THREATENED WITH GANGRAPE FOR WEARING JEANS

WHAT IF THIS HAPPENS TO YOU?

Much after the media frenzy died down, Farah Aziz of Aligarh Muslim University has been harassed for protesting against moral policing on campus. In an exclusive to *Marie Claire India*, she says everyone labels her vulgar because she has a voice.

By Shefalee Vasudev

I WENT NUMB WITH DISBELIEF WHEN I WAS THREATENED with gangrape because I wore jeans with a T-shirt and no *dupatta*," says 22-year-old Farah Aziz, a final-year student of mass communication from Aligarh Muslim University (AMU). "I am a bad guy with many criminal cases against me and I know how to teach you to dress decently," a fellow student told her, adding that, come what may, he would make sure she learnt to wear the *dupatta*.

Most of you may remember this after the media gave two days of rabid attention to her sexual harassment case. Aligarh, February 2006: Farah's *dupatta* is snatched by two boys on a motorbike. When she complains, she is told by the student's union that she deserves it for dressing indecently.

> "Standing up for women's rights is equated with going against Islam"

Farah's story should read: '*Dupatta* Politics'. The *dupatta* signifies a veil. The veil marks the body and denies the person. What remains is a sign of submission, underlining a lesser status. In her refusal to wear the *dupatta*, Farah reasserted her freedom and articulated her identity.

The media dropped the story, but Farah's harassment continued. It is four months since she went to the media and the students of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) for support. Now, Aligarh has become dangerous territory for her. Her landlady congratulated her upon her return from Delhi, after having seen her on TV. But the next morning, when some boys started hooting outside the living quarters, she became abusive, ordering her to leave.

Moral policing is usually a silent brutality. It works through a muted acceptance of a code of conduct. However, if someone defies that unspoken code, the policing becomes coercive, even openly oppressive. Amorality is sometimes the weapon used to 'defend' morality. As it happened in Farah's case.

After lying low for a week, when she stepped out to go to the general education centre on campus, she was called the *rakhail* (keep) of SADA (Struggle against Discrimination and Alienation), the group she was a part of. That was a day she will never forget. Mad with rage that she had defied them, 40-odd boys formed a chain around her, making obscene comments, refusing to let her pass. While most would have turned on their heels, Farah did not. She went ahead despite the hostility.

"I can't repeat many of those words," she says. "But I even went to the college canteen to make a point that I was going to keep up the fight. " She becomes thoughtful for a moment. But her face does not reveal any emotion; her eyes remain clear. "I am labelled a Communist and an atheist," she continues. "They say this because I react to gender discrimination. Standing up for women's rights is equated with going against Islamic traditions and culture."

Farah is a bit self-conscious as we share lunch at a roadside restaurant. She is probably aware of the way others in the restaurant are staring at her. Later, I observe her as we sit cross-legged on her bed in her very modest room, and wonder where all this grit has come from. The room is almost bare; it doesn't even have a mirror. University textbooks, a soap, a talc, a comb, and some ▷