

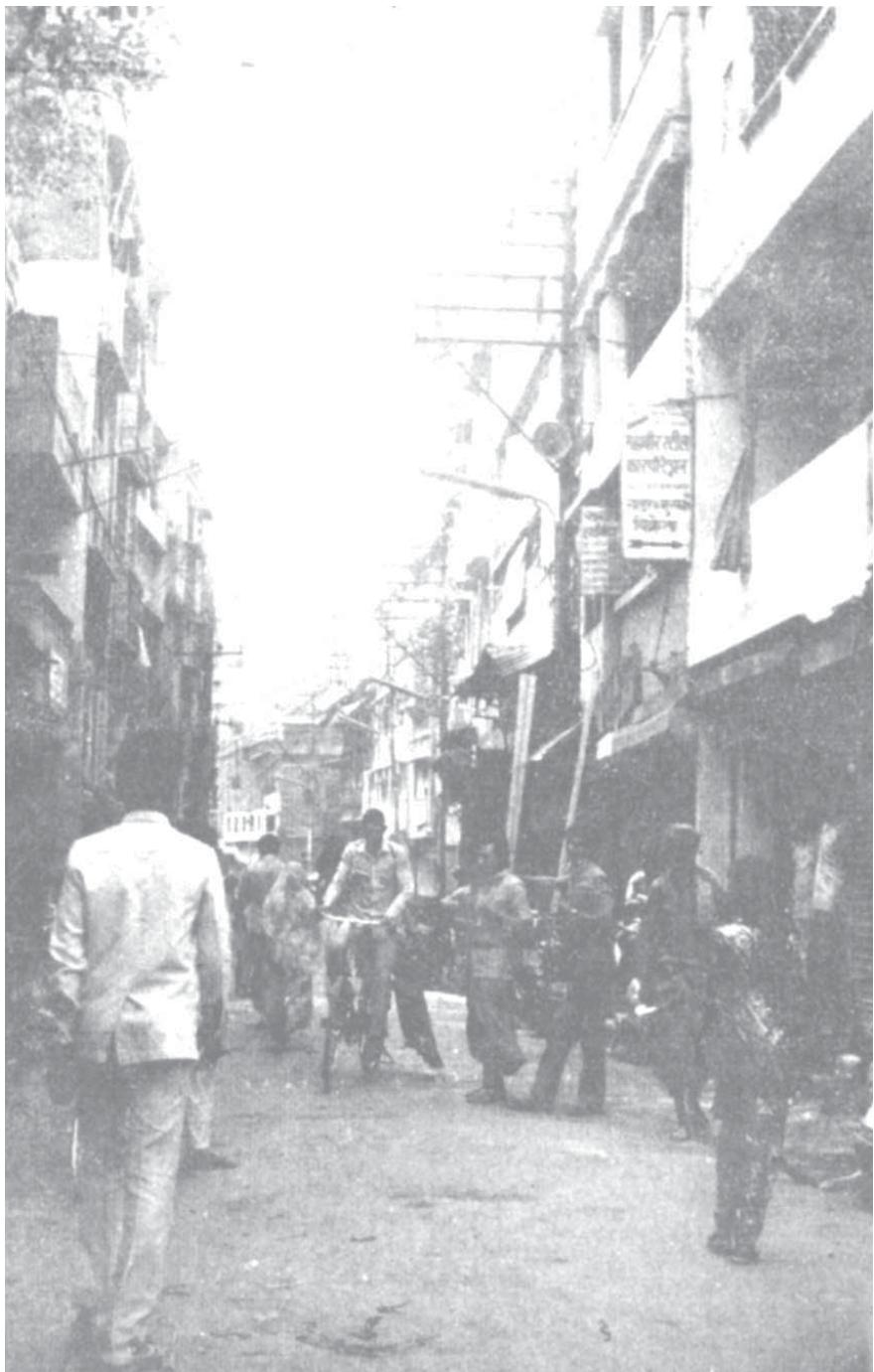
# A Life Of Humiliation

—Navneet Sethi  
and K. Anand on  
the Sahu sisters'  
Suicide

ON February 3, Poonam Sahu, a 22 year old postgraduate, and her two sisters, Kamini, aged 20, and Alka, aged 18, committed suicide by hanging themselves in their house in Coolie Bazar, Kanpur. Their suicide notes did not make clear the reason for their action. They merely asked their parents' forgiveness. The reason given by the parents and relatives, and eagerly accepted by the press was their inability to arrange the girls' marriages due to exorbitant dowry demands.

We met Mr Sahu in a restaurant since he did not want us to visit their home as he said his wife was unwell. He also would not let us meet any of their relatives in Kanpur. We had to delay the report for a while because Holi results in large scale hooliganism for days before the actual festival, and the Sahus live in an area where it is difficult for women to move around on their own without harassment. We also paid several visits to the Anwarganj police station but were not given copies of the suicide notes.

