

Ragging: History and Evolution

by Harsh Agarwal (harsh.agarwal@noragging.com)

Substantial ink has been spent in discussing the incidents and ill-effects of ragging but we have hardly ever tried to go deeper to the roots of this savage phenomenon which is rapidly eroding our education system. Ragging, Hazing, Fagging, Bullying, Pledging, Horse-playing etc. are different terms used in different parts of the world but each signifying the same old practice of welcoming the fresher in a barbaric manner. This phenomenon can be traced back to as early as 7th or 8th century A.D. In Greek culture, new entrants to the sport community were subjected to all kinds of humiliations and teasing to inculcate a team spirit in them. Gradually with the passage of time this technique was subjected to myriad modifications and was later adopted by the military forces, from there it finally entered in the education system. Since its inception in the educational arena, ragging underwent several modifications before morphing into an organized form of campus violence. During the 18th century forming a student organization in colleges was very much in vogue particularly in the European countries. This concept was later adopted by the U.S. universities as well. In the period 1828-1845, several student organizations popped up in the U.S. campuses. These were named after Greek letters like Alpha, Phi, Beta, Kappa, Epsilon, Delta etc and were called as Greek Letter Organizations (GLO's) or Fraternities. The new entrants to these fraternities were known as PLEDGES. During this time ragging (called as Hazing in west) existed in its rudimentary form and was merely a ritual to test the courage of the pledge. The first ragging related death occurred in 1873 when a freshman from Cornell University fell into a gorge as a consequence of ragging. Ragging underwent a massive transformation after World-War 1. It was during this time that it started to acquire its real brutal form. Soldiers returning from war re-entered the college and brought with them the technique of Hazing (ragging) learned in military camp. These techniques were used to make individual fail as an individual and succeed as a team. This philosophy of team development continued to be used in different fraternities. Eventually when fewer military students entered college these techniques were passed onto others who did not understand their purpose or usage and ragging became a brutal and hazardous exercise. Gradually in the early 20th century ragging related violence started to escalate in the western countries. In India the tradition of ragging was imported along with the English education. Though it existed in the Army and English public schools much before the country's independence, it became conspicuous only after independence. Ragging then meant seniors mocking and jesting at juniors. 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 civilized community of this country. Gradually as the higher education became more and more accessible to different communities, ragging became a soft weapon to settle the animosity between students of different castes, communities and religion etc. Deep influence of the media during the 80's made ragging much more brutal and violent in India. Soon ragging became a measuring rod to test the grit of the seniors. Many seniors, who were reluctant to rag their juniors, finally succumbed to peer pressure. It is till an important factor in Indian ragging. During the early 90's rapid mushrooming of new private Engineering and Medical colleges led to several disastrous experiments with this old practice of ragging. It made Southern India a hub of this brutal activity. During the 90's ragging related suicides began to increase at a rapid rate. In 1997 Tamil Nadu, which was one of the worst affected state, became the first province in India to bring legislation against ragging. In 2001, the Hon'ble Supreme Court of India banned ragging throughout the country. It was now left to the college authorities to enforce this law. This led to complete disappearance of daytime ragging in campus which was much healthier and a safer mode of interaction while more threatening and virulent ragging in the hostels continues to thrive in most of the colleges. History teaches us that borrowing the foreign culture has always proven to be disastrous to the importing nation. Ragging is just another example to it. We tend to forget that ragging is a western culture and is deleterious in a multi-ethnic and diverse society such as India. Even in the west ragging was always used as tool to take out vengeance between the Blacks and Whites. In India, a myth that ragging makes the fresher bold has always existed. This has given a passive social approbation to this cruel practice. As long as this exists ragging will never see its demise. In its several years of existence ragging has done more harm than good. It has claimed lives of several thousand innocent students all across the world. Today, ragging no longer exists in its brutal form at places where it actually originated but is rapidly proliferating in the under-developed and developing nations of the world. Presently Sri Lanka is the worst affected country in the world. Has ragging reached its pinnacle or is the worst yet to come? How many more lives will it claim before our society wakes up? Perhaps only time shall answer these questions.