

Menace of Ragging: Addressing Concerns

Abstract

This article is based on a research study on ragging in higher education institutions with special reference to a medical college in Agra. Though the site is specific it shows the intersectionalities between social variables such as caste, class, gender, etc. and frequency and nature of ragging. It also highlights different aspects of ragging such as its origins, causes and implications, thereby offering rich insights. A few cases of ragging highlighted by media are also listed. After discussing suggestions to curb it by several committees set up for the same are discussed and limitations pointed out.

“He wished to depart and safeguard himself in a secure place to be never found again. All witnessed him tremble and cry, but they did not stop and let him go even after an hour of reasonless fun. An hour of torture, an hour of tormented roaming in the college wearing just his underpants, an hour of unending trauma... lifelong mental damage !” (Naveen, 1st year student, A-One Medical College)¹

The depiction of Navin’s agony highlights the damage caused by ragging to innumerable students every year. The unheard trauma of the young minds, spells out the face of ragging in today’s world. Ragging has always been questioned by common people as well as by scholars. Policies have been issued from time to time to curb this menace. Despite the fact that ragging has been strictly banned in all colleges of India. It is still rampant, the ban has not been very effective. Which is evident from the number of ragging cases still reported by different sources. However, the unanswered question is: Why does ragging exist? When and how will the educational system be freed from this menace? Where is the solution to this problem?

This paper endeavours to examine the menace of ragging in higher education

¹ Pseudonym

institutions with a special focus on a medical college in Agra, from which primary data was collected. The paper is organised into seven parts. The first part focusses on the origin of ragging. The second part highlights the reported cases of ragging, committees formed to curb ragging, major cases of ragging and change in the nature of ragging with time. The third part deals with media and ragging. The fourth part focusses attention on the geographical spread of ragging. The next part underlines the choice of site for carrying out the present research. The sixth and seventh parts lay out the findings with major focus on the nature and prevalence of ragging and its connection with gender, caste and class.

The Origin of Ragging

Ragging is also known as *hazing* in the US and *bastardisation* in Australia (Wikipedia Contributors, 2019). It involves newcomers being bullied or ragged by senior students. Ragging still seems deeply rooted in the world even if it is banned. If we trace back the history of ragging, it began roughly 2000 years ago in Greece. Initially termed as *pennalism* ‘a system of mild oppression and torment practised upon first year students’.

Ragging was condemned by scholars like Plato who defined this tradition by saying “practical jokes played by unruly young men that injured the hazed and citizens who got in the way” (Sterner, 2007 as cited by Klinger, 2017). St. Augustine of Hippo, a fourth-century North African Catholic bishop, termed it as “acts of devils.” In the mid-17th century, it was not just condemned, but banned by the institutions like Harvard College. The first known action that took place against hazing was in the year 1684, when one student was expelled for hitting students and making them perform acts of servitude. This seems quite tame when compared to modern day hazing (Sterner, 2007 as cited by Klinger, 2017). After adopting different measures to curb the vicious cycle of hazing, it remained entrenched in colleges and universities in the western world.

As far as India is concerned there is no evidence which records ragging as being an indigenous phenomenon in ancient Indian educational institutions. But there is a possibility of it being introduced as a result of British Colonialism during the post World War II, when soldiers returning from war re-entered college and initiated the tradition and techniques of ragging. Thereafter, it might have gradually made an entry into Army and English public schools (Cohen, 2010). It became conspicuous only after independence, with a different term called “ragging”, and shockingly its current forms range from whimsical to brutal. Till the late 60’s, ragging was never a serious problem in India as it was relatively in a much milder form, primarily because higher education was confined to some particular sect of the society and hence ragging was confined only to a part of the civilised (sic) community of this country. Gradually, as higher education became accessible to different communities, ragging became a soft weapon to settle the animosity between students of different castes, communities and religions, etc.” (Kirti, 2017).

Cases Reported and Committees Formed

In the present time, ragging has been one of the most serious issues in higher education in India. In educational institutions, ragging has become a norm rather than the exception across the country. There have been many cases of ragging that shook the whole nation. It was highlighted when the dismembered body of a 19-year-old boy was found in Tamil Nadu in 1996. A senior had abused him physically and it was discovered that when he refused to strip, he was forced to lick his footwear. (Kumar, Nov 12, 2010)

In 1999, the UGC formed a four member committee under Prof K.P.S. Unny to uproot ragging. They defined ragging as “*Display of noisy, disorderly conduct, teasing, excitement by rough or rude treatment or handling, indulging in rowdy, indisciplined activities which cause or likely to cause annoyance, hardship, physical or psychological harm or raise apprehension or fear in a fresher, or asking the students to do any act or perform something which such a student will not do in the ordinary course and which causes him/her shame or embarrassment or danger to his/her life.*” It suggested a three-pronged system to control the impact of ragging in educational institutions namely: ‘Prohibition - Prevention - Punishment System; that is, prohibition by Law, prevention by following a set of guidelines and punishment in case ragging takes place in spite of prohibition and prevention.

