Committee set up to investigate the charges made at that time had cleared him of all charges. He said he did not have a copy of the Committee Report because only their conclusions but not the text of the Report had ever been made available to him or to the public.

When asked about the allegations of rough behaviour, including

allegations that he used physical violence against some members of the staff, he denied them as well, ascribing their origin to the same tussle about who was going to fill the new positions that the university was establishing to replace the temporary project positions.

When asked about the allegations that his wife had separated from him for a period due to his sexual misbehavior with staff members in the Department, Dr Bhatia denied it, and said that the real reason for their temporary estrangement were the cultural differences between him and his wife. Dr Merh asserts that his wife had sought shelter for about three years at the Parsi Anjuman because of increased maltreatment at the hands of Dr Bhatia at the time when he was having a particularly brazen affair with one of his women employees.

Dr Bhatia also stated emphatically that Dr Sushama Merh, who he felt was spearheading the campaign against him, was doing so because she did not want to have to put in full duty hours at work. She had insisted, he said, on her hours of work being reduced, something he felt he could not accede to without affecting the overall discipline of the Department. He also alleged that she was incompetent and inefficient and had done absolutely no work even after she was placed in the south campus, a place where, he pointed out, it was less likely for him to be able to put obstructions in her way.

Given the seriousness of allegations being levelled against Dr Bhatia, it is imperative that the Delhi University authorities institute a thorough probe into the charges of sexual harassment and misuse of power and keep him under suspension through the period of the enquiry. If these charges are proved correct, this would be a case of "grave moral turpitude," a ground on which a university teacher and/or administrator can be fired from his job. □