



PSYCHOLOGICAL, SOCIOLOGICAL, AND POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF RAGGING IN SRI LANKAN UNIVERSITIES

Siri Gamage*

School of Education, University of New England, Australia

ABSTRACT

Ragging is interpreted as a phenomenon that has arisen in the university mainly as a result of the sexual and romantic deprivations of male students who are away from their usual places of residence or birthplaces. This paper provides insights into ragging as a sociological phenomenon while discussing its psychological and political dimensions, and suggests a different approach to tackling the issue in the contemporary context. Ragging is an activity that reinforces the seniority of the second and potentially third year students over first year students before the latter sets their foot on the ground and establishes old college, locality, class, caste and other linkages with those who are working or learning on campus. The paper outlines different forms of ragging, its positive aspects such as helping students from rural backgrounds break out of their shyness, and suggests various hypotheses that can be tested through systematic research such as class jealousy as a potent incentive for ragging. In spite of its positive functions, severe forms of ragging have concerned many within and outside of universities due to its physical and psychological consequences. In this light, the paper provides a series of strategies that can be used by University authorities to control severe forms of ragging in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Ragging in Sri Lankan Universities, Sociology of Ragging, Deprivation, Romantic Interests, Positive Aspects of Ragging

INTRODUCTION

The government and higher education authorities have been grappling with the issue of ragging for several decades primarily by

way of adopting a legal approach. Bullying of first year students, hereafter called freshers, by senior students is a form of severe ragging at the beginning of each academic year, which has been a regular phenomenon in Sri

*Author e-mail:
sgamag2@une.edu.au

©2017 Social Affairs Journal. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

Lankan Universities since the time I was an undergraduate at the university of Ceylon, later Peradeniya, in the late 60s to early 70s. Perhaps a form of ragging existed since the inception of the residential university located in a picturesque landscape providing a romantic atmosphere for the students embarking on a learning experience distinct from what they received in schools, many of which are located in rural settings. However, ragging in the early phases would have been a milder version practiced for socializing purposes, as I have not seen any accounts of severe ragging, not certainly torture, during this period.

When I was a young probationary assistant lecturer, I wrote an article on the subject to *Samaja Vimasuma*, a publication by the students' association of the Department of Sociology at the University of Peradeniya, incorporating interviews that I conducted at the Marcus Fernando Hall in the 70s. Apart from being the subject of ragging by senior students in the Arts faculty, I observed some group ragging acts in the Hilda Obeysekera Hall where I was a resident in my third and fourth years as a Sociology undergraduate.

One question about ragging is whether it reflects social deviancy. In other words, whether it is conducted by a group of senior students led by a few with a psychological disposition considered as not normal. Such questions cannot be addressed fairly without a systematic study, even though my own experience with a senior student who ragged me tends to suggest that there is a deviant element involved in ragging. However, it is risky to generalize without actual hard evidence.

The aim of this paper is to provide some insights into ragging as a sociological phenomenon and a different approach to tackling the issue in the contemporary context.

Before discussing ragging as a sociological

phenomenon, it is useful to highlight several dimensions of ragging.

FORMS OF RAGGING

Ragging is primarily an activity conducted by male seniors on both male and female freshers at the beginning of an academic year spanning the first semester. There are instances of female seniors engaging in ragging but these acts are minor compared to those performed by male seniors. There are also many seniors who do not engage in ragging. In fact, they despise those who perpetrate these acts on freshers.

The residential nature of the University of Peradeniya contributes to this phenomenon, but ragging occurs outside residence halls as well, including in private residences outside the university rented by students. In addition, ragging takes place within university premises, including in locations like outside lecture halls, tutorial rooms, canteens, the library, roads, and parks. Students are asked to read a book upside down, smoke a cigarette putting the lighted side in the mouth, remove shoes, kneel down, give a political speech, or even go in front of a female fresher and say something silly. In extreme cases, freshers are forced to cross the railway bridge on foot or to undertake other risky adventures. In some cases, boys are asked to smoke cigarettes if they disclose they are non-smokers. In other cases, they are asked to drink a cocktail of alcoholic drinks if they disclose they are not alcohol consumers. Freshers are asked by seniors who engage in ragging to engage in pseudo sexual acts, criticize their parents, professors, the police, politicians, or engage in acts that are against normal etiquette in society, most importantly including removing clothes and displaying personal sides of the body. In the case of males, they would even be forced to masturbate in front of the seniors if the event takes place in a residence hall room or similar space. In these instances, freshers are powerless bodies compared to

the seniors who perform these acts. However, such acts are very rare.