The failure of implementation of the guidelines suggested by Unny’s committee and the increasing rate of ragging cases, stipulated Supreme Court to form another committee under Dr. R K Raghavan, in 2006. The committee was asked to invite effective suggestions and methods to prevent or control ragging. The committee was also asked to give suggestions for possible action against persons involved in ragging and also against institutions that are unable to control ragging in their premises.

Though committees from time to time were formed to take action to prevent ragging, but still ragging cases were being reported. In one of the medical colleges (2009), four drunk seniors attacked a 19-year old student who later died due to brain hemorrhage. It was one of the most infamous cases of ragging as the Honorable Supreme Court realised that the death of the student clearly indicated that the 'formulation of guidelines and regulations was not sufficient. Hence, the Honourable Court ordered that such regulations shall have to be enforced strictly'. Thereafter, University Grants Commission framed UGC Regulations on curbing the menace of ragging in higher educational institutions, 2009, which have been notified on 4th July, 2009 in the Gazette of India. These regulations include the submission of anti-ragging oath affidavits by students during admissions at colleges or online, regular raids of hostels where newcomers have been accommodated, and providing them brochures/information booklets containing the telephone numbers of the anti-ragging helpline.

In 2015, the Supreme Court mandated the study of the prevalence, causes and solutions to curb the ragging menace in universities. The research was based on a survey conducted among over 10,000 students in 37 colleges across the country and led by a committee of scholars from the JNU. The report was named *Psychosocial Study of Ragging in Selected Educational Institutions in India*. It highlighted social discrimination in ragging. Thereafter in 2016, an amendment to the definition of ragging was made by the UGC to broaden anti-ragging regulations by giving a comprehensive picture of ragging and by linking abuse with social variables. "Any act of physical or mental abuse (including bullying and exclusion) **targetted** at another student (fresher or otherwise) on the ground of colour, race, religion, caste, ethnicity, gender (including transgender), sexual orientation, appearance, nationality, regional origins, linguistic identity, place of birth, place of residence or economic background."

Despite the fact that almost three decades have passed since ragging has been

recognised as a deeply rooted problem, the country is still to find the best solution to stop the menace of ragging. Though, efforts have been made to solve this problem, they seem to have failed in eradicating this menace from the formal space of education.

In 2018, a student of management was hospitalised after being allegedly ragged by seniors at the institute. He was beaten for 3 hours. Many students from the same college revealed that they had faced ragging and were too frightened to leave their hostels. (Unnithan, Sept 7, 2018).

The cases highlighted above are only a few that were reported. The manner in which the proportion of ragging cases is increasing it might need greater efforts to uproot it completely.

Ragging and Media

Ragging unfortunately has become an integral part of the Indian higher educational institutions as is evident from the fact that it often constitutes the central theme in several films. Many films portray ragging as an enjoyable activity. For example, films like *Waqt Humara Hai*, *Munna Bhai MBBS*, *Three Idiots*, *Main Hoon Na* dealt with the theme of ragging. However, instead of projecting the damaging influence of ragging on young students and sensitising the public to its adverse effects, it ended up endorsing it. The projection largely revolved around either an arrogant newcomer who had to be tamed in or an awkward fresher who needed to be reigned in. Ragging was justified as a reasonable activity, which brought in fun and laughter. Films often rely on ragging scenes for bringing in humour and laughter for the audience. Use of demeaning names such as *telu*, *murga* is seen as being funny rather than disrespectful. For example, in *Waqt Humara Hai* forcing student to smoke, proposing to a boy or a girl, slapping and insulting are all projected as funny behavior rather than something to be condemned. Similarly by making the fresher wear mismatched clothes or even walking around

same year in September, some senior MBBS students reportedly thrashed a newcomer outside the campus for having long hair and coming to college riding a scooter (Dev, Aug 21, 2014). In the following year, a second-year student complained against his senior who did not allow him to fill water in his cooler after an argument and locked the junior in a room and scourged him (TOI, May 2, 2015).

