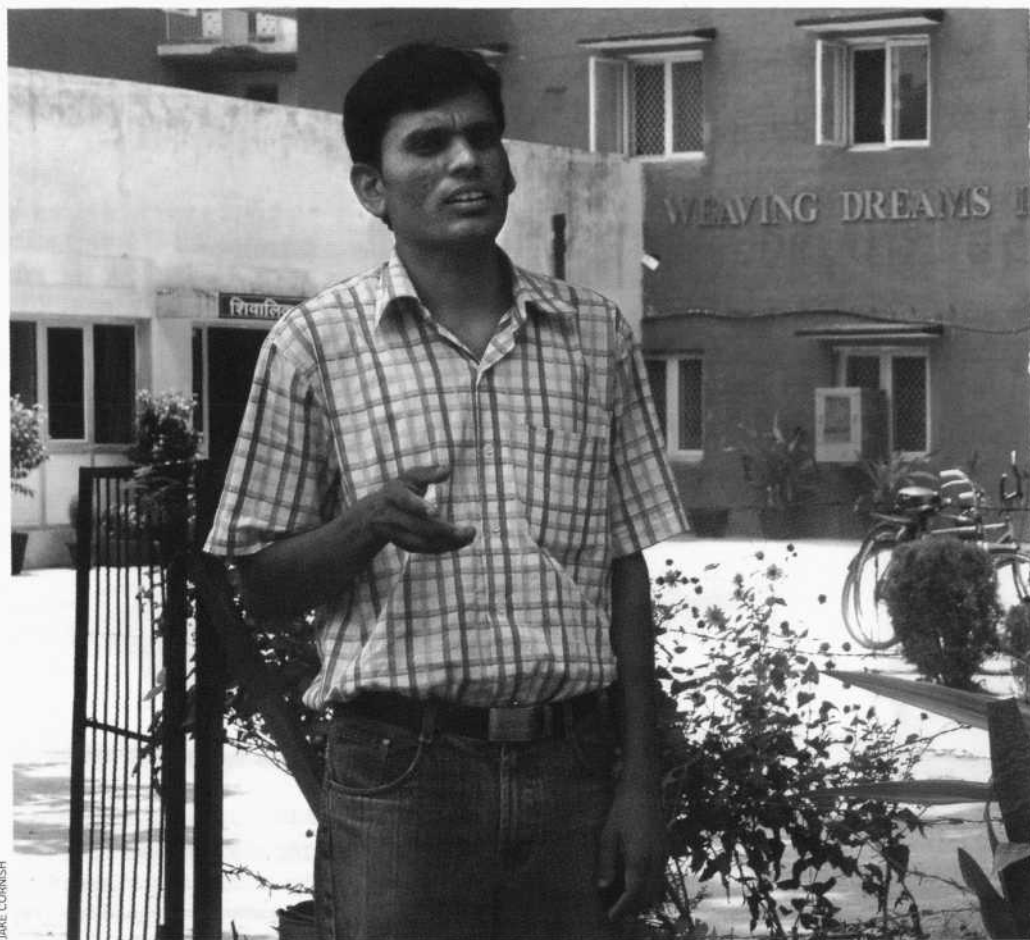


FOR AKSHAY (name changed), his admission in 2002 to the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi, (IIT-D) was an achievement whose magnitude has less to do with his being Dalit than with the fact that he has battled schizophrenia since his early teens. Diagnosed in 1997, Akshay has been through years of therapy, which his doctors at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) have certified to have had 95 percent success. His struggle with this complex, mind-debilitating illness, however, meant that it took him six years to reach third-year studies at India's premier engineering institute.

This May, Akshay went to his professor of Applied Mechanics to request an attendance waiver because he hadn't been keeping well. A sensitive response is what one would have expected, particularly from a person of the sophisticated calibre IIT professors can be thought to possess. What Akshay received, instead, was a reprimand of stunning crudity. "Every second beggar on the street is a schizo-



JAKE CORNISH

The expulsion of 20 students, including 12 Dalits, is the first time the institute has asked so many students to leave

THE OUTSIDERS

A new case of caste discrimination in IIT Delhi highlights the miserable plight of Dalit students in India's premier technical institute, reports **SHOBHITA NAITHANI**

phrenic," he claims the professor told him. "IIT has no room for such people. Degree engineer ko milti hai, bimaar ko nahin (engineers get degrees, not the sick)." Then came the crowning blow: "The only reason you're here is because of reservations." The stunned 24-year-old stood speechless.

But worse was to come. Akshay's name, along with those of 19 other IIT-D undergraduates, was struck off the institute's rolls earlier this month because his "performance was below the required minimum level for continuation". This is the first time the institute has asked so many students to leave; 12 of them are Dalits. Akshay, a bank clerk's son from Faizabad in Uttar Pradesh, doesn't deny the fact that he hadn't done well, but insists that the institute must examine the reasons for his poor show. "I sought support but all I got was a dressing-down for being a Dalit," he says. "I can't get over that, and I can't understand why the faculty is not more supportive."

Along with AIIMS, IIT-D was at the vanguard

of anti-reservation protests in 2006, when the human resources development ministry sought to expand reservations for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in State-funded institutions of higher learning. The anti-quota campaign reached a nadir of vulgarity when IIT-D students took to articulating their protest by pretending in public places to mend shoes and sweep roads, implying that these "low" professions (to which Dalits have traditionally been confined) would be the upper-caste IIT aspirant's only career options were the quota law to be enforced. Propaganda through SMS and e-mail was a highlight of the campaign — these and other inspired ideas were, it was later found, the brainchild of a Gurgaon-based public relations firm, which had offered to help out.

Resentment of backward-caste students is apparently endemic at IIT-D, and comes not just from peers but the faculty as well. Where pro-

fessors are meant to guide students through the institute's demanding course work, many of them actively demoralise those from disadvantaged backgrounds. "The IITs were never democratic," avers a former student, who asked not to be named. "I don't mean in terms of functioning, but in their attitude towards students."

The 20 students expelled this year were also obliged to vacate their hostels without delay. Some left without questioning. One decided to fight back. Last December, Ravinder Kumar Ravi achieved passing marks in a subject he was later informed he had failed. He approached the Dean with the initial mark sheet, but, he says, "the Dean took no heed and said the teacher's word was final". He then went to the teacher concerned (whom he doesn't wish to name); she subsequently e-mailed the Dean to explain that the discrepancy had occurred because she had missed one of Ravi's assign-

