

EDITORIAL

Ragging: human rights abuse tolerated by the authorities

SANJAY A PAI¹, PRABHA S CHANDRA²

¹Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine, Columbia Asia Referral Hospital, Malleswaram, Bangalore 560 055 INDIA email: sanjayapai@gmail.com

²Department of Psychiatry, National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences, Hosur Road, Bangalore 560 029 INDIA email: prabhachandra@rediffmail.com

Every year, students joining professional colleges all over India start classes with the excitement and trepidation that accompany a new venture, particularly one that will shape their lives. However, very often, the initial euphoria of getting admission into a coveted course gives way to feelings of subjugation and possible humiliation and fear. The new students fear not the difficult course, nor the exams nor even the strictest of teachers. They fear harassment by a group of people who are just one to four years older than them—their seniors in college. At a time when students feel most vulnerable, having left a protected school environment and, often, their parents and homes, this can be a harrowing experience.

On March 8, 2009, Aman Kachroo, a first-year medical student at Rajendra Prasad Medical College, Tanda, Himachal Pradesh, died of head injuries after being severely ragged by four of his seniors (1). Less than a week later, we learnt that a young engineering student in Andhra Pradesh tried to commit suicide after being forced to strip and dance naked in front of her seniors (2). These two particularly severe incidents of ragging have brought “ragging” back into the public eye.

What it's all about

Ragging is an act of aggression committed by an individual or group on another—junior—individual or group. The first group, by virtue of its being senior to the second group, somehow claims the authority to commit the act. The second group, by virtue of its being new to the institution, is automatically victim. Seniors bully or harass juniors in order to derive fun and pleasure out of their discomfiture. The key element in ragging is that it occurs in the context of a power differential with no recourse to any form of justice. Hostels are probably the most notorious for these practices that amount to severe bullying in education—often indirectly sanctioned and accepted without much protest.

Ragging in fairly severe forms has been reported from several countries including Sri Lanka, Australia, the UK and India. It has been common in India for many years now. In recent years, it has become almost normative and sanctioned in the student community, particularly in professional colleges. Though it is increasingly being reported in the news, it has long been accepted as a serious problem; the Coalition to Uproot Ragging from Education (CURE) was set up as far back as 2001. CURE has actually declared a “No Ragging Day”, October 11. On that day, in 2005, Amit Sahai, an engineering student, committed suicide after being ragged.

There is an impression that professional colleges and medical colleges have higher rates of ragging. While this may be true, the practice is reported from colleges of all disciplines including agriculture, fashion, law and technical specialities. The greater numbers from medical colleges might be related to the fact that medical students usually live in hostels and away from a support network of friends and family.

What makes otherwise normal, reasonably intelligent youngsters, often from a middle class background, with the appropriate family background and upbringing, indulge in senseless and sadistic acts? We do not know the answer. A MEDLINE search showed less than 30 references with the key word “hazing”, with just one in a psychiatry journal (3). If we do not understand what goes on in the minds of such people, we may never know how to tackle the problem.

Factors like the nature of selection (merit vs capitation fees), local attitudes towards violence and bullying, and segregation and alienation based on caste and language may play a role in the higher frequency of ragging in certain situations. Students entering professional colleges may feel intellectually superior to those who have failed to make the grade. Ragging—especially physical ragging—may also be a means of showing one's physical strength to one's juniors and colleagues and a means to illustrate who the “first among equals” is.

Can a bully become a good doctor?

The ultimate, tragic irony lies in the fact that Aman Kachroo's life was snuffed out by boys who were training to become doctors. Is it not a paradox that our future healers are perpetrators of fear and humiliation? Do we really believe that a medical student who is cruel and sadistic enough to torture someone will magically transform, two years later, into an empathetic and caring doctor? Is it not more likely that such people will be uncaring doctors, unsuccessful in the true sense? After all, being a doctor involves much

more than making a good diagnosis or offering the appropriate medicine or surgical procedure. Good doctoring involves good communication with patients, colleagues and others. Despite all the changes in medical practice, such as the corporatisation of healthcare and the increase in medical litigation, the core principle of medicine practice—care for the patient—has remained the same. Indeed, it could be argued that the changes make the idea of an empathetic physician all the more relevant.

We also believe that the circle of people who will suffer at the hands of such doctors extends beyond patients. Colleagues, particularly younger ones, need to be handled with care and it is reasonable to assume that someone who rags mercilessly as a student will be harsh in dealings with others as a professional.

Everybody's baby

To the onlookers of some of the horrific consequences of ragging, what is startling is that teachers and administrators turn a blind eye towards the issue. The response of the principal of the engineering college referred to above is typical. He said "She... has fared badly in the semester examination and was depressed. That could have prompted her to attempt suicide." (2)

It is also true that many in the profession are aware of ragging but call it a "student's issue" which does not require intervention. It is viewed as akin to a street fight about which we are not concerned or can do nothing; in any case, a token suspension of the hostel warden or supervisor is not going to bring back lives or sanity lost.

There are far too many indications that violence and bigotry—racial, religious, caste or other—have been on the rise in India over the past two decades or so. Unless we take strong action against ragging and those who rag, we will be guilty of adding to the growing intolerance and brutality in society.

What we can do

Expectedly, the University Grants Commission (UGC) has prepared draft regulations that intend to make it compulsory for students and their wards to state in writing that they are aware of the laws and punishment for ragging (4). It is not clear why such solutions are required when there is already a Supreme Court guidance note on this subject. Besides, does it really require a suggestion from an educational body to state the obvious—that ragging is illegal and inhumane? However, there is a lot that we as teachers and as medical professionals can do to prevent our students from being dragged into this cycle of brutality—either as perpetrators or as victims.

Ideally students should be counselled before they join medical college—or any line of study—to ensure that they are mentally and physically capable of completing the course and succeeding in that particular line. This is standard practice to filter out a medically or physically unfit candidate from joining the armed forces. However, we do not, currently or in the near future, see such a solution in India for other courses, such as medicine. Interventions need to be two pronged. First, there should be stronger deterrents to ragging in the form of rules and strict punishments (akin to those for cheating in exams) accompanied by more vigilant monitoring of places and situations (such as isolated hostels and private hostels) where students are at risk of being ragged. However, it is not enough to focus on punishments alone.

There must also be a positive approach, encouraging senior students to adopt more inclusive and civilised methods to show juniors "the ropes". Senior students need to have other models of welcoming new students into their fold and guiding them. Colleges should be much more proactive. Teachers should create an atmosphere where freshers interact with seniors in a manner that does away with the power differential early on. Study groups moderated by teachers should have students from different years and each junior student should get a senior student as mentor. Several colleges hand out material to seniors on what ragging can do to a human being.

Violent practices are learned, and passed on from one generation to the next. It is possible to bring a halt to this "tradition". What we need is a model for terminating ragging, terminating the very idea of deriving pleasure from humiliating another human being.

Administrations, teachers and colleges often view ragging as a private and fun affair, at worst a rite of initiation that is a necessary evil. They need to recognise it as a form of bullying and get actively involved in stopping this violation of human rights.

References

1. Khatta S. 19-year-old medical student dies after ragging. *Indian Express*. [Internet]. 2009 Mar 10. [cited 2009 Mar 25]. National news: [about 1 screen]. Available from: <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/19yroid-medical-student-dies-after-ragging/432940/>
2. Das A. Andhra girl attempts suicide after ragging. *Hindustan Times*. [Internet]. 2009 Mar 14. [cited 2009 Mar 25]. News: [about 1 screen]. Available from: <http://www.hindustantimes.com/StoryPage/StoryPage.aspx?sectionName=HomePage&id=08d625b4-f02c-4c81-9d35-4d027fe048f3&Headline=Andhra-girl-attempts-suicide-after-ragging>
3. Ramzy I, Bryant K. Notes on initiation and hazing practices. *Psychiatry*. 1962 Nov. 25:354-62.
4. Express News Service. UGC prepares draft regulations to check ragging, seeks written undertakings. *Indian Express*. [Internet]. 2009 Mar 20. [cited 2009 Mar 25]. National news: [about 1 screen]. Available from: <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/ugc-prepares-draft-regulations-to-check-ragging-seeks-written-undertakings/436662>.