

# Indecent Proposals

With gender crimes becoming a serious menace in universities across the country, the campus is no longer what it used to be—safe



Illustration by NILANJAN DAS

■ by Shefalee VASUDEV

**F**OR MOST STUDENTS ENTERING university, the only physical threat was over-the-top ragging by seniors.

Not any more. The campus is a dangerous place. Seema Sharma, a student of J.V. Jain College in Saharanpur, was allegedly raped during a college tour to Mussoorie. She later succumbed to her injuries. A Delhi

University (DU) student was reportedly gangraped in a moving vehicle. Complaints of sexual harassment have been registered against the director of the National Law Institute (NLI) in Bhopal. A college principal in Indore and a former director-general of the Tripura Police are facing similar charges. Over 300 students of Patiala's Government College of Physical Education (GCPE) have been holding protest rallies, demanding action against those guilty

of sexual harassment. These are only a few instances of gender crimes that have surfaced in the media recently. Yet none of them have been legally put to ground or the guilty convicted.

Following a furore over the gangrape of a student of the Maulana Azad Medical College, Delhi, former Union law minister Jana Krishnamurthy announced a new law last week for speedy disposal of sexual harassment cases in special courts. The Sexual Offences



(Special Courts) Bill, 2003, is likely to be tabled in the budget session of Parliament. But that is cold comfort to millions of girls studying in universities across the country. Most often the offenders are those entrusted with the task of providing them the proverbial guidance. Like NLI Director V.S. Rekhi, who took perverse pleasure in calling girl students to his office, cracking vulgar jokes or asking them sexually suggestive questions. Or Professor Nasser of the Tamil Nadu Dental College, Chennai, who would lace his comments with sexual innuendos in and outside the classroom. Or a former director-general of police who took to asking a decoy woman constable in Delhi, "What is your rate?"

**R**AJNI Thakur, a 24-year-old second-year student of GCPE opened a Pandora's box when she accused her judo coach Kulraj Singh Gill of making overtures to her. "I decided to fight back as it became too much to handle," she says. Thakur blew the whistle in December 2002 after being denied permission by the college authorities to participate in an interstate judo competition. The college authorities set up a committee to look into the case but Thakur refused to appear before it. "The committee was an eyewash because it included teachers close to the accused," she says. Subsequently, a high-level committee set up by the Director of Public Instructions (colleges) recommended suspension of Gill and Kulwant Kaur, another teacher who had allegedly been cooperating with Gill. Reiterating Thakur's allegations, 60-odd girl students complained of harassment

by teachers saying they were often asked to exchange modesty for marks. "The discretion of marks in the internal assessment is used as a bait for sexual exploitation," says Surinder Kaur Grewal, chairperson, Punjab Women's Commission.

Sexual harassment ranges from making vulgar comments or physical advances, displaying pornographic material to stalking and, in extreme cases, rape. These are overtures most girls have to contend with virtually



**CLEAN CAMPUS DRIVE**

- Universities should have clear policies to combat sexual harassment in accordance with the apex court's 1997 Vishaka guidelines.
- Counselling/interim panels must be gender neutral. Boys must be empowered to lodge complaints.
- Universities and the police should work in tandem to put redressal mechanisms in place.
- Campuses should be well-lit, have traffic regulations, more PCOs and complaint boxes.
- Private hostels and paying-guest accommodations should be under the purview of a university.

every day. "Most of us have been approached by men who offer us money to go out with them," says Priyani Roychoudhury, a final-year student of Delhi's Miranda House. No wonder then that a passing mention of gender crimes can reveal a painful immediacy for redressal. A report by the Gender Study Group of DU some years ago reported that

**TRACKING THE OFFENDER**

- 383** Total number of offenders studied.
- 92** were graduates, **5** post-graduates, **71** had studied up to Class XII, **only 24** were illiterate.
- 286** passed verbal comments, **69** made lewd gestures.
- 200** said the reason was the girl's looks, **10** said it was dress sense.
- 129** stalked on scooters.

Source: DELHI POLICE

91.7 per cent of the girls living in hostels had been harassed at sometime or the other. In Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Delhi, 45 cases were recorded in the past three years. "It is very rampant in the colleges of Uttar Pradesh as well," says Professor Surendra Nischal of J.V. Jain College. Or Tamil Nadu. Punjab. Madhya Pradesh.

A four-month study on patterns of sexual harassment conducted by the Delhi Police (north district) during their special drive in

2002 reveals that most offenders are in the age group of 31 to 40 years (see box). "Good education and sound family background do not work as deterrents," says Sanjay Beniwal, DCP (north), Delhi Police.

