

How Elite is Elite?

- Women in the Civil Services

SENIOR civil servants, at the federal and state levels in India are generally members of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS). They are recruited from university graduates by an annual, countrywide examination. Jobs at this level of the civil service confer power and prestige and are consequently highly prized. Technically, women were never kept out of the service and the first woman entrant to the IAS was recruited almost immediately after the country became independent. Since the 1960s, 10 to 15 percent of the 150 or so persons recruited every year are women. "Here have been few overtly discriminatory regulations based on sex. In practice, however, there have been murmurs about sex bias affecting promotional and career prospects, especially in recent years.

Women civil servants have not generally gathered as a group to react in an organised manner to common issues. Aware that their entry into the civil service has been in equal competition with men, they have been reluctant to face the fact that as women they confront special problems. To them, such behaviour would amount to an admission of weakness and a declaration of their inability to perform their jobs as competently as their male colleagues. Besides, the number of women in any service in a given year was also, at the initial stage at least, so small and the posted in such widely dispersed locations, that interaction was limited to occasional contact. Women civil servants also have been prone to fall victim to the prevailing male determined mindset, which tends to compare women

with one another and not with all civil servants of a particular seniority or group, both male and female; such an atmosphere encourages rivalry and distrust among women and hinders them from recognising their common difficulties born of existing societal attitudes. All this is in addition to the usual reluctance of women in general to spare time from official and household chores for organised activity.

Occasionally, incidents of sexual harassment of women civil servants have also surfaced. Although service associations have not provided rallying points for women they have, on rare occasions, taken up issues with a somewhat pro-woman slant. One such case occurred in 1982 when a male trainee officer misbehaved with a woman colleague at the Civil Services Training Institute at Mussoorie. Mr. P. V. Appu, the then director of the Institute, took the view that the probation of the male trainee should be terminated. Several service associations supported Mr Appu's stand and demanded stern action against the wrongdoer. When action was not taken, Mr Appu resigned. The incident was widely publicised and Mr Appu's action lauded but government did not go back on its decision.

Generally, however, it is believed that women IAS officers exercise functions within the ambit of governmental authority and protection and for that reason are rarely subject to sexual harassment meted out to lower level functionaries and to poorer women who come in contact with government

functionaries. However, the recent incident concerning Rupan Deol Bajaj, a woman IAS officer of the Punjab cadre, has revealed a disturbing reality.

Rupan, a senior officer, was working as secretary to the state government of Punjab when the incident of harassment occurred, in August 1988, in full view of many senior civil servants and other members of the public. (see Box) Rupan promptly demanded a full and appropriate disciplinary action against the chief of police, Mr. K. P. S. Gill, who had molested and insulted her.

Proceeding through the bureaucratic hierarchy, she met the chief secretary of the state, Mr Ojha, the security adviser to the governor, Mr Ribeiro, and the governor himself, Mr S. S. Ray. Mr Ribeiro alone considered the incident a humiliating insult to a senior officer, warranting prompt governmental action; the others suggested that she was probably blowing a trivial occurrence out of proportion. She was advised to visit Mr Gill in his room, where he would proffer her a private apology, Rupan turned down the suggestion and her husband filed a complaint under the Indian Penal Code with the sector 17 police station at Chandigarh.

The incident now came into the full glare of publicity. To counteract the adverse effects of the complaint on the Punjab police, stories were planted in leading newspapers, seeking to slander Rupan's character and treating her as the stooge of the Punjab terrorists out to denigrate Gill, the saviour of the Punjab. The incident was also made out to be the normal reaction of IAS officers who

were hostile to their police colleagues like Gill and jealous of the latter's success and importance. Some women journalists, however, took up cudgels against the pro-Gill slant adopted by their editors and insisted on printing Rupan's version of the events. Petitions to the government followed, one of which was from Rupan's colleagues and fellow civil servants.

Many of the women civil servant learned of the episode from the fairly garbled and largely unfavourable press coverage in newspapers and journals. They pieced the facts together and discussed their reactions at the usual on and off work encounters with other women colleagues. Some were also provoked to protest by the attitudes of certain male colleagues who either belittled the incident or adopted the standard viewpoint that the victim was herself to blame and had probably invited such advances. These adverse reactions seemed to the women symptomatic of their subordinate status in society, in the media and in the administrative structure itself : a fact that they tended to forget in the normal routine of work. Discovering that many of them shared a common sense of outrage, they decided that an overt expression of their unhappiness was essential. Lowkey murmurs acquired direction and purpose and it was resolved to meet to discuss the manner in which their sentiments could be communicated to the government.

