

## Three Stages in Ragging

A simple explanation to understand the evil practice of ragging and our failure to address it

By Harsh Agarwal, 2011

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In last ten months I have visited over 40 Universities and Colleges in different parts of India to conduct anti-ragging workshops and got to interact with several thousand students and hundreds of faculty members. The experience so far has been enriching and has helped me realize that even after the Supreme Court's landmark verdict in 2007 myths about ragging are still deep-rooted in the minds of the people across the length and breadth of the country.

At the beginning of every workshop, the first question that I ask students and teachers is how many of them think ragging is bad? Within no time almost every hand in the audience goes up. Next question is, is ragging necessary for friendship? There would be complete silence. I have to make the atmosphere light and assure that that I am not doing any investigation and students can express their views freely. Then some hands gradually go up and soon many more get the courage and majority of hands are up. Then I ask third question – how many of you think that mild ragging should be allowed? Since I become little friendly and informal with my audience by now so the answer comes faster and again majority of hands go up condoning mild ragging.

I then try to engage students in a slightly humorous conversation and make them think on what is friendship? How did they make friends in school where there was no ragging? Is friendship a natural phenomenon or it needs a catalyst like ragging? Does ragging happen across the world? During my interaction with the students I have to make sure that I keep their interest alive and bypass their conscious mind to make them listen to me and think on this issue. I then proceed to show the documentary *Anarth* which has some gory scenes of deaths, suicides and sexual abuses that resulted from ragging. When the documentary ends there is absolute silence for a minute. Students and teachers don't know how to react as they fail to establish connection between ragging they are familiar with and what they saw in the documentary.

In my last session of the workshop I become a little serious and explain the relation between those gory scenes and the so called 'friendly' or mild ragging and that how dangerous this method of inorganic friendship is. In the end, I tell the students about the interest International media has been showing lately in highlighting India's ragging culture and how it is causing a big embarrassment to the country. With this I finish the workshop and leave onto the students to ponder on the subject. However I know even if I continue visiting colleges for the rest of my life it will never be possible for me to cover 20,000 odd colleges in the country and interact with

millions of students and teachers who harbor similar misunderstanding about issues that eventually give birth to ragging.

Today major hurdle in eradicating ragging is the dichotomy that exists in the understanding of this issue. After the Supreme Court guidelines nobody disputes that ragging is bad but interestingly, majority still feels that it is an indispensable tool in making friendship. Both students as well as teachers, think that it is fine to have a mild or toned-down level of ragging and it is only rogues and hooligans who make it nasty and are giving bad name to this traditional method of initiating friendship. When any death or serious incident of ragging is reported, students and teachers perceive it as a different 'form' of ragging practiced in 'notorious' colleges.

If I have to explain the phenomenon of ragging in the simplest possible way then I would classify different aspects of ragging into three stages, with one stage followed by the other and finally leading to unfortunate consequences.

Stage 1 is the stage of myths and ignorance. As mentioned earlier, people have wrong notions that (a) ragging helps in friendship (b) is practiced across the world (c) helps in personality development (d) mild ragging is good and can be kept under limits (e) ragging is an old practice and we have to keep this tradition alive. These myths sow the seed of ragging.

For some students ragging does give opportunity to interact and make friendship and also provide an informal platform to display their talent if they have, in certain fields, limited to, singing, dancing, acting and mimicry. For these students ragging not only helps in winning friends and becoming popular in college but it also becomes the only mode of entertainment in otherwise dull college life, not offering much extra-curricular activity to students. It is therefore not a surprise to later see these students becoming strong proponents of ragging. However, several others lacking talent in singing and dancing or not comfortable with the idea of forced and speed friendship find ragging humiliating and an invasion on individual's liberty and choice. Most of these students quietly suffer the agony so as not to jeopardize their career and shatter dreams of their parents. Many such cases gradually fall into the trap of stage 2 and ragging starts taking dangerous turn from there.

Unfortunately, our effort to act at stage one is limited to creating deterrence among raggers. When I visit any college the first thing I notice or drawn attention to by college management is the large number of posters and standies warning students of the consequences if they indulge in ragging. Similarly I regularly see government advertisement in national newspapers warning students not to indulge in ragging. I wonder is deterrence the right antidote to bust myths or is logical reasoning and debate better way to address it?

Stage 2 is when socio-economic complexities that exist in our country start influencing ragging subtly. A slight variant of these complexities could also be found responsible for the problem of bullying in schools. Once the concept of ragging gets legitimacy it becomes impossible to ward off the influence of various prejudices and socio-economic factors from ragging. Soon the so called mild ragging starts getting caste, regional, class, gender, sexual, campus politics, etc color to it. Visit to any professional college can show us how students are divided into groups based on these social, economical and regional identities. These identities decide the nature and severity of ragging and from here ragging starts treading the path that leads to violence and abuse.

Given the enormous diversity we have in our country, stage 2 is the most complicated stage in ragging and very difficult to address or even acknowledge. Currently we don't have any mechanism in place to deal with stage 2. The only way to get rid of it is to impart school education that inculcates feeling of brotherhood and encourages school children to appreciate diversity in our society and think beyond social identities.

Stage 3 is the final stage of ragging that often makes newspapers' headlines. Once stage 2 gets out of hand it results in violence, hospitalisation, sexual abuse, physical assault, death and suicide. When these cases are reported in the media there is hue and cry and strong appeal from all corners for stricter laws against ragging. Anger at this point is so high that we want nothing less than death sentence for ragging. However because of our myopic approach our focus gets fixed on stage 3 and we tend to overlook the bigger picture how everything started at stage 1 in the form of small prank for speed-friendship and personality development.

Taking action at stage 3 is too late and doesn't help much in preventing future incidents of ragging. There is no doubt that due to deterrence created by the government in recent time ragging has come down to some extent however this is also true that the effect of deterrence is reaching its saturation. We must not forget that ragging originates at stage 1 from a set of illogical reasons and therefore perfect prescription to cure this problem is to attack those reasons right at the inception stage of ragging.

Lastly but most importantly, policymakers in education need to revamp the curriculum and method of teaching by infusing critical reasoning and encouraging individual thinking among students to not only spur creativity, innovation and research in the country but also to ensure that irrationalities like ragging are not able to conquer educated minds ever again.

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