AN INTERPRETATION OF RAGGING

My reading is that ragging is primarily an activity perpetrated on both male and female freshers by a few senior male students in order to attract attention from the opposite sex. In this sense, it is associated with the desire of senior students to pick a nice and attractive girl from the new batch of students to be their girlfriend. Those male students who missed an opportunity to do so in their first year yearn to not miss the opportunity in their second year. Thus they want to show to the female freshers that they are in control of campus life compared to male freshers. If male freshers compete for the new stock of girls, the seniors without girlfriends can miss out.

Thus ragging can be interpreted as a phenomenon that has arisen in the university as a result of the sexual and romantic deprivations of male students who are away from their usual places of residence or birthplaces. The atmosphere provided by a residential university like Peradeniya including the existence of remote and romantic places for couples to inhabit contributes to this phenomenon, for example places like the Lovers' Lane, ground floor of the Arts Faculty, Senate buildings, and large and old trees with hanging branches and roots to sit on. When some of their contemporaries in the senior batches find girlfriends from among the freshers, this can also add to the agony and frustration of those who miss out. When such individuals continue to be denied the opportunity to hitch up with a fresher girl, this situation leads to increased frustration, a condition described as *frasa gahagena innava* in the university vernacular. When a fresher girl agrees to be the girlfriend of a senior student or even a fresher male student it is referred to as *Uta Kellek vatuna*. People who are in a romantic relationship walk

together under an open umbrella for lectures and evening walks. It provides necessary protection from rain, sun, as well as for covering up their romantic activities from the public gaze. Often male students who have a girlfriend can be recognized if they carry a short, rolled umbrella with them.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL DIMENSION OF RAGGING

The Sociological dimension of the rag has to do with the general stratification of society along various hierarchies and the power imbalances between those who wield power and those who are the subjects of such hierarchies. Being young and coming from socially deprived backgrounds, most senior students are not in a position of power derived from social, political, and economic hierarchies. It is possible to hypothesize that senior students who come to the university from well to do, urban backgrounds are not inclined to engage in ragging. But this is a hypothesis that needs testing by systematic research. From my observations during the years I was a student and later a lecturer at Peradeniya, I can state that there is an element of class jealousy on the part of seniors who engage in ragging. If they see some male freshers come to the campus with the trappings of urban middle class backgrounds, they are taken to task. For example, wearing jeans, expensive shoes or shirts, mod haircuts, and expensive watches can be an attraction to good-looking female freshers. To prevent the latter being attracted by the former, seniors who engage in ragging force male freshers to either remove such items or confiscate these items temporarily.

Mass entry of students from lower socio-economic and rural plus peri urban backgrounds or minority caste backgrounds to universities is a trend that has characterized the student population since the mid to late 60s. This made the percentage of students entering universities from high socio-

economic and urban backgrounds a minority. This imbalance in class composition made those from the latter background the subject of class jealousy in the eyes of those from the former background. Those from lower socio-economic and rural backgrounds saw those from well to do families and urban schools or with western outlooks in behaviour i.e. dress, hair style, English language ability, social contacts, etc. as class enemies who needed to be tamed and put in their place. This sentiment and desire paved the way for clandestine group acts conducted on university premises and in transport venues. Some such acts were performed publicly during daytime and others were conducted at night in residence halls when freshers were summoned to particular rooms or bathrooms or other secluded spaces for ragging in some cases after dinner. I remember how in the Hilda Obeysekera Hall the freshers were asked to wake up at 4.00 a.m. in the dark and jump to the Swimming Pool naked in the middle of two wings. It was cold and the water was cold too. By comparison to other torturous acts performed by certain senior students, this was a mild event.

The point I want to make is that the sub culture emerging in the universities where ragging has become a phenomenon believed to be uncontrollable has its origins and basis in the massification of higher education from the 60s onwards, and the entry of a large number of students from deprived socio-economic, cultural, and rural backgrounds to universities. Their desire to assert authority within the student population by pushing down the status of those from privileged backgrounds served as the primary cause of this phenomenon, even though the need for romantic relationships was an equally important reason. In relation to the latter point, it is useful to point out that those competing for female partners from well to do families or backgrounds included not only senior students but also junior lecturers and tutors. Preventing

such junior academic staff members reaching out to attractive female students from well to do families and urban backgrounds, and using ragging to establish early relationships with such female students was also an imperative. In some circumstances, a strategy adopted by some seniors was to save some female students from ragging so that they could be seen by female students thus saved as their saviours, leading to the development of soft corners towards the saviours, which can lead to romantic and/ or friendship relations.