After two years in the year 2017, another incident was reported where a student of the 2015 batch, lodged an online complaint saying that one of the senior student of his college thrashed him and even threatened to kill him (Lavania, Mar 12, 2017). In the year 2018, ragging appeared to be more prevalent when it took social media as its tool to rag more students and some senior students forwarded a seven sheet long guideline as a WhatsApp message to their juniors. The message contained some of the following guidelines for juniors - wear black coloured pants and white shirts; keep your eye on the third button of the shirt whenever you walk in the college; donot talk to each other in English in the college; donot bring any vehicle to the college; donot refute any senior as they are always right; you are only allowed to utter the word SORRY and no other word or argument with your seniors. The whole message was written in obscene language. The junior students were also told to come one by one and read the forwarded message in front of all and those who refused to do so were thrashed by the senior students outside the college campus. (New Desks, Amar Ujala, Oct 03, 2018)

An anti-ragging organisation, called *Aman Movement*, maintained data on complaint of ragging and gave medical college-wise distribution of cases registered by the anti-ragging call centre. The report highlighted that 13 complaints of ragging had been registered by the students of one of the medical colleges of Agra from 2012 to 2019, which is one of highest among all the medical

colleges of Uttar Pradesh.²

Therefore, the survey was conducted to examine the prevalence of ragging in this medical college of Agra and its relation with demographical variables. The study involved 100 first year students of the medical college. The sample comprised students across categories of gender, caste and class. A survey was administered to all the students, their responses collected and analysed along two axes (i) prevalence and nature of ragging and (ii) its relationship with demographical variables like gender, caste and class.

Prevalence and Nature of Ragging

At first glance the college might not give away the prevalence of ragging as boards and posters suggest that it was a ragging free campus and ragging had been abolished and rooted out completely. On the contrary, the prevalence of ragging was visible and noticeable within a few minutes of arrival into the first year classroom by looking at the physical appearance of the freshers. The peculiar look of students prominently indicated the way ragging was happening as female students had applied lots of oil in their hair which was tied in two ponytails whereas boys were either bald or had short haircuts. All of them were in white dress. Boys were supposed to come to college in white full sleeved shirts, white pants, red tie, white coat, red socks and black shoes whereas girls had to wear white salwar kameez, white dupatta, red socks and black PT shoes. It seemed to be their uniform as if they are attending school, whereas the dress code of medical students is a white coat.

Ragging was not restricted to just the physical appearance; the first year students were also supposed to follow rules set by their seniors such as they were expected to greet the seniors every time they came

² *Aman Movement* was launched by Raj Kachroo in the memory of his son, Aman, who was ragged to death in 2009. It is co-partnered with UGC and MHRD to implement National Ragging Prevention Programme in India.

across them; to keep their eye on the third button of the shirt whenever they walked within the college. They were not permitted to communicate in English; not to refute any senior and were only allowed to utter the word SORRY. They were also not allowed to argue with their seniors. Ragging was not only limited to this. The junior students were not allowed to go to the canteen so either they carried a lunch box with them or they remained hungry. They usually had their classes on the 3rd or 4th floor, but they were prohibited to use the lift. The juniors were not supposed to walk abreast and they were asked to walk in a single file, and bend their heads while walking. Students residing in the hostels said that they were not allowed to sit if any senior passed by. Even in the dining hall they were supposed to sit in the corner seats and not in the centre rows. They were not even allowed to bring bikes / scooters, mobile phones and other electronic accessories to college.

On further inquiry it was found that physical ragging was taking place in the campus as about 43% of the students asserted that they had faced physical ragging which constitutes acts such as slap yourself/ someone else, sit in a 'cuckoo' position so as to embarrass oneself; to do chores for seniors such as washing clothes and cleaning their rooms. They were usually asked to do silly things like push-ups, climbing on trees and exercise on the main road.

Alongside the physical ragging, verbal ragging was also prevalent in the college as 67% of the first year students stated that they faced verbal ragging. The acts that constitute verbal ragging include teasing juniors if they belong to any particular class, caste or creed; seniors calling junior male and female students as 'Fuchcha' and 'Fuchchi' respectively; forcing juniors to answer personal/socially-unacceptable questions/topics; teasing juniors with inappropriate verbal language and many such acts that are meant to exhibit superiority of seniors over juniors all of which ultimately leads to mental trauma, uneasiness and discomfort for the fresher.

The worst part was the ragging came to the fore when some students acquainted the researcher with their experience of sexual ragging where they admitted that seniors indulging in ragging of sexual nature. Though the percentage of the students facing sexual ragging was only 11% this kind of ragging disturbs the students mentally, physically and psychologically.

Ragging and Social Context

The study revealed significant connection between social-economic-cultural locations of freshers and nature of ragging. Among the social cultural factors, gender, caste and class were identified for deeper investigation.

Gender

With many incidents coming to the fore, it was also found that there is a difference in terms of ragging encountered by boys and girls. Although females are still considered weaker in terms of physical strength, in this study, female students admitted that they did not face harsh ragging as faced by boys. Data shows that 72% of male students have faced ragging as compared to only 40% of female students. Boys were usually asked to change their hairstyle, approach a strange (girl), and slap a person without any reason. Whereas girls were asked to follow orders given by seniors like sing a song or dance etc. and then laughed upon by seniors.

