



The Issue of Safety Amongst Undergraduate Students in the University of Delhi

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we investigate what are the connotations of safety for students and in what way is college a safe space. In the questionnaire administered, there was no specific question on safety. However, the response to our first question—*What does entering college mean to you?*—saw a significant percentage (68%) of female students associating entry into college with entry into a safe space. Students' expectations from college—as revealed in their responses to other questions—go beyond *physical* safety, not only do they draw attention to the multidimensionality and complexity of the concept, but in doing so they mark out and identify within the *safe* environs of college, temporally and spatially fluid islands of *unsafety*. Their responses problematized the notion of safety, thus alerting us to a political (including gendered) and expansive understanding of safety. In this expansion safety emerges as a cluster concept incorporating dimensions of gender, equality, justice, freedom and democracy. This paper makes two arguments, *first* that the college experience contributes to the students' understanding of safety in its multidimensionality. The connotations of safety include both the physical and the socio-psychological dimensions. *Second* that in the articulation of this learning a student develops a critical understanding of social, political, and economic structures of power.

Keywords: safety, unsafety, gender, city, University.

INTRODUCTION

This article is based on a *study* of four constituent colleges of the University of Delhi.¹ In this paper we investigate what are the connotations of safety for students and in what way is college a safe space. In the questionnaire administered, there was no specific question on safety.

¹ The study was conducted amongst undergraduate students of four constituent colleges of the University of Delhi.

College A is an all-women's college and college B is co-ed college in the South campus of the University. College C is an all-women's and college D is a co-ed college in the North campus of the University.

There were 50 respondents each from colleges B, C and D, and 200 respondents from college A. 30% of the responses were collected online; 70% of the responses were collected in person.

In addition to the questionnaire, the data was collected via a workshop and focus group discussions of representatives from all four colleges and unstructured interviews with students.

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This paper makes two arguments, *first* that the college experience contributes to the students' understanding of safety in its multidimensionality. The connotations of safety include both the physical and the socio-psychological dimensions. *Second* that in the articulation of this learning a student develops a critical understanding of social, political, and economic structures of power.

This article is divided into four sections. The Introduction in the *first* section is accompanied by a discussion that establishes the context of the study. The *second* section brings forth the meaning and various connotations of the concept of safety for students. The *third* section analyses how unsafety is embedded in the structures of power. It also points out how students gradually learn to see unsafety as not a social vagary but as a structural problem that must be revealed and resisted. The *fourth* section is the conclusion which highlights the key points of our analysis.

SAFETY IN THE UNIVERSITY ENVIRONMENT

Safety is an important concern in urban contexts (Datta 2021; Hengehold 2011; Mitchell 2004; Moser 2012; Strandbygaard, Jones, Jensen, Nielsen, & Grönlund 2020; Yu, Fang, Xue, & Yin 2014). The city of Delhi, where the four constituent colleges are located, has acquired notoriety of being 'one of the most unsafe cities in the world for women' (Vishwanath & Mehrotra 2007: 1542). Literature review on the subject brings forth an important comparative insight—contrary to the Indian undergraduate student's experience, the campus of the Global North university is regarded as unsafe (Faulconer, Dixon, Griffith and Frank 2020; Fisher 1995; Hodge 2013; Klodawsky & Lundy 1994; Srinivasan 2024). In the backdrop of these comparative insights, the idea of college as a safe space in context of the University of Delhi in the Global South, poses a problem. Before proceeding further, it must be underlined that this does not mean that the campus of the University of Delhi and its constituent colleges—while the former is an open campus the latter are gated complexes—have a spotless record of being without incidents of crime and violence. More recently there were incidents of men gate-crashing and harassing female students at the premises of Miranda House (Pandey 2022) and Indraprastha College (Khan 2023).

During the time of annual college festivals, the number of security personnel including that of the state police are increased around college premises. The University recognizing this problem of safety has taken measures in this regard to address the issue. Anticipating hooliganism,² the

² See DU tightens security before Holi to prevent Hooliganism and rowdy conduct <https://indianexpress.com/article/education/du-tightens-security-before-holi-to-prevent-hooliganism-rowdy-conduct-9215394/>

University juggles the academic calendar to ensure that the mid-semester break coincides with the *Holi*—the festival of colours. The University has formulated anti-ragging instructions that are to be strictly enforced by its constituent colleges. Since 2015 it is binding on all universities and colleges in India to have an 'Internal Complaints Committee' to prevent and address issues of sexual harassment of employees and students. It follows from the above that the University's understanding of safety places a premium on the physical dimension.