But the point I make from a sociological point of view is that ragging is an activity that reinforces seniority of the second and potentially third year students over first year students before the latter set their foot on the ground, and establish old college, locality, class, caste, and other linkages with those who are working or learning on campus. Fourth year students are usually busy reading for their honours degrees. By the fourth year they either have a girlfriend or have decided to devote themselves to full time study to obtain a class in their exams. We cannot blame students wanting to establish or reinforce a hierarchy of their own within the university when there are many other hierarchies outside. However, what becomes the subject of criticism are the methods senior students employ to achieve this goal.

It is also seen that in most cases, those who engage in ragging and the fresher subjects who go through such acts become best friends in time to come. They share knowledge and learning, social skills, etc. while becoming buddies in the remaining years. Such relationships become life long ones after university days.

RAGGING AND ITS POLITICAL DIMENSION

The political dimension of ragging is associated with student politics on campus. There are formally established branches of

national political parties in universities. In order to take control of the Students' Association, an entity sanctioned by university regulations to address the welfare needs of students, politically motivated groups compete among each other. In most campuses, office bearers of the Students' Association usually have been elected in the past from the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a leading leftist party in Sri Lanka. However, since it was not in the ruling coalition back then, it could not offer employment or other benefits to graduates. Nonetheless, given the elitist nature of national politics and mainstream political parties, the JVP had become attractive to sections of the electorate that did not have access to these parties, including many students in universities. Thus student bodies or associations with JVP officials tended to adopt a radical platform in relation to education and employment matters. Today the situation has changed somewhat. The Frontline Party (FP) or *Peratugamee Pakshaya*, an offshoot of the JVP, has become dominant in student politics and associations on campuses. It is possible that student activists of the FP or those affiliated with the JVP who come from rural and urban but marginalized socio-economic and caste backgrounds, engage in forms of ragging to maintain their superiority over those who come to the university from more privileged socio-economic and caste backgrounds. With the added muscle of the JVP (which has of late entered into winning coalitions and thus been part of the government), they are better organized to create an encompassing consciousness among students who feel marginalized from the mainstream socio-politico-economic landscape and the opportunities it offers. This is another hypothesis that needs to be tested through systematic research.

It is important to study the differences of approach to ragging between seniors affiliated with the JVP, FP, and other minor parties vs mainstream political parties.

Equally important is to investigate whether ragging on campuses is purely a Sinhalese phenomenon or whether students from ethnic minority backgrounds also engage in these acts. Furthermore, it is useful to investigate the extent to which ethnic minority students are subjected to ragging by majority Sinhalese students. During my time as a student and later a staff member such incidents involving ethnic minority students were not common.

However, there could be an element of social justice and equality consciousness also in these activities, as the national political platforms of the JVP and FP are based on a critique of the respective political agendas of the two major parties UNP and SLFP. Whether and to what extent such noble ideals have become subverted in the context of the romantic needs of the undergraduate population as described earlier also demands investigation.

It is well known that members of the student branches of main political parties on campuses such as the UNP and SLFP try to act as saviours of freshers from ragging. Their ulterior motive however is to recruit new members to their branches. This creates situations of conflict with the JVP or FP members during the ragging period, spilling over on to the following months and sometimes even years. Targeting individuals from such parties, whether one is for or against ragging, and stereotyping them is part and parcel of the process.

RAGGING AS STUDENT SUB-CULTURE

One could argue that ragging is part of the institutional student sub-culture, and therefore as in other formal institutions, it is part of the normal socialization process. For example, new recruits to the police, armed forces, and para professions in other countries go through some form of ragging. Sub cultures develop in institutions over time in response to particular contextual necessities. As

discussed in this paper, maintaining seniority among the student population (as also a way of defying social hierarchies existing beyond the boundaries of the university), or indeed finding suitable partners for romantic relationships can be the precursor to the emergence of ragging in universities.

Whatever these imperatives are, what has attracted most criticism from the press, the public, and authorities is the vulgar nature of the practice amounting to torture in some instances. The extent to which ragging has evolved from a simple exercise by senior students to establish their power and authority over freshers for individual motives, to a complex phenomenon where the subject of ragging becomes harmful physically and psychologically has to be understood in relation to the broader changes that have occurred in universities over the decades, student mentality, and the prevailing sub culture.

Regrettably, ragging has evolved into a socially, culturally, and perhaps legally unacceptable practice in various campuses. Such practices amounting to torture cannot be condoned purely on the basis of other justifications including the argument of a sub culture and even social justice.