In the present research, verbal ragging was found to be most common style of ragging i.e. almost 7 out of 10 students face such ragging in college. The second most prevalent style was physical ragging. Prevalence of sexual ragging was also evident. Although the average percentages of responses were least in sexual ragging but it is the most severe kind of ragging and 9% of boys said that they faced sexual ragging. All of them were asked to kiss a statue situated at a public point and do acts having sexual tone.

It was also revealed by the National Anti-Ragging Helpline, the crisis helpline of the

University Grants Commission (UGC), that more boys than girls have complained about being subjected to ragging on campuses. Most complaints come from institutes attached to hostels, where ragging becomes easy and goes unnoticed by authorities.

Caste

When it comes to castewise distribution of ragging, 53% students of general category have faced incidence of ragging whereas the percentage increased to 69 % for Dalit students. Despite eradication of untouchability and the allotment of specific kinds of work to different castes in the caste hierarchy, 13% of the students complained that their seniors compelled them to clean the washrooms just because they belong to the SC category. Many of the SC students said that they are easy prey for seniors to do their personal work especially in hostels like washing their clothes and bringing hot water for them. Many of them belonged to the low socio-economic group who could not afford to leave the college and take admission in another college so there is no clear evidence that whether their caste or their class was making them an easy prey. The findings of this study coincides with the findings of a report on Psychosocial Study of Ragging in Selected Educational Institutions in India (2015). The report highlighted “Caste-based discrimination was admitted by eight per cent of students; however, high percentages were reported from colleges in the North. Caste and gender-based discrimination are most prevalent in a government medical college in UP.” In the same research it was found that economic background is one of the critical factor of ragging and about six percent of students admitted economic-discrimination during ragging.

Class

Poverty remains an important issue in India, and a clear association was found between socio-economic status and ragging: students ragged physically and verbally

were more likely to come from middle or lower-socio-economic backgrounds in comparison to the students who were from richer households. Students belonging to lower strata informed that their seniors asked them to do their personal works such as washing clothes, cleaning up the room, bikes and other stuff. They often addressed them with weird names that lowered their self-confidence. Low socio-economic status does somewhat increase the risk of being ragged in college just because such students are unable to afford an extravagant lifestyle. Ragging in the form of financial abuse was more prevalent among students of higher socio-economic backgrounds. Seniors often asked them to pay their personal bills of canteen, mobile phones, petrol and other expenditure. They often borrowed their cars and bikes. It was found that socio-economical class does not play a significant role in ragging. It actually affects the style of ragging. Data shows that 61% of the low socio-economic students have faced ragging as compared to 59% of the high socio-economic students.

Conclusion

Many comprehensive and practical recommendations have been proposed and detailed reports been made. However, execution is confined to adding a page to the prospectus stating that ragging is a crime, displaying slogans of ragging-free campus at the entrance of the college or university and asking students and their parents to sign an affidavit at the time of admission. The main idea behind signing such affidavits is to inform parents that if their child is caught ragging he or she would stand rusticated. Everything which seems perfect in planning, fails in execution and thus is unsuccessful in achieving the objectives and goals. The effort put by different agencies and the government seem to be inadequate in reality as a large number of students are suffering from this

unbearable agony of such a disgraceful activity.

The government is spending time and efforts to keep a record of ragging and stakeholders share advice or protest when something unpleasant happens. Rather, it should be the shared responsibility of the government, stakeholders, college authorities and staff and students. Various committees have made detailed recommendations such as conducting orientation programme and workshops to make students aware of steps to be taken if they are ragged. The college must seek the assistance of professional counsellors and anti ragging campaigners at the time of the orientation programme. These programs ensure that students' voices are heard and necessary action is initiated by concerned authorities.

Anti-ragging committees must include teachers, wardens, representatives of students from junior-senior section, parents/guardians, domestic help and some professional staff. Inclusion of over-burdened teachers to be a member of an anti-ragging squad will have no significant results. Teachers are already under enormous

pressure with academic and non-academic assignments. In the first few months, they are usually busy making timetables, notes, preparation for lectures and conducting orientation programmes. They are already a part of many academic and non-academic bodies. They also need to supervise during exams and later evaluate the answer sheets and give grades. Abolishing ragging is not the sole responsibility of any one set of teachers and administration but it should be taken as a shared responsibility. Parents too should not ignore their wards' complaints by taking it casually. The biggest problem of ragging is the weakness and irresponsible attitude of the institutions and civil society. The teachers, clerical staff, wardens, staff of canteen, security in charge, research scholars, peons, watchman, gate keeper, and sweeper should be empathetic when they see a group of seniors and juniors involved in an unusual activity. Prevention is the only way to eradicate this disgraceful activity from our higher educational institutions.

Note from Editors: Although this article is about ragging in colleges, it is relevant to schools as ragging in some form exists in schools. We need to be aware of the issue and act in a manner that does not remain a menace

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