There was unanimity on the fact that this was an issue affecting all women and leadership should be assumed by women alone. It was determined that women of all services should be associated with the protest meeting. Bringing in women police officers was considered especially crucial, in view of the active campaign afoot to convert the incident into an IAS-IPS confrontation. Attempts were made to inform as many of the women as possible in Delhi at all levels, and even those visiting the capital for official or personal reasons were roped in. Some time was taken to make these

The incident took place at a dinner party at the home of Mr S.K. Kapoor, IAS, financial commissioner and secretary to the government of Punjab. Around 25 couples attended, including the inspector general of police, the advocate general of Punjab, and some press correspondents.

Mr Gill, director general of police, Punjab, attended without his wife. The guests sat on the lawn in two large semi-circles facing one another, one occupied by women, the other by the men. At about 10 p.m., Mr Gill walked across from the men's semicircle to that of the women and occupied an empty seat five or six chairs away from Mrs Bajaj. Evidently, he behaved in a manner that offended the women sitting in the neighbouring chairs as they got up and walked away. He then called out to Mrs Bajaj saying "Come and sit here, I want to talk to you about somethin." Mrs Bajaj walked over to Mr Gill and was about to sit when she noticed that he was pulling the next chair so close that it touched his chair. She pulled the chair back to its original position and was about to sit down when Mr Gill again pulled the chair close to his own.



Rupan Bajaj

Mrs Bajaj narrowly escaped losing her balance and falling. She then refused to sit down and returned to her original seat. Within 10 minutes, Mr Gill walked across to her and stood directly in front of her, with his knees practically touching her. He pointed his finger close to her face, and commanded: "You get up, you come along with me." At this point, Mrs Bajaj loudly rebuked Mr Gill for his obnoxious behaviour and told him to leave immediately. Mr Gill only repeated his earlier order. Mrs Bajaj then got up to walk away. As he blocked her way, she had to pull her chair back, turn and go the other way. As she turned to escape, Mr Gill slapped her on the posterior in full view of all the guests surrounding her. Mrs Bajaj immediately reported the incident to her husband as also to the host, Mr Kapoor, and Mr Pathak, joint director of the intelligence bureau. Apparently others, including the daughter of Mr Mehra, senior advocate of the Punjab high court, had complained of Mr Gill's misbehaviour that evening.

from intervention petition filed by women activists and organisations in the Gill - Bajaj case.

arrangements and a sense of urgency was felt when it was seen that other groups, like women journalists, had already openly come out strongly against the unfortunate episode.

Despite all this, the group that eventually met was not very large. Several women stayed away, either due to pressing official work (since the meeting was held during office hours) or out of lack of sympathy for the issue raised. A couple of men were also

present, but no attempt had been made to actively associate men with the meeting itself. The participants included even those who did not support the idea of an organised protest.

Some participants pointed out that harassment of the kind to which Rupan had been subjected was quite common in a working woman's career, all women learned to handle it very quickly; was there any point in making a collective fuss about it? Others responded by

indicating that they had reached the breaking point and would no longer tolerate such behaviour; they insisted that refusing to protest vocally at this stage would amount to condonation of what had been done to Rupan. Many of the women felt: "There, but for the grace of god, go I!" Several of them declared that if they had been in Rupan's place, they would have expected to obtain the open support of their women colleagues. Supporting Rupan was essential because such incidents were generally suffered by all women (not just working women) in silence and her courage in putting up an open fight deserved to be backed up. It was seen as a preventive against future repetition of similar episodes against other women. The normal tendency to convert the victim into the wrongdoer by using her complaint as an excuse to probe her morals and character was also roundly condemned.

Another plea that was made related to the triviality of the episode when compared to incidents like the Deorala Sati; did those who had not raised their voices then have a right to talk about the exploitation of women? The accusation was keenly felt by all listeners; nevertheless, it was not considered adequate reason to keep them from protesting on the present occasion.