One argument for its tolerance by authorities is the assumption that it is a temporary phenomenon limited to the first few weeks of the new academic year. Thus many academic staff also tends to tolerate and overlook acts of ragging. However, this this is only relevant if ragging is conducted publicly. The more sinister aspects of ragging take place away from the public eye.

POSITIVE ASPECTS OF RAGGING

Ragging has a positive dimension also. Some students who come to the university from deprived backgrounds display signs of submerged personality such as extreme backwardness resulting in a failure to

communicate with peers and lecturers. They may display excessive forms of subordination due to the cultural, social, familial, and economic backgrounds they come from, and the resultant dependencies they experienced in early life. If their parents were labourers, landless farmers, or those earning a living by selling physical labour, in Sri Lankan society they are seen as subservient to those in high economic or social positions, particularly in the countryside. When students from such backgrounds enter the university, they bring with them and reflect the dispositions of such background, which have been passed down to them as an inevitable consequence of the process of socialization in their respective life conditions.

Through acts of minor ragging such as asking them to sing a song, go and say something to a female student, act as a lover in front of an imaginary girl, or speak as a person in another role such as a bus conductor or fish seller, seniors believe that they can eliminate or at least curb subservient character traits that these freshers inherited from their family and school contexts.

Examples of such ragging are recounted by Manchanayake (2016, p. 20), an engineering student who entered University of Ceylon, Peradeniya 50 years ago in the following manner:

That particular day, three of us were returning to JP Hall after the General Induction Programme conducted for the freshers. The set of steps starting off just past the Kissing Bend on the Galaha Road was a short cut to JP Hall. Even some Marcus Fernando Hall boys used to take this set of steps to cut short to their hall through JP. As three of us reached the top, we saw a senior who was seated at the top end of the embankment, and he was having a good scrutiny of the freshers passing by. He immediately recognized

that we were freshers and ordered us to go back to the foot of the steps and start coming up counting the steps. Then Lal, Wimalasiri and I went down and started counting the steps very seriously. At the end, he called us and inquired about the total count of the steps involved. We had three different answers and we were sent back to the foot of the steps for a re-count.

Another example given by him is as follows:

Three of us were in our room, and a senior walked in. He wanted the three of us to get together and with our combined effort to blow off the glowing bulb of the room, considering it to be an oil lamp. We were fresh from home and found that amusing and we were laughing. The senior lost his temper and said, "Cut your bloody smile off". Then we realized it was serious and the smiles had all disappeared from our faces. He ordered "Bring it back" referring to the smiles. Then the smiles were back on. He ordered again to wipe it out with our hands. Then all the smiles went off again and he inquired from us where the smiles were at that particular moment. We replied that they were enclosed in our palms. He then ordered us to open up our palms and divide it into four equal parts and put one of those quarter smiles back in our faces. We tried it.

A similar ragging event is described in Sinhala by Wickramarathne (2012, p.79) in a Commemorative publication issued by the 1974 Faculty of Arts batch of students for their 38th anniversary. There can be numerous other publications of this sort including newspaper articles that can be considered as rich sources that can be accessed by future researchers if they venture into researching ragging in the Peradeniya University.

I agree with the proposition that lighter acts of ragging can serve as a personality enhancement process because they compel the freshers to engage in acts they would typically not have the courage to do. However, the same cannot be said about more severe forms of ragging. Even acts such as asking a male student to smoke a cigarette from the lighted side, drink alcohol mixtures and getting them drunk, or remove clothes and engage in masturbation, or sexual engagement between two male students have been thrown in the same basket along with their lighter forms and defended. This cannot be accepted.

SEVERE FORMS OF RAGGING

Those who actively engage in severe forms of ragging fall into at least three categories: 1) Those who were subjected to severe ragging in their first year 2) Those who suffer traumatic experiences prior to attending university such as family breakdowns of parents and 3) Those frustrated by their inability to form functional social or romantic relations.

Continuation of severe ragging or forms of torture by seniors in the first category works in a cycle. The thinking goes 'as I was tortured in the first year, I have a right to torture others'. Conversations with colleagues in my era confirmed this fact. Such individuals may come from middle class backgrounds also, in contrast to the students from lower socio-economic classes who are predominantly associated with ragging.

During my doctoral field research, I was able to approach a senior who engaged in harsh forms of ragging in my first year. He lived near Pilimalawa in the mid 80s. He disclosed that the reason for his behaviour was that his parents separated during his youth and the resulting conflicts and trauma caused him to act harshly against those who appeared to come from normal family backgrounds. This is quite a revealing statement.