CONNOTATIONS OF SAFETY FOR STUDENTS

Physical Dimension of Safety

The need for physical safety was expressed by female students only. They regard college as a safe space that provides them with physical protection. This spatial understanding suggests a distinction between an 'inside' and an 'outside' wherein the inside (of college) is safe and outside (of college) is unsafe. The inside, that is, college is vested with legitimacy as an academic institution that operates under rules and reserves rights of entry into its premises; as a public institution it is accountable to the law of the land. The entry and exit points into a college are manned by security personnel (mostly from private companies) and are under camera surveillance. While the movement of the security personnel is restricted, the CCTV cameras with features such as dynamic range, remote monitoring, cloud storage, night vision, motion sensing and sound reproduction, have a long and wide view of the field of vision. The college transacts its responsibility to provide a safe campus via such security measures.

The college boundary wall punctuated by entry and exit gates, organizes space into inside and outside. Female students regard the space outside the college boundary as an unsafe zone that includes unmanned parks, lanes, poorly lit roads, walkways to the metro station, isolated markets and streets. The figure of threat and danger of the unsafe outside is the sexual predator and marauder.³ The predatory behaviour—anticipated by students—is never a surprise. Student 7 of college A spoke about being often accosted by catcalling and masturbating men in the public park which she had to cross on her way to college from her nearby paying guest accommodation (PG). What worried her was the daily occurrence of such episodes which were coincident with her college timings. That such behaviour is the predator/marauder's premeditated routines is well known to both, the outstation and local students.

The dread of potential physical assaults creates a mental and emotional trauma for the students. In a tutorial class a female student shared with one of the authors of this article that the daily fear made her nervous and she could not concentrate in classes as she would be worrying about her journey back home through the unsafe park. The student's anxiety reached such levels that her mother had to fly down to Delhi and take her for psychiatric counselling. The quest for physical security by young women is not without its mental and emotional toll.

Gargi Student's protest continues: DU teachers and students back them <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/gargi-students-continue-to-protest-many-back-them/articleshow/74090058.cms>

Police identify eight more students in IP college case <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/delhi/police-identify-eight-more-students-in-ip-college-case-8551453/>

³ We are grateful to Prof. Amrit Srinivasan for this point

Socio-Psychological Dimensions of Safety

While college is regarded as a safe space, not all physical enclosures in college are regarded as equally safe at *all* times. For example, in the life of some undergraduate students, the classroom gets cast variously as a safe or unsafe space; some students manage to move in a linear progression from unsafe to safe, there are some whose experiences oscillate between the two. Students' responses drew attention to the limitations of safety as merely physical. Some female and male students spoke about how in their initial days--in some cases an entire semester--the classroom and the tutorial environment was not safe for them to speak. A female student 2 of college *A* in response to question no. 24 (What inhibits your asking questions in class and in other venues in college?) shared: "I don't ask questions because my classmates are very intelligent. I think my questions are stupid." Responding to the same question, a male student 41 of college *D* shared "When I joined college, I was scared to speak in class because people laughed at my English. Now I don't care and I ask."

There is a direct correlation between emotional security and a congenial environment. Extrapolating from students' responses, a congenial environment is one that enables students to ask questions fearlessly, helps students overcome their hesitations and low self-esteem, gives them the confidence to articulate their views despite their 'not so good English' or in the Hindi language.⁴ 70% of the students credited the role of the teachers in encouraging them to speak in class and get over their inhibitions. Students of social sciences and humanities credited class lectures and tutorials as helping them overcome the shame and embarrassment they experienced due to their gender, caste, and class identities. We may note that these issues are a part of the syllabi of the disciplines of humanities and social sciences whereby a lecture on 'class' may trigger a discussion that digresses from the generic to the personal. Female student 46 of college *C* said there are two teachers in the department from whom she asks questions on topics that are forbidden at home. Some students who spoke of not asking questions in the large lecture classrooms for fear of being mocked, found the courage to so do in the smaller tutorial groups. For most teachers and students, the small tutorial room and group enable free flowing conversations. Besides the teacher an empathetic classmate plays a significant role in this regard. During the tea-break of our Workshop, student 3 of college *B* acknowledged a classmate's role in making him feel comfortable in class and college. The classmate volunteered to help him dissect difficult texts of philosophy in the first semester. Subsequently he became his 'go to person' for all academic problems and for initiation into the social etiquettes of urban living.