One participant reminded the gathering of their dual role as civil servants and as women - remembering the peculiar conditions in Punjab today, how would they have behaved if they had been chief secretaries themselves and had been faced with a similar accusation against a senior police officer? This argument was countered by the remark that a woman chief secretary, like her male colleague, was duty bound to ensure Legislative protection to all state employees, irrespective of sex. There was thus no contradiction of roles involved in seeking to redress Rupan's grievance.

Despite the heated debate, there was

a tacit acceptance by everyone present of the discriminatory nature of the prevailing administrative structure, of which each participant had personal experience, it was also recognised that the treatment meted out to Rupan could only be a pale reflection of the way in which women at lower levels were likely to be treated.

The meeting considered the different forms that their protest could take. Despite the strong feeling aroused by the incident, it was decided that the issue of Mr. Gill's guilt should not be prejudged; the demand should only be for a quick and full enquiry by the concerned administrative authorities into Rupan's complaint and speedy follow-up disciplinary action if the complaint was proven correct, since delay and prevarication were likely to affect the morale of all women employees. An appropriate protest note on these lines, with the signatures of sympathisers, could be sent to the concerned central departments as well as to the Punjab government. Although there was much anguish at the irresponsible reporting by many sections of the press, the idea of an open letter to the press was discussed and dropped, in view of the welcome criticism of the adverse coverage by some journals and the firm stand of women journalists themselves. As an added precaution, it was decided that the legal position regarding such a protest note under the conduct rules governing the behaviour of civil servants would be studied and the matter taken up at a further meeting for which a date was fixed.

The second meeting was attended by a more cohesive group, since those who did not advocate organised protest stayed away. Rupan herself was present at this meeting and talked to the gathered women. Copies of her complaints to the government and to the police were also distributed and did much to clear the air of doubts and misconceptions. One of the most frequently expressed doubts related to the reason for the timelag

between the episode and the filing of Rupan's complaint. When her complaint was read this issue was cleared; Rupan had hoped to get redress from her administrative superiors- it was only when matters were delayed that she had sought the help of the courts. Rupan's talk to her women supporters gave them some inkling of what they could expect if they were ever placed in a similar situation; it confirmed then their determination to prepare a protest petition.

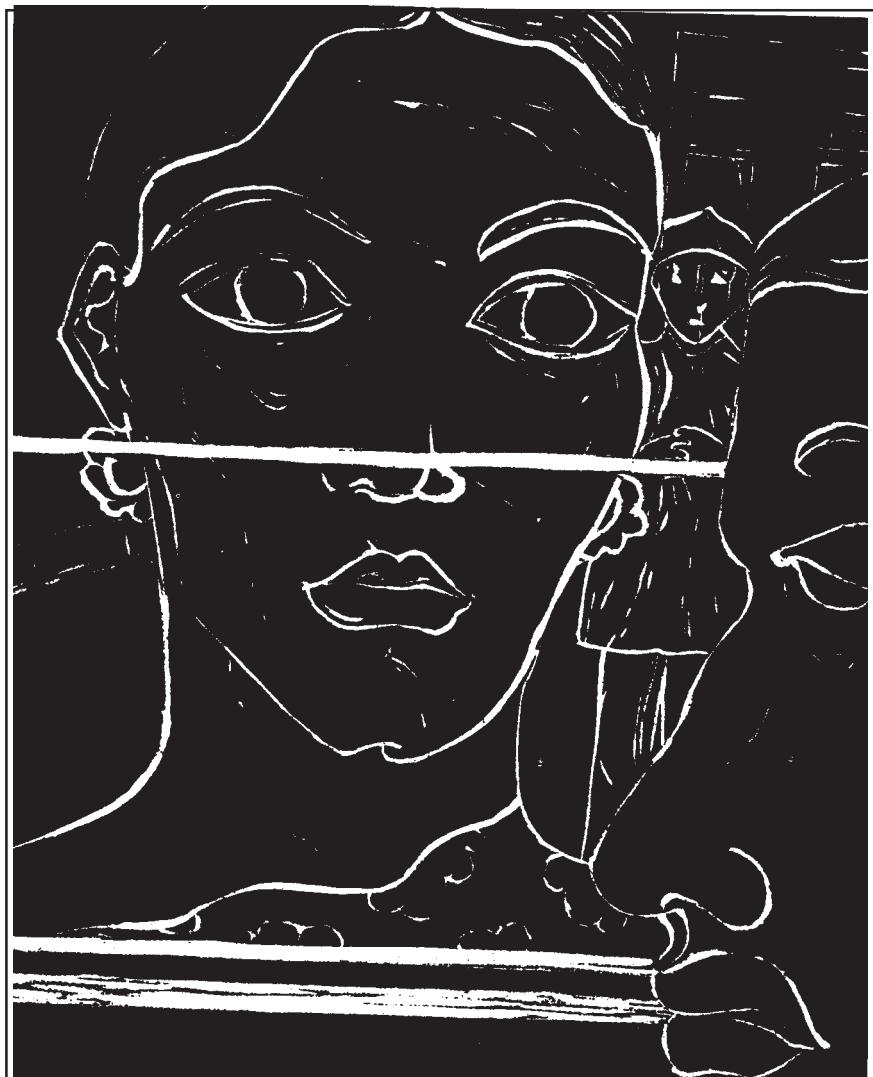
Having satisfied themselves that their action would not violate conduct rules, a small group was set up to get the protest note drafted and copies were circulated for signature. In view of the time constraint, it was decided not to contact women posted outside Delhi; those who visited the capital during this period could be requested to sign. Again, the coverage was to be tended to all services and seniority levels; although men were not excluded, active attempts were not made to meet and convince them. The involvement of the services association was also discouraged, as it was felt that this could further intensify the campaign to convert the incident into an IAS versus IPS affair. After a short break, the various petitions in circulation were put together and presented to the relevant administrative levels, both at the centre and in Punjab.

