The question of gendered segregation at IISER Mohali hostels?

anu sabhlok, IISER Mohali, May 2022[1]

Introduction

When we first moved to campus in 2010, there were only 3-4 buildings. There was the CAF that housed a few labs and offices, including the office of our founding Director Prof. Sathyamurthy. There was a small building that housed the library and there were two hostels - 5 and 7. These hostels housed classrooms, labs, faculty offices, study rooms, canteens, dining halls and the living area for students. The first batch of 26 students at IISER had 4 female students, the second batch of 40 had 6 and the third batch of 105 students had 21 female students. With the small number of students and the proximity of living and working spaces, interactions amongst students and faculty was high and a shared enthusiasm for learning and research was evident.

It was in this context that questions of gender, caste, regional identity and food habits came up. How are we to house women and men students? How do we engage with students who come to campus having imbibed caste biases as part of their cultural context? What is to be done with diverse food habits reflecting regional, caste and class influences? Should we enable or discourage regional cliques from forming? These were the kinds of broader issues that the Dean Students office (DoS)[2] including the wardens of that time dealt with. Of course, there were other things to be dealt with: How is the hostel to be cleaned and by how many people? How is food quality to be monitored - how much of this is the domain of students eating in the dining halls and how much of this is the responsibility of the DoS office? How to adhere to tendering norms that go for the lowest bidder and yet provide inexpensive but healthy and clean food to students? Should we intervene in day to day matters or allow students the space to resolve issues themselves, i.e. do we only address complaints? Each of these discussions took days,

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[1] While I have consulted a few wardens and former Dean Students in the writing of this document, the views expressed are mine and draw from my long term engagement with the student community as their teacher, former warden and former Dean Students.

[2] I use the term Dean Students Office (DoS) to imply an ecosystem consisting of Dean Students, Associate Dean Students, Wardens, Caretakers and office staff attached to this office.

some are still lingering. There were dialogues, debates and open forums with students and decisions were taken after long deliberations with the stakeholders.

Coeducational versus segregated hostels

The decision to house male and female students in the same building but with separate wings was also arrived at after many such discussions, including a public debate. The hostels at IISER Mohali are divided into segregated wings (that now allow students of the opposite sex to visit each other's wing between 10am and 10pm) with shared common spaces. Obviously the pragmatics of the time also did not allow for segregated buildings, as we only had two hostels and a very small percentage of female students. More importantly, however, our intention to create spaces that foster healthy relationships and an overall growth of our students pushed us to gain a deeper understanding of living arrangements on campuses. Some of this understanding, gathered from reading texts and shared experiences on late adolescent psychology, higher education governance, and student life administration is shared below:

Co-educational residence spaces are better at meeting the developmental needs of college age students by offering an environment for healthy male-female interactions and alleviating the social pressures that generally accompany inter-gender socialization. Co-ed living arrangements provide for more natural (i.e. 'at home' or 'real life' kind of situation), informal, low anxiety engagements with those from the opposite sex and helps students learn how to develop enriching relations with the other that are not riddled with awkwardness and objectification (especially in the long term). (Duncan, 1972).

While many college administrators fear that co-ed living spaces will create a culture of promiscuity, Duncan (1972) and Katz (1969) have argued that close proximity and sharing mundane everyday rituals mostly leads to students developing a sibling type of relationship with their peers. Calling this social phenomenon the 'Incest Taboo', Katz writes: "Quite simply, these students tend to form deep, intimate and rather

brotherly-sisterly type attachments, their romantic relationships are more often with people living outside their own house, they find that you cannot treat people you live with merely as sex objects. It is not like having a casual affair with someone in another dorm and then when it's over you simply don't see each other again." Waynmore's thesis (2010) supports this line of thinking through a quantitative study that correlated coed living arrangements on college campuses with men's progressive views of women.

The UGC's Saksham report also highlights the urgent need to work towards a "positive interpersonal climate on campuses", pointing specifically towards science campuses "where perceived gender neutrality in teaching practices" makes it "harder to recognize social problems and power relations." This report discusses that measures need to be taken to make "working in the laboratories for long hours and in relatively isolated conditions" secure and safe for women. Our experience at IISER Mohali demonstrates that vibrant, socially inclusive and mixed gender residential spaces may be one way in which students look out for each other when in labs and other isolated spaces (rather than if they only met in work related spaces). The report further states, "In more senses than one, these educational spaces need nurturing, to enhance capacity to anticipate new realities and set the terms of a truly democratic, liberatory discourse for society at large."

The BS-MS years are times of immense transformation in students wherein they challenge, question and rework their own patterns, biases, and prejudices – as well as those of their peers, teachers and society. Yet Astin (1993) noted that college education has not reduced gender stereotypes in youth attributing this largely to single-sex housing arrangements in colleges (we have certainly observed this in the Indian scenario, where gender sterotypes are persistent despite higher education). Others have built on an understanding of the role of peer groups in student development, to argue that adding a critical mass (and not merely a token minority) of women to the social mix is crucial for challenging gender stereotypes (Kanter 2000; Gupta, 2020). In the IISER Mohali case, we have observed over the years that students living in mixed hostel buildings with shared common spaces and opportunity for informal social

exchange alters gender, caste and regional prejudices and students learn to value diverse ways of thinking and being. Sharing spaces drives students to cooperate, negotiate and resolve issues towards the common goal of living together. This process is crucial to healthy social and psychological development of the students and prepares them for future long term relationships (personal and professional) by shifting stereotypical attitudes towards more realistic perceptions.