Mr Sahu told us that in their community, parents start looking for grooms as soon as a girl is 16 years old. Sometimes, even 14 year old girls are married off, in violation of the law. Demands for dowry are made at the outset. Apart from cash, a detailed set of demands is made for particular kinds of furniture, utensils, clothes, jewellery. Mr Sahu, a senior



**The street on which the Sahus live. Theirs is the flat on the right with knotted curtains**

employee in LIC, earns Rs 4,000 a month. His estimate of the amount to be spent on each girl's marriage was Rs 50,000 to 70,000. He had begun looking for boys ever since Poonam completed her BA, six years ago. Failing to get a well educated husband for Poonam, the Sahus had started looking for

boys less suited to her in all aspects—education, family background, job. "We had our compulsions", said Mr Sahu. Humiliated by a series of rejections, Poonam had recently asked her parents to stop the search.

But no one took this seriously. We tried

to find out about the life the three sisters led. The Sahus have five daughters and one son, aged 15.

It seems they led a very confined life. Poonam's wish to do her MA in education was turned down simply because DAV college, the only college in Kanpur that offers this course, is a coeducational institution. Yet Kamini was later allowed to pursue this course because a male cousin had joined the college and he could keep an eye on her. Alka was in BA final year. But, as Mr Sahu revealed, "They did not take part in any extracurricular activity—either in school or in college. They were very shy girls. No going to friends or get togethers but only to college and back home." The girls' education seems to have been seen primarily as a passport to marriage. In a society which is hostile to daughters, the sisters had to face insults and taunts from relatives and had to live with the guilt of being a burden on their parents. "*Lo panch deviyan aa gayee*" was the welcome they received as guests. Despite belonging to a high caste wealthy family and being educated, their life was in many ways more oppressive than that of an illiterate woman labourer. It seems that they were not close to either parent but very close to each other.

The tension increased because cousins younger to Poonam and Kamini were getting married. It was to attend the marriage of one such young cousin that the parents had gone to Lucknow when the girls, who had stayed behind on the pretext of studying, committed suicide.

From what Mr Sahu said, it seems that the younger girls, at present aged seven and five, will be lavishly married off, if only to assuage their father's guilt. Ironically, as we were talking to him, a girl was being shown to a boy in the same restaurant. The culture which makes marriage at all costs and on any terms compulsory for a woman, which drove the Sahu sisters to death, is still flourishing and it is this that has to be combated, for dowry is only one manifestation of it. □

## Exposing The Rot

### —Sexual Harassment of Students

The book recommended by the teacher was not available in the library. But he had a copy, and she could come over to his place to consult it. Twenty year old M thought her teacher was doing her a favour. She went to his place, little realising what awaited her. As soon as she sat down, he began to paw her. What added to the horror was that his wife and children were in the house, only a scream away. But M could not scream. She remonstrated with him and, when he would not listen, managed to push him away and escape from the house.

The case of M is not an isolated one. The abuse and harassment of women students by teachers is much more widespread than is generally admitted. A girl who has had such an experience is reluctant to talk of it, for obvious reasons.

She may often have no alternative but to submit to abuse, unless she wishes to jeopardise her academic career. This is particularly true for research students, especially in the sciences.

Under the present structure, a research student is regarded more or less as a slave of the supervisor. There are, of course, many research supervisors who do not misuse this privilege. But this is the result of a voluntary waiver of control. Mild exploitation of the guide-student relation is fairly common, with students of both sexes "Where are you going?" "To buy vegetables for my guide" is a standard joke among Ph D students in the sciences. More degrading forms of exploitation and misuse are also prevalent, as is readily admitted by faculty members in private conversation. However, even those enlightened individuals who would never abuse their own students fight shy when it comes to restraining their colleagues.

The research student is dependent on the supervisor in more ways than one. Academic supervision or guidance is only one of them. Provision of research facilities is another. This is especially

important in the sciences, where denying access to an instrument can be a way of punishing the research student who strays out of line. Professors even fight their own battles through students, by denying the students of a rival access to certain instruments.

Most important of all, perhaps, is the fact that the system obliges the student to depend on the supervisor's recommendation for further studies or academic positions. This too appears to be more strongly institutionalised in the natural sciences. Falling out with one's supervisor means putting one's entire academic career in jeopardy. It is fascinating and depressing to see how, in the event of a student-guide rift, the entire faculty closes ranks. In most cases, the unfortunate student will not find another supervisor since he or she has violated the unwritten code of servility.

Given the current notions of academic good behaviour, it is perhaps not surprising that the reaction of most academics to sexual harassment of a woman student by her research supervisor is ostrichlike. They would prefer to believe that such things never happen. If a woman student is foolhardy enough to make such a noise that it becomes impossible to ignore her, they attempt to dismiss her charges by attributing them to academic incompetence or some other devious motive which is left vague. On no account must a colleague's conduct towards his student be questioned, or the system will collapse.

