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AIFRTE condemns vicious police assault on girl students at BHU

The All India Forum for Right to Education (AIFRTE) condemns the vicious and lawless action of the Uttar Pradesh police force in lathi-charging peaceful women students of Benaras Hindu University (BHU) on the night of 23 September 2017.

The girls' hostel students had for some months been engaged in petitioning the hostel and university authorities against the unconstitutional gender discrimination being practiced by the university. Girls were not allowed use of mobile phones after 10 p.m. and were denied access to WiFi in their hostels. They were not allowed out after 8 p.m. even to visit the library or their families. The girls' hostel menu did not include non-vegetarian dishes although all these facilities were permitted in the boys' hostels. The reason given for such absurd discriminatory rules was that women's sexuality would be aroused in the absence of such restrictions and hence their 'safety' could not be ensured!

The present agitation was provoked by the assault on a second year Fine Arts student who was returning to her hostel after six o'clock in the evening on 21 September 2017 by some molesters on motorbikes. The girl who suffered injuries on her private parts fainted on the road. Security guards standing a few meters away reportedly did not help and when there was some protest they allegedly insulted the girls for being outside after dark and not being careful when moving about alone. Even the hostel warden preferred to question the character of the victim instead of responding to the incident with the seriousness it deserved. The Proctorial Board too showed no sensitivity and only wanted to suppress the complaint because of the Prime Minister's impending visit to his Lok Sabha constituency.

Angered by the attitude of the authorities, the girls, demanding security, equality and justice, demonstrated at the BHU gate. They accused the authorities of indulging in "victim blaming" and turning the campus administration into a "Khap". Moral policing has become the order of the day at BHU under the present Vice Chancellor Girish Chandra Tripathi who like most others was appointed for his Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) affiliation.

By the afternoon the students had occupied and blocked the university's main gate. The university administration called in police and para military force but made no attempt to talk to the students who repeatedly called for the V.C. to come and speak with them. The police was stationed around the main gate and the V. C's house but the students refused to be provoked and continued their peaceful protest and sloganeering.

The agitation captured nationwide attention of media because Narendra Modi reportedly preferred to change his route and avoid the BHU rather than listen to the complainants of the girl students. Of course, the RSS student wing, the ABVP called the girls legitimate protest a political stunt against Modi and the university, which makes a mockery of their so-called 'protest' outside the Ministry of Human Resource Development.

With this excuse the entirely male police force viciously attacked the girls, grievously injuring many of them who suffered head wounds and were badly beaten up. The claim that the demonstrating students had turned violent, pelting stones and burning a vehicle, was patently false.

If indeed 'outsiders' had infiltrated the assembly of peacefully protesting girl students, one wonders what the large police force amassed at the BHU gate was doing? Did it facilitate their entry? And why did they enter the girls' hostel and beat up girl students after pulling them out of their rooms? Several journalists were also assaulted despite having shown their press cards.

The AIFRTE strongly condemns the use of male policeman to brutally beat up the peacefully protesting girl students of BHU. Across campuses all over the country, university administrations,

(P.T.O.)

शिक्षा नहीं कोई कारोबार, है यह जनता का अधिकार

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headed and largely staffed by RSS affiliated personnel, are resorting to harsh and inhumane methods when they are confronted by the legitimate demands and democratic protests of students and teachers.

This is part of the totally negative and destructive attitude adopted by the present central and state governments headed by the RSS-BJP towards the universities and other institutions of higher education, including the IITs. The External Affairs Minister tried to claim credit for these institutions and earn “brownie” points during her speech at the United Nations, but the ferocious attacks being launched against the academic community and campus democracy are alarming and deserve to be condemned in the strongest terms.

The fact that several prominent public intellectuals, journalists and academics adhering to rational and progressive ideologies and beliefs have been assassinated for their convictions and these actions have been ‘celebrated’ and extolled by right-wing reactionary forces, emphasizes the threat to the pluralist, democratic and critical traditions that have sustained higher education in India.

It is in this context that AIFRTE sees the assault on the peacefully protesting girl students of BHU as a grave danger not only to higher education but to the future of all democratic rights and institutions in the country.

AIFRTE therefore demands

- immediate removal from office of the Vice Chancellor Girish Chandra Tripathi;
- appropriate legal action against all university administrators and police officials responsible for the brutal lathi-charge on students on 23rd September 2017;
- immediate withdrawal of FIR's against more than 1000 students
- independent judicial enquiry by a retired High Court judge into the present incident and the patriarchal maladministration of the university with regard to BHU women students;
- immediate formation of a Gender Sensitization and Sexual Harassment Committee in BHU;
- swift and positive response to the demands raised by students regarding their safety without trampling on their freedom of speech and movement, right to participate in all campus activities and to avail of all facilities with full adherence to the constitutional principles of equality and justice.

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