Gendered spaces are particularly violent to students whose appearance may not fit in with the stereotypical gendered norms, including to trans students (Thorpe, 2017). Moreover, it is well documented that excessive physicality and aggression are part of male dominated or all male environments such as single sex hostels (fraternities, sports clubs etc.) and a continous female presence impedes such violent behaviour (Whitaker & Pollard, 2014). It further reduces bullying on campuses. This is observed in the IISER Mohali context also, where students have more of a supportive relationship toward each other. The camaraderie is perceptible when incoming batches are warmly welcomed and guided by senior students instead of being ragged.

Prof. Sathyamurthy, who was initially skeptical of the mixed hostels, acknowledged in one of his Republic Day speeches (about 4 or 5 years down the line) that this was the correct thing to do and that he is happy with how it has shaped our students. Several alumni have written back proudly reminiscing on their co-educational experience.

Incidents in hostels and their handling

This is not to say that in this arrangement instances of aggression, sexual harrasment and or bullying don't happen, but when they do (which is very rare) they are promptly addressed by the peer group. When such instances are reported to the DoS office, immediate action is taken. Action here does not necessarily mean punitive action (although this is not ruled out either) and brings in dialogue, counseling, and conciliation. The DoS office sensitively handles these situations in order to bring about a

fair resolution while also avoiding further alienation and/or violence (as per UGC/MHRD notification May 2, 2016). UGC's Saksham report states:

> Given the realities of a heterogeneous and diverse student body, purely punitive approaches to issues of the 'safety' of women and gender sensitization serve little purpose in terms of meaningful intervention however "well intentioned" they may be. Instead, approaches must be educative, preventive and correctional.
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> Cultures of inclusion and sensitivity to diversity become an important prerequisite to respond to violence of all kinds especially when women are targeted. Gender justice on campuses is clearly not an 'isolated operation' requiring quick fix solutions, but an exercise involving a perspectival shift that is able to set down norms of respect, nondiscrimination and the unacceptability of any abuse of power, along with robust processes of debate, discussion and dialogue. This has to be the purpose of a new pedagogy within which issues of gender justice are seen as an integral part - not as 'women's issues' to be ghettoized or added on to academic or curricular agendas as a 'requirement' or afterthought.

These are the guidelines and the ethos that the DoS office honors. Conscious efforts have been made by wardens over the years, counseling and supporting students towards creating an inclusive and safe environment in the institute. Students who have come forward to communicate an incident of sexual harrasment to the wardens, have been encouraged to report these to the ICC and support is provided when students are hesitant for reasons of fear or mistrust. Some cases that have come forth in the past few years are perhaps a reflection of these efforts. Instead of looking at these cases as evidence of a degenerate 'mafia-like' culture, we need to view them as a reflection of the openness to speak up on the part of the students and perhaps an evidence of their (tentative) trust in the institutional process. It is good to see that women students feel empowered to voice their complaints.

The need to protect and the desire to control

There is a strong tendency in Indian academic administration to control the non-academic part of student life, particularly that of women students. While IISER Mohali has been somewhat liberal in many of these aspects, the attitude still lurks. It is evident in the manner in which rules are made to 'protect' women students. This

constant need to speak for and control women students in the name of "protection" is problematic. An institute of higher education needs to create environments where students are empowered to speak for themselves and to protect themselves.

Pinjra Tod, a collective of young college women across the country (largely in Delhi University and Punjab University), have protested against the paternalistic logic of surveillance, moral policing, and increased securitization of college campuses (Zahan 2020). They argue for more autonomy and the right to speak for themselves, critiquing regressive institutional practices that bind them while claiming to act on their behalf. Looking at gender as intersectional, *Pinjra tod* students have created a space where women from all backgrounds feel empowered to voice themselves. Drawing from their experiences with ICC and the #Metoo movement, several women groups have demanded for the ICC to be an elected and autonomous body (Gawali, 2019). At IISER Mohali too, students have been asking for gender sensitization of ALL members of the institute (including faculty) to be made mandatory and for more clarity in terms of ICC processes. These conversations are essential in order to sustain a healthy and safe learning environment for all.

The way forward

As IISER Mohali has grown bigger, its problems have also become more complex. We have students and faculty coming from diverse backgrounds. It is also difficult for wardens in the current scenario to engage meaningfully with all students. We are severely short staffed. The constant dialoguing essential to nourish educational spaces is difficult. We often rely on peer to peer engagements, for the senior students to mentor junior students into the ethos and culture of IISER Mohali. The student community at IISER Mohali feels alienated and unheard at this juncture. Part of this feeling is related to the two years of COVID related institutional dynamics that needed to prioritize a whole different set of logistical arrangements, thereby leaving little or no time and energy to engage meaningfully with the student community.

In terms of the hostel segregation several students and faculty have requested for an open dialogue rather than a decision thrust upon them from the top. It is also a valid concern that some students, particularly some women students, would prefer segregated living spaces. On the other hand, there are many students who are thriving in a co-educational model and would want it to continue. It is important to create mechanisms for both these needs. Students are very capable of devising these mechanisms and resolving these diverse needs. The way forward is for the administration to trust the student body to have internal discussions and propose a model that takes into account the voice of all students. It is after all, the students whose lives are most affected by these models and rules. In matters of rules and the breaking of rules too, the student community can and should be entrusted with formulating proposals for rules and consequences for breaking them. Adhering to rules devised by them would in the true sense be a matter of respecting the code of honour.

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