In the last couple of years, several research students in the Indian Agricultural Research Institute and the botany department, University of Delhi, have committed suicide. However, dead victims tell no tales. One victim who broke the silence is Anita Kotha, a bright student in the department of physics, University of Delhi. Anita did her M Sc in physics from Jammu and the prospect of being an

advanced researcher brought her to Delhi. She was attracted by an ongoing collaborative work at one of the world's best laboratories ; Fermi National Laboratory, USA. The project head in Delhi is a reader, Dr R. K. Shivpuri, who immediately accepted her as his research student.

Soon after Anita joined, she was informed that in at least two previous girl students' cases, Dr Shivpuri's conduct had been very suspect. In one case, a girl student, Ms R. Patil, felt harassed by Shivpuri and made a concerted effort to leave him. She contacted other faculty members and applied for admission and fellowship to a US University. Dr Shivpuri, on coming to know about her success, wrote extremely adverse comments about her to the concerned university and succeeded in jeopardising her admission.

The next victim was a hard worker, Archana. Archana had worked with Dr Shivpuri for a long time before Anita. Archana had complained of harassment to her close friends and made an attempt to get away from Dr Shivpuri. She applied to the Centre of European Nuclear Research (CERN) in Geneva and got an offer for research there. She was shocked to discover her supervisor's anger when she broke the news to him. Normally, such an achievement would be a cause for pride to a conscientious teacher —however, Shivpuri told Archana that her Ph. D thesis would be jeopardised if she accepted CERN's offer. The belief in the department is that Shivpuri did not desire Archana to leave the group. When Archana insisted and did submit her thesis and finally went off to CERN, Shivpuri showed a complete lack of cooperation in the thesis. The result: her thesis was rejected.

Anita brushed aside these stories as rumours and concentrated on her work. She soon became her supervisor's favourite and was promoted to be a senior research fellow in the group. Shivpuri wrote good recommendations for her which earned her attendance at a workshop in Trieste, Italy. She was also sponsored to go to Fermilab. All seemed well set for her to take off on a bright career in physics when Shivpuri arrived in USA and started

making physical advances towards her. She was shocked. Her whole career seemed to collapse around her. She wrote to CERN to Prof F. Sauli for a short term fellowship. Shivpuri intercepted her mail and then wrote to Prof Sauli, admonishing him



against accepting students for research without their supervisors' permission. He even cited Archana's current joblessness as an example of how unsponsored students could be thwarted by him if he so chose. He made adverse comments about Anita's abilities, and said he was "firing" her from Fermilab. This unwarranted interference in a student's career reeks of vindictiveness. Furthermore, a supervisor has no right to dismiss a student accepted by the department's selection committee for a PhD programme. Prof Sauli replied, objecting strongly to Shivpuri's unethical intervention, saying that he was filing this "nonrequired advice in the place it belongs to."

When Anita heard of all this, she felt very depressed because she was stranded in the US with no financial support and two years of hard work were going to be wasted. She contemplated suicide, but friends intervened and helped her get admission to another US university. After leaving Fermilab, Anita wrote to the head of the physics department, Delhi University, to draw his attention to Dr Shivpuri's behaviour.

Anita's forthright letter created a stir in the department but no action was taken.

Prof Shivpuri allegedly claimed that he had removed Anita because she had tried to seduce a colleague at Fermilab, Amit Jain, the son of another physics professor at Delhi University. Amit, however, wrote a very courageous open letter denying Shivpuri's charge against Anita and corroborating Anita's version, saying that he had witnessed Shivpuri's harassment of Anita, and his "weird" and "obsessive" behaviour towards her : "Many times he used to make collect calls to her from India ... And I happened to be around on one such call when he was insisting her to say 'I love you' and she refused...Even if she would just talk to some guy in the experiment, or have lunch in the cafeteria with someone (apart from him) he would be very angry..."

When contacted, Dr Shivpuri refused to talk to Manushi, saying he had already been misrepresented in the press. Later, however, he wrote a letter to the newspapers, alleging that professional jealousy within the department was at the root of the matter. He is reported to be trying to go abroad for a year, so as to escape the scandal. Several physics researchers and the research students association have called on the university to issue a notice to Dr Shivpuri to show cause why his services should not be terminated on grounds of moral turpitude, and to conduct an enquiry into the allegations against him. They request all concerned persons to write letters to the vice chancellor and the head of the physics department, in support of these demands and also for corrective steps to solve the more general problems of research students of which this case is one manifestation. They ask that the university issue guidelines to women students informing them what they should do if sexually harassed, build institutional safeguards into the system to protect research students in general and women students in particular from harassment by their supervisors, set up a special cell to tackle such problems, and lay down that any teacher against whom such an allegation is made should forfeit the privilege of being allowed to supervise research students.

**(based on a report prepared by several researchers in the physics Dept, Delhi University)**