

India: victory for female student strike against curfews in residences

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What started as a simple desire to take part in an in-campus theatre festival, exploded into anger against years of timing restrictions and moral policing.

As one enters Maharshi Dayanand University's campus in Rohtak, Haryana, everything looks normal on the surface, but there is a palpable tension in the air - a sense of something unusual. The unusual that has happened is that may be for the first time in the university, women students have challenged the restrictions and controls imposed on them through hostel curfews and various kinds of surveillance.

The university has nine hostels for women students with about 2,000 residents. The curfew timings for these hostels have been 5.30/6 pm in winter and 7 pm in summer.

On the evening of February 18, the residents of these hostels, unable to attend an ongoing theatre festival inside the university campus because of being locked inside after 6 pm, gathered around their hostel gates and demanded that they be allowed to attend the festival.

By the time the administration came with 'permissions' and buses to take them to the venue in a 'disciplined' way, students had stormed out of the gates and marched to the venue. The daily frustration and anger against being controlled like this then coalesced into a dharna by around 200-300 women, demanding relaxation in the curfew timings and an end to the daily surveillance over their entry and exit. They demanded the university administration and vice chancellor (VC) come and talk to them. They went back to their hostels only on the assurance of a formal meeting with the VC and other administrators the next day.

The next evening, the administration tried to 'calm' matters by instructing hostel wardens to 'talk' to them. The wardens did talk to the students, and even their parents, but the women were not in a mood to listen. They came out of their hostels again and marched to the nearby Kranti Chowk, where they sat shouting slogans against the administration and for their *azaadi* (freedom) from the arbitrary restrictions imposed on them.

In the letter they wrote to the VC, the agitating students said, "Though the constitution of this country has given equal status to women ... [women students] living in the hostels of the university ... feel this equality to be false as there are so many unconstitutional rules imposed on them in the hostels which are entirely based on discrimination'. They demanded that:

- Entry to the main gate of the hostel compound be extended to 8pm.
- The gates of hostels inside the compound which are closed by 7 or 8 pm should be open 24/7.
- Checking of ID cards at the hostel main gate should be stopped.
- Female friends should be allowed inside hostels.
- E-rickshaw facilities should be made available on campus.
- Women students should be allowed to go to all programmes in the university at night without

any conditions.

- Security and lighting should be increased on campus.
- All departments should have sanitary pad-vending machines.
- There should be a committee of women students in the hostels which should be included in the decision-making process regarding hostels.

For hours, the registrars, deans and wardens tried to placate them, threaten them and ridicule them, but the students didn't budge till the VC came and spoke to them. But when the VC told them that their demand for azaadi was detrimental to their own safety and that if they felt too suffocated they could go elsewhere, the angry students decided to start a hunger-strike on the spot. They sat there through the night, singing and chanting slogans, asserting that hostels should not be like jails.

Seeing their determination, the VC agreed to hold a meeting on their demands and finally reached an agreement whereby:

- Curfew timings for the main gate of the hostel compound were extended to 8 pm in summer and 7 pm in winter.
- Curfew timings for the gates of various hostels inside the compound were extended to 10 pm.
- Entry of friends and visitors will not be restricted on showing of valid ID proof.
- Residents will not be asked for IDs every time they enter their own hostels.

The administration also gave assurances on various other demands for sanitary pad-vending machines on campus, better transport facilities, more lighting on campus and greater involvement of students in the decision-making process in the hostels.

The anger of these women students may have only been over the theatre festival, but was building up over the years because of the numerous restrictions, says Kiran, a final year LLB student in the university and a resident of Yamuna hostel. "It is our constitutional right to be treated as equals but such restrictions deny us this equality. Given the context of our society, we are not even demanding absolute freedom from restrictions, but a little relaxation so that at least we can avail the facilities and opportunities offered to us as students in the university. We demanded relaxation till 8pm considering the timings of central library," she said.

It is not just curfew timings but also the constant moral policing by the authorities that has angered these women. Meenakshi, a final year MSc Zoology student says 'even if you are just sitting outside the hostel with some male friend, the guards chase you away as if you are committing some sin. I am a science student and we have classes and practicals till 5 pm. If we get even a little late or don't have our ID card with us, the warden is called, who scolds us and only then allows us inside the hostel. And if we are not present during attendance call, they directly call our parents. So many girls prefer to not come back to the hostel if they get late. If something happens to them, whose responsibility will it be?', she adds.

As it is, most women have to go through difficult and complex negotiations with their families to be able to come to university and study. Neha, a first year B.tech student from a nearby village talks about how she had to give up her dreams of a career in wrestling as her family deemed the university to be an unsafe space for a women to be in. "After coming to the university, you expect to be treated like adults at least by your teachers and authorities. But even they are constantly telling us what we can, can't or should not do. Even the teachers taunt you if you are interacting 'too much' with boys. At least they should think differently. No one is bothered about the rampant sexual harassment in the campus which happens at all time. All this puts too much mental pressure on us and we can't study freely," she adds.

Another final year LLB student Monica said she had to face counter-charges from the authorities when she complained against a boy who had been harassing her for months. "I complained against him several times to the guards but they have not taken any action against him. When I told them that if they don't do anything I will myself beat him up, they replied that I should do that. If we have to be responsible for our safety ourselves then we can do it at any time, why put curfews or have security guards at all?" she says.

She said the authorities always try to blame the victim. In a recent case of sexual harassment on campus where a woman filed an FIR, the VC said, 'Aren't you the one who roams around with three-four men?'. Does that make her available for harassment? The burden of honour is always heaped on the woman. They keep talking about safety but there are no efforts to create any awareness on these issues or any redressal mechanisms. Everyone just tries to hush down these incidents," she added.

After the protest, these women are facing a lot of backlash from everyone. Manju, another law student said everyone in the university has been telling them that what they did was not right and that they should not have created a ruckus. "Nobody dare say anything to the boys if they do anything. They do whatever they please inside their hostels. They only try to control us since they think it is easier. I have been getting calls from my mother since a teacher from my village called them and told them about the protest. Everyone is trying to make us feel guilty," she said.

A battle within the hostels also continues for these women students. Kiran said a lot of women students, too, were against them after the agitation, "but we are trying to convince them that our demands are just and right. We are all part of the patriarchal system, it will take time to change our thinking. We are trying to form a group of women hostel residents so that we stay united against all kinds of pressure and carry forward our struggle."

Mixed with the joy of success in getting their major demands met is a sense of apprehension among these women students with regard to what might happen in the coming days. The new timings are yet to be implemented and they fear that the administration might use any excuse to go back on its promises. To make matters worse, their slogan of 'azaadi' is being linked to "bad influence" from students of Delhi University and Jawaharlal Nehru University and attempts are being made to delegitimise their protest. The local media, too, is trying to portray their demands as "asking for too much azaadi" while the wardens and teachers continue to exert moral pressure. The women know they are in for a long fight.

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P.S.

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<https://thewire.in/228132/how-girls-in-rohtaks-maharshi-dayanand-university-rose-against-curfew-timings-and-won/>