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GENDER RIGHTS

A year after Delhi University accepted transgender students, protest aims to highlight LGBT woes

Sexual minorities complain that not enough has been done to protect them from discrimination.

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Published Apr 24, 2015 · 10:30 am



Resisting Campus Violence Against LGBTQ/Facebook

It took a lot of courage for Tushar (name changed on request) to finally check that seemingly inconsequential box on the short survey form he filled one afternoon a couple of years ago. For the first time, the student of English literature at the University of Delhi mentioned his sexual orientation on paper, seemingly to help his classmates conduct a small research project. But that one simple act came to colour his time on campus so much, he regrets it now.

“It appeared harmless,” he said. “What could ticking a checkbox on a small survey exercise do? But, it exposed me in front of my classmates who were far from supportive or silent about my orientation.”

After the survey, jokes about his sexual orientation became common during outings, as was bullying inside the college walls, Tushar said. But he feared that if he complained to the authorities, his sexual identity would get even more attention. “I should have gone with male instead of gay,” he said.

No door to knock

Tushar is only one among the hundreds of closeted lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queers at Delhi University who are regularly subjected to discrimination and abuse without any support system to speak up about it.

Last year, when the university opened its doors to **transgender students** in its postgraduate courses, an undergraduate student who identifies himself as gay, hailing from a prominent North Campus college, was beaten up by two other university students.

The LGBTQ community in the campus knocked on many doors and tried to figure out a way to report the incident, while protecting the victim's identity, but there was no institutional system to address it.

“He was so scared to talk about it or reveal his identity that we couldn't file a FIR,” said a gender activist from Delhi University who was among the first to rush to help. “The matter was soon a thing of the past but the culprits escaped any punishment.”

Persisting woes

It was not the first time that the support system (or lack of it) for the LGBTQ community on the campus was exposed. Even when the university introduced the third gender option under the Other Backward Classes category on forms for post-graduate courses, **similar concerns** were expressed by the student community.

Now, when the university is setting out to include the same option for the under-graduate courses too, both students and activists are concerned whether it is a decision taken in haste without due thought given to measures to sensitise other staff and students to their transgender colleagues.

“The university claimed that nine people had taken admission in the post graduate courses last year but did nothing to make it easier for them,” said Aapurv Jain, the co-ordinator of Delhi University's informal gender studies group. “There were absolutely no gender-sensitisation workshops taken up, no seminars and workshops by the university and the expectation is that they will simply be accepted in the campus and feel at home.”

Jain said that deep-seated conservatism is coming in the way of inclusion. “The authorities, teachers and even students are homophobic and transphobic,” he said. “People bully North Eastern students and others who don't identify with the majority. In such a state, LGBTQs are at the most risk of all minorities.”

Other gender activists also claimed that the university hasn't done enough to protect the identities of those who are harassed. These apprehensions have increased ever since **Ordinance XV(D)**, which used to offer protection against sexual harassment, has been replaced with the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act 2013, which allow only women to be counted as the victims of sexual

abuse. "Men and the rest of the LGBTQ community have no protection against something as heinous as sexual harassment since this replacement," said a gender rights activist, who identifies himself as a queer.

Policy paralysis

In February, in a **scathing letter**, the University Grants Commission rapped universities for not being transgender-friendly. "The transgender community is a distinct cultural identity and unique on the socio-cultural map of the country," the letter said. "It is to be admitted that much remains to be done in order to ameliorate the discrimination and deprivation suffered by the community in Indian society." The letter came almost a year after the university allowed transgender admissions and it took another two months after the letter to finally get started on a **consultation process** to prepare an admissions policy for transgender students.

The community, however, feels that there is no institutional structure to support them. To highlight this, the LGBTQ community will organise a day-long **protest** march on Friday to demand changes.

"What we have is a situation where we have bit off more than we could chew," an activist involved in the organising of the march said. "There are no special toilets for transgenders and there's no helpline one can dial at the time of need."

She added: "Abuses are hurled at LGBTQ students all the time. We want to make sure that the university takes note and controls such instances by introducing systems which protect identities and punish the offenders instead of traumatising us further through diluting existing mechanisms."