UNSAFETY AND STRUCTURES OF POWER

In the first place, how did the issue of safety enter students' thinking about college? How come when students enter the portals of college, they are cognizant of the imminent threat to life and bodily violation, fear of predators, wary of strangers, feelings of vulnerability that are outside? The idea of safe/unsafe spaces gains currency and charge in context of the scarred reputation of the city of Delhi--national capital of India--as the most unsafe city in the world for women. The official statistics of crime against women confirm this as a fact. Post-Nirbhaya⁵ the

⁴ The medium of instruction in the University of Delhi and its constituent colleges is English and Hindi.

⁵ The brutal sexual assault of a young woman in Delhi 16th of December 2012 became a context of nation-wide protests for justice for the victim/survivor. The protests became a context for a people to reflect on patriarchal oppression and the complacency of state agencies on issues of crimes against women. 'Nirbhaya' meaning the fearless

identification of Delhi with endemic gendered violence is etched in the nation's history and memory.

College as a safe space cannot be assumed *apriori*. The transposition of the conceptions of safe/unsafe spaces from the city to the college/university may be attributed to the force of the spillover effect—a way of thinking and being—of these conceptions. The city as a space and an arm of gendered violence enters students' consciousness through perception and experience. Infamy of Delhi notwithstanding, thousands of students from across the country aspire to study in the University of Delhi. This shows that students are drawn to the fame and reputation of the University despite the unsafe city to which it belongs.

Safety thus emerges as a multidimensional concept. For female students' connotations of physical safety are sexual. Consequently, in an unsafe city, there are individuated zones—college, home, PG and hostel—of what may be referred to as *sexual safety*: All these get mapped as safe in the female student's mindscape. A safe space trumps temporality; for instance, even if late in the night, a student feels safer inside rather than outside college. Not just the academic learnings, but the entire experience of college life prompts female students to unpack sexual and physical threats as 'gendered violence' both, in terms of its spatiality and temporality. The student moves away from being a passive recipient in need of college protection from the *outside* social structures to being an aware and questioning student interrogating those very social structures such as patriarchy that legitimize violence against women. The student as a rights-entitled young woman learns to distinguish between policy and social change. Even as she highlights the unsafety of unlit streets at night as lapses in state responsibility which can be corrected via an ad hoc municipal installation of lamp-posts, her consciousness is raised to social and behavioural change and structural transformation. Till that time female students devise tactics and strategies to circumvent unsafety which we must emphasise has been unpacked for them by them as not a chance occurrence or a deviant behaviour but a structural problem. Student 23 of college A in response to a question about 'a good lecture' said that the lecture on 'politics is the art of the possible' was life-changing for him as he learnt that since social change will not happen overnight and his family also opposes his choice of career, he must take the initiative and build a network of friends and a support structure.

The students' responses suggest that the classroom experience—lectures, assignments, readings, discussions, tutorials—expands the notion of safety. While this is mostly true for social science students, the context for science and commerce stream students to reflect on these issues are the Generic Elective social science papers, student union elections, college seminars, book clubs and film screenings followed by discussion. However, the classroom discussions are distinct because they can continue over the entire semester and therefore are intensive. The interlocutors are familiar if not friendly faces—familiarity *does not* breed contempt. This space for critical thinking compels students into activities of reflection and questioning, into revelations, explorations and criticism. This is how students begin to see the structural roots of unsafety *and* unsafety as an impediment not just to bodily integrity but to the freedoms that they are legally entitled to. Students' responses indicate that after some time in college they begin to see their lack of privileges not as individual failings but a result of structural locations

was the moniker given to brave young woman who fought back her assaulters. She succumbed to her injuries and passed away on the 29th of December 2012 i.e. within 13 days of the assault.

in class, caste, religion, patriarchy, and community. Class discussions unpack the status quo as constructed, not natural. We must underline that the fault lines such as that of caste and class do not vanish, the social and political conflicts do not get resolved but they do acquire an urgency for the odd student(s)—thanks to variables such as that of teacher, classmates, college—who acquires the determination to speak against unjust practices.

Classmates also have a role in fostering and maintaining a congenial environment. Classmates give each other hope and support as echoed in the response of student 19 of college A: ‘I am the member of the debating society in which we have discussed issues of reservation, caste violence’, student 39 from college A, is an active founding member of her college queer community. This has provided space to come out of the closet. She said, “though my parents don’t know, I am glad to have acquired a supportive circle of friends.” For some student’s class presentations offer an occasion for relatively greater freedom to explore topics and issues outside the university examination framework.⁶ Class discussions including student presentations are possible occasions for some to unhesitatingly, for others more daringly, to cross the proverbial ‘Lakshman rekhas’ in the assuring presence of encouraging peers and teachers.