Effects of severe forms of ragging can be

lasting on those who are subjected to such acts. Though criminal cases are reported in the media and receive the attention of university authorities, there is very little research about severe forms of ragging even by the country's social scientists and psychologists. It is time that the academic community takes steps to design systematic studies to understand this phenomenon and come up with potential prevention measures.

EVADING TACTICS

Freshers adopt various evading tactics to mislead seniors who engage in ragging and avoid being subjects of ragging. Ragging takes place in various venues including venues for group ragging such as Halls of Residence, on their way to and back from lectures and tutorials, and venues for individual ragging.

During my time, one venue for group ragging was the bend on the road near the Hilda Obeyesekera Hall and the Open Air Theatre (Vala). Another was in front of the Arts theatre - the main lecture hall in the Arts Faculty. Female students coming to or returning from lectures walk in groups in order to not attract individual attention. However, seniors isolate one or two and ask them to slow down, then keep talking. This is a form of coercion. From the side of the female student, there can be an inclination to get to know the male student also. Seniors promise that they will escort her to the Hall of Residence safely without letting other seniors to rag. Some take their offer and others refuse. Those who take the offer can end up being the romantic partner of the relevant senior who acts this way, and continue to be escorted after lectures or even escorted to lectures plus evening activities like going to movies and spending time in the Lovers' Lane.

Some freshers act as seniors when walking to lectures and back in order to avoid being perceived as freshers. Seniors typically protect freshers who are from the same

school as them.

When freshers who reside outside the university campus come by bus and get down near the Arts theatre, they become the subject of ragging because they are easy targets. Seniors develop a sense of who the freshers are by their behaviour, what they carry, persona, hesitation, unfamiliarity with the place, and so on. If the freshers, particularly females, ask parents to drop them by car, this can attract the attention of seniors.

Some freshers try to comply with the demands of seniors without showing signs of resistance. This way they think they can satisfy the egos of the seniors. Some do not carry files or papers for writing notes as they can attract attention. Seniors use a different kind of files, i.e. hard bound, compared to freshers who normally use softcover files. Freshers are required to wear white shirts and trousers so that they can be easily identified during the first semester. Those who do not comply can either be treated badly, or, if they are really lucky, avoid the rag altogether.

Thus there are developed norms and expectations pertaining to the behaviour of freshers in the university sub culture. Study of these sociologically can be useful to uncover the normative framework within which ragging occurs.

APPROACHES TO HANDLING RAGGING

How should the university authorities handle or address ragging as a romantic, sociological, and political phenomenon? In this section, I offer a few ideas in brief.

A purely punitive or legalistic approach to address ragging cannot succeed due to the pervasive nature of the phenomenon as it has taken root in the university system based on strong psychological, sociological, and political reasons. While strong regulatory measures adopted by university authorities

and efficient application of the law are important, further measures need to be conceptualized and implemented to make a difference on the ground without politicizing the issue. When punishments are meted out to some students by the authorities, this becomes a breeding ground for JVP and FP members to continue with their campaigns to seek relief for students who were thus punished. Therefore, a more sophisticated and subtle approach to handling ragging rooted in a deep understanding of the complex nature of the phenomenon is required.

1. It is risky to treat ragging as a one dimensional phenomenon or to consider it in simple or binary terms, i.e. political binaries, especially because it has romantic and sociological functions. A more holistic understanding of the phenomenon is called for, in order to come up with more effective means of handling the issue.
2. A methodology needs to be developed to identify deviant elements among those who perpetrate extreme forms of ragging amounting to torture. This needs to be distinguished from milder forms.
3. A systematic research study is necessary to understand various forms of ragging, participants, their motives and consequences, normative aspects, sub culture, and positive and negative dimensions of ragging, including the views of victims.
4. Methods of recognizing seniority among students other than ragging need to be identified, supported, and perhaps even be institutionalized.
5. Multiple approaches should be taken to handle extreme forms of ragging including counseling and good behaviour bonds.
6. Systematic and rigorous investigation of alternatives to ragging is strongly called for. This can include creative methods like having venues for seniors to introduce themselves to freshers and vice versa, and organizing common activities including sports, debates, etc.
7. A commission of enquiry to understand the complex phenomenon, its causes, and possible solutions can be appointed.
8. New technologies can be used for detecting ragging incidents in real time and stopping such incidents plus arresting the culprits. A better and more prompt reporting mechanism would be to use text messaging to a designated mobile number. Additionally, installation of security cameras in key places can deter severe forms of ragging. However, the possibility of ragging activities being taken to places outside of the university to avoid being detected thus also needs to be noted.
9. The option of including a statement in academic transcripts about the behaviour of students, positive or negative, can be explored.

REFERENCES

- Manchanayake, