

DU Bedevilled by the Menace Within

A new phrase has entered the vocabulary of the Dhaka University administration: sexual misconduct. The first part, sex, is perhaps nothing new. But the second part, misconduct, brings a whole new dimension to a teacher-student relationship.

In a way, the inquiry committee instituted by the DU Syndicate to investigate allegations of sexual harassment against Prof Shahiduzzaman of the department of international relations deserves some sort of literary award. The way they have managed to turn an act of sexual harassment into a mere "misconduct" is worthy of a juggler. They have also used terms like "immoral", "indecent" and "unsuitable for a teacher".

Perhaps they have taken lessons from recent experiences in the United States.

It was President Bill Clinton who raised eyebrows when he termed his extra-marital affair with Monica Lewinsky an "inappropriate relationship". He was topped by the recently elected and then self-deleted Speaker of the House of Representatives Bob Livingston who said he had "strayed from his own extra-marital affairs. Obviously, Clinton had also "strayed", and there may be millions up and down this planet who are "straying" every now and then.

But, of course, neither Clinton nor Livingston could be accused of sexually harassing the women with whom they had strayed. These were affairs of mutual consent between adults. The problem only arose because they had strayed too far from whatever protective shield they had, and into the public limelight.

The story on the DU campus is a little different.

If Prof Shahiduzzaman had

It is rather disturbing to think that plain thuggery and hooliganism can be unleashed on the campus against students protesting illegal acts committed by teachers. But it would be quite ridiculous to suggest that these were ordinary students with a simple desire to protect the dignity of teachers or the university.

merely been guilty of "misconduct", then he could be compared to the 11-year old boy who recently hit the front page by "touching up" the behind (or was it the front?) of a stewardess on Singapore Airlines. The boy's act was called a "misdemeanour", and many had actually sniggered at the novelty of a child sexually abusing an adult for a change. But there was little to snigger about the professor's "misconduct".

What the female student had accused Shahiduzzaman of was sexual harassment, which has a far more sinister connotation than "misconduct" or "immorality", or "indecent" or something vaguely "unsuitable" for a teacher (the other professors on the inquiry committee would not need an explanation on this). If he was to be found "guilty", then it surely had to be just that, or nothing at all. The fact that Shahiduzzaman was found "guilty", meant he was guilty of sexual harassment. But by their deft piece of linguistic gymnastics, Shahiduzzaman's fellow professors on the committee have apparently contrived to lessen the burden of guilt.

However, the committee's findings, and the events that led to it, raise a number of questions, none of which can be brushed away by gymnastics of any kind. First, what purpose is this act of linguistic jugglery designed to serve? Second, is Shahiduzzaman merely the tip of a very misbehaving iceberg? If so, would the DU Syndicate be honest and courageous enough to tackle it head-on?

What the DU Syndicate ought to understand is that, saving Prof Shahiduzzaman is not going to save the teaching

community. If Shahiduzzaman is guilty - and the committee's report says he is - then the law needs to be allowed to take its own course. This does not only mean disciplinary action by the university itself, though that is the minimum the public expects. But if sexual harassment is an offence under the law of the land, then legal proceedings need to be initiated without further ado. There is little room for jugglery of any kind here, because public attention is now firmly focused on what the DU would do next.



The Outside Story

BY SABIR MUSTAFA

What the DU is dearly hoping is that this particular case is seen as an aberration. But this may require a great deal of soul searching, in public. One way would be for the DU to institute a general inquiry into conduct of teachers with female students, as well as seriously pursue specific allegations of sexual harassment against individual teachers. The teaching community, represented through the Dhaka University Teachers' Association (DUTA) or the faculties, may take the initiative as an exercise in self-preservation. Only when the whole truth has been brought into the open, and the campus is exorcised of this unholy ghost, can the public regain the faith it otherwise always had in the integrity of the academic community.

There is little doubt that some teachers may be involved

emotionally with students; there may be a number of "inappropriate relationships" at any given time; and many teachers may "stray" in the course of their close encounters with the opposite sex. But few teachers are in the business of using their advantageous positions for sexual harassment. It is these acts of sexual harassment, rather than the amorous interludes in the teacher-student relationships, that need to be exposed and differentiated from relationships based on mutual consent. For this differ-

leaving the "crime" - and therefore the punishment - open to interpretation. Such prevarication, in British political parlance is called "fudging", but in plain English it is called cowardice. The inquiry committee's apparent lack of moral backbone, thus, does not augur well for the future.

While observers are likely to pick on the bare bones of the committee's report, there is another aspect of the sex saga that may need a lot of attention. One of the strangest developments of the whole episode was the sight of a group of young students, mostly first or second year under-graduates, who went into action to "defend the dignity of the teachers".

These boys, calling themselves "Conscious Students", established the "dignity of the teachers" by physically assaulting other students, male and female, who were protesting alleged acts of sexual harassment on the campus. It was obvious that the "Conscious Students" knew little about how to protect the "dignity" of fellow students, let alone teachers or the university. But no sooner had these thugs set about attacking other students, the vice chancellor himself issued appeals for restraint from "both sides". The VC called on both sides to refrain from staging demonstrations while the inquiry was progressing.

This was rather strange. Those protesting sexual harassment were basically demanding investigation into allegations, publication of reports of inquiries and punishment to those found guilty. What was so inflammatory about this, that the VC himself had to call for restraint? But the sudden arrival of the

"Conscious Students" group on the scene introduced a qualitative change to the environment. They introduced violence, demonstrating an extreme lack of tolerance while wearing an air of total self-confidence.

The VC's intervention appeared to put the two sides on the same pedestal. Most people would be forgiven for thinking that, if the violence unleashed by the "Conscious Students" was designed to put an end to the anti-harassment demonstrations, then the VC's appeal to "both sides" were designed to serve the very same purpose. The questions that then arise are, who were these "Conscious Students", and who was behind their sudden appearance on the scene? Was any teacher involved in instigating this violence? Was the VC aware of any move from within the teaching community? Why did the VC not ask police to take action against the "Conscious Students" when they turned violent?

It is rather disturbing to think that plain thuggery and hooliganism can be unleashed on the campus against students protesting illegal acts committed by teachers. But it would be quite ridiculous to suggest that these were ordinary students with a simple desire to protect the dignity of teachers or the university. Perhaps the VC and the newly-elected DUTA would like to investigate this sordid aspect of a decidedly squalid affair, and unmask those behind this new brand of terrorism.

A lot now hinges on what actions the VC, the Syndicate and the DUTA take. If they do not act against those who unleashed terror against protesting students, then the public would be free to draw their own conclusions. At the same time, the DU's actions in the Shahiduzzaman case would enable the public to gauge whether the academic community has the moral courage to confront this menace within.

THE DAILY STAR

JAN 10 1999