Students acknowledge the teacher’s pivotal role in engendering a congenial environment of free inquiry, critical thinking, uninhibited expression and fearless articulation. Teachers make the classroom environment safe for students by encouraging them to ask questions freely without any apprehensions, ensuring that all students have a fair and equal chance to participate in discussions, not blocking a student from expressing her opinion due to his/her personal and political stance, making room for voices that disagree or are critical. The absence of such an environment is regarded by students as a teacher’s apathy. Student 25 of college D was disappointed by his teacher’s insistence of giving an uninterrupted lecture and directed him to take the question to the tutorial which incidentally was being taken by a different faculty.

We as faculty have observed how incidents of caste discrimination and communal violence become contexts for students to demand and insist debates and discussions on such issues. For example, the Rohit Vemula case generated intense emotions and strong opinions in class that epitomized the ongoing struggle between the forces of structural discrimination and the resistance to them. Student 42 of college A complains of caste biases of her college mates that prevent her book club society from being truly democratic. We do not see this as a problem but as evidence of her newly acquired daring made possible by the classroom’s safe environment; and hopefully this thinking and practice will remain with her beyond college.

Given an opportunity, students call out structural exclusions and caste discrimination. In doing so they legitimize the urgency, both, intellectual and practical, of engaging issues of discrimination related physical and symbolic violence upfront. In context of classroom discussions, an increasing number of students muster courage and confidence to talk about the discriminatory experiences of their family, from a critical vantage that is definitely empowering; and usually they find an empathetic audience in their classmates. To a

⁶ The final marks for a course are a sum of the final end semester university exam and the internal assessment which includes the class presentation. Both the student and teacher have the room here to maneuver the prescribed curriculum into a ‘hidden curriculum.’ This point is discussed in detail in our forthcoming publication.

considerable extent this not only enhances a student's self-esteem. It also affirms the structural dimension of safety in the classroom situation.

A vital insight from the students' responses is that the social fault lines notwithstanding, the student transformation is marked by sensitivity and empathy to the other. The college classroom structure contra the current media channel debate socializes the student into listening. The student responses confirm the public university as a space where different social groups come together in "more or less egalitarian conditions" (Deshpande 2016) making it a democratizing space that equalizes existing hierarchies and questions discrimination. It speaks to and has implications for the social exclusions of caste, class, gender within the society.

CONCLUSION

Our study showed that the college is regarded as a safe space. To begin with, students when they enter college see unsafety as a *natural* condition in the city of Delhi which has to be lived with. Over the months and years interacting with teachers and students they begin to see lack of safety as a *political social construction* and they learn to demand of political and social institutions to create safe spaces. Female students make this cognitive transition towards empowering practices of individual engagement with structure-agency dialectics.

In addition to the demand for protection from the college and the state, female students take the initiative to challenge the boundaries of safe and unsafe. Realizing that the prohibition from unsafe spaces is a denial of possibilities of a rich social and political life, female students devise ways with their existing resources. A female student widens her social circle by extending it beyond close friends to include college mates, class mates and flat mates as allies to go 'where and when women are advised to not go.' They avoid going out alone at night, they also simultaneously whenever possible seek to claim the streets in these very nights by venturing out in a large group; they realize the importance of being part of the collective. While the female student is not accompanied by the collective all the time, but the collective context--of sharing stories, of validating individual voices and experiences--gives them the vocabulary and strength to create their own safety nets in life's journeys. For example, student 11 of college C said that when alone in an auto late at night, not only does she message the auto number to her friend but also pretends to be talking to her friend throughout the journey. As far as the male students are concerned they do demonstrate sensitivity to the issue of their female colleagues but most of them end up endorsing or taking on the role of the patriarchal male protector of women. In a co-ed college male students often escort them to the metro station or home when they are practicing for plays or when they are out late.

The student does not just have to be empowered with physical skills like karate or mental emotional skills (courage to question) but also to be encouraged to be sensitive to one's structural privileges and have the responsibility to take along those who do not. In the latter the training of the male students in particular becomes crucial. They have to be told to abjure unconscious misogynous practices and internalized toxic forms of masculinity. If the college alerts us to the fluidity of masculinities, this will go a long way in making our cities safer.

This study draws attention to the multi-dimensionality of the concept of safety and (unsafety), that is valid not just for young women in college but for women of all ages in various sectors of society. The college and the classroom environment, the role of the teacher and empathetic

classmates enables the student to abjure the victimhood narrative and encourages her to adopt the *will to agency*.

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