The government however remained silent both at Delhi as well as at Chandigarh. Gill was not shifted from his post and no enquiry was ordered. To add insult to injury, he was awarded a national honour, the Padma Bhushan, at the earliest opportunity. And in July 1939 Rupan was transferred out of the secretariat as director of the Punjab State Training Institute.

Rupan's police complaint was filed as "untraced" and Rupan and her three eye witnesses were not required to file statements. She then moved the subjudge's court at Chandigarh on a private complaint and her statement was recorded. She sought the production in

court of the internal noting made by Ribeiro after hearing Rupan, in which he had pointed out that this was not the first complaint of this nature against Gill. The Punjab government refused to file the document, claiming executive privilege, but their contention was struck down by the subjudge. The state government appealed to the high court and their position was upheld. Meanwhile, Gill himself moved the high court to quash Rupan's complaint on the ground, among others, that the occurrence was too trivial to be taken serious note of. The high court promptly agreed with him, feeling that no ordinary person would object to behaviour like Gill's. Rupan has since filed two appeals to the supreme court against both the high court orders. Senior advocates have offered to defend her and some women's groups are also considering the possibility of filing an intervention or public interest petition in support of Rupan.

The reaction of the state and central governments, editors of leading news papers and some echelons of the judiciary have acted as eye openers to working women everywhere. There has been no serious move to deny the occurrence of the incident. Reactions have predictably been male oriented, the most frequent one being that working women should expect such behaviour in the normal course of things and take it in their stride, as if it was the right of men to paw every accessible woman. The implication is that the police are doing a difficult task in the Punjab and must be allowed their bit of fun to keep up their morale. And finally, there must be something wrong with Rupan herself to have invited such behaviour; these things do not happen to nice homebodies who do not stir out of their houses. Except for Ribeiro, all administrative levels reacted in one or the other of the above ways and refused to take the numerous petitions by Rupan and others seriously. The effects of this



incident on the morale of women civil servants and on all women were lightly brushed aside.

Although some follow-up efforts were made by women civil servants to mobilise signatures to build up a second round, these fizzled out very soon. Nor were there any further organised meetings, neither when Mr Gill was awarded the Padma Bhushan, nor when the Punjab high court dismissed Rupan's petition.

Two areas, however, deserve greater attention. What impelled many women to refuse to participate in the meetings or sign the petition? Were there any longterm benefits from this organised

movement of women in the civil service?

On the first of these two issues, it is clear that many women who sympathised with Rupan's predicament remained outside the net merely because they were not informed of what was going on. This happened because the meetings were based on spontaneous contacts, not on organised and systematic efforts. Women posted outside Delhi were deliberately left out in view of the time constraints. Some in Delhi itself were prevented by distance and transport difficulties from participating in the meetings and signing the petition. But many did not agree on the need for any protest at all.

(Name with held on request)