But the quirky equations of power do not limit sexual harassment to students. Late last year, senior lecturers Poonam Bhatnagar and Mayarani Jain of the premier Holkar College, Indore, filed a complaint of sexual harassment against Principal Narendra Dhakkad. Similarly, Anita Tamarkar, a 38-year-old lecturer in the department of physical education at Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, accused her PhD guide, Kanwaljit Singh.

Eight years ago, the Supreme Court made it mandatory for all institutions to have committees to address the problem of sexual harassment. Yet there are no combative mechanisms in place, barring one in JNU. The Delhi-based Forum Against Sexual Harassment (FASH) presented a draft policy to the DU authorities in 1998. "But a formal report on it was submitted only in July 2002," says Janaki Abraham, a lecturer and member of FASH. In the meantime, dharnas and street plays organised by DU students

**A new problem has surfaced: HOMOSEXUAL harassment. It is rampant in BOYS' HOSTELS.**

have resulted in interim committees being set up and pamphlets and posters being circulated. But elsewhere, there still is no policy on gender crimes.

University authorities are yet to be sensitised to the need for such a policy. Some of them even oppose the word "sexual" in sexual harassment for moral reasons. But Diksha Gupta, a Miranda House student and president of DU's Women's Development Cell, says, "Labelling the issue as eve-teasing undermines the gravity." Concur Suman Bisht, a PhD student and member of FASH: "Sexual harassment needs full-time attention." Shyam Menon, proctor, DU, says ever since the university joined hands with the police, there have been progressive results. Beniwal is also planning to post plainclothes police personnel on the University Special buses.

What also needs redressal is the way complaints are registered. Reporting a

sexual crime gets complicated because of the possible effect on academic results if the offender is a professor. Take Saru Rana's case. As a post-graduate student of Punjabi University in Patiala, this gritty girl took up cudgels against the vice-chancellor, Jasbir Singh Ahluwalia, who allegedly asked students to serve guests at his residence. The head of her department, Saroj Rani, and other teachers reportedly turned hostile when she refused to keep quiet about it. After her written complaint, Ahluwalia summoned Rana to his office, where he allegedly tried to molest her. It was the Amarinder Singh Government which promptly sacked Ahluwalia in April 2002 after an FIR was lodged against him. "I am the victim of a politically motivated frame-up," says Ahluwalia, one-time close confidante of Parkash Singh Badal, former chief minister of Punjab. Rana, who has been given secu-

rity cover by the Punjab Police, will now appear as a private candidate for her second-year examinations. She was declared "failed" last year.

Despite the fact that the reporting of sexual harassment cases has gone up tremendously in the past decade, action is iffy if the offenders are university staff. And authorities even try to cover up such crimes. "The principal of J.V. Jain College forced the two teachers, who accompanied the students to Mussoorie, to give false statements," alleges Nischal. So far, neither has an FIR been registered nor has the post-mortem report been made public. The Madhya Pradesh Government did not concur with the state Women's Commission, which along with the Human Rights Commission had validated the complaint against Rekhi. Holkar College Principal Dhakkad also got away scot-free. Students allege that complaints against him to senior officials of the state's Education Department fell on deaf ears because of his contacts in the administrative and political circles. Meanwhile, the two complainants—Bhatnagar and Jain—have been transferred out of Indore. "We were asked to withdraw the cases by whoever we met in the Government," they say.

**I**N Tamarkar's case, the Punjab and Haryana High Court took a suo moto notice of her complaint and Kanwaljit Singh was relieved of his charge as director (sports) even before the first court hearing. But Tamarkar says that instead of words of encouragement, she is getting jeers. Amritsar-based veteran social activist Satyapal Dang believes that the powerful teacher's union in Amritsar University has prevented "punitive action" based on Tamarkar's complaint.

There is an additional problem that has surfaced recently—homosexual harassment in the hostels. "In our meetings, many boys have spoken about the problem," says Abraham. "Male authority over younger men also is being exercised through sexual violence," says Radhika Chopra, a DU reader who has been researching and writing on sexual harassment for more than a decade. While more girls feel empowered to report against sexual crimes, adds Chopra, few boys have the nerve to do the same. That's another iceberg the police, law officials and the civil society have to contend with to make life on the campus freer, enjoyable, more meaningful and academically nurturing. The way it is meant to be.

—with Ramesh Vinayak, Neeraj Mishra and Kavitha Muralidharan

**Besides STUDENTS, women lecturers have also reported incidents of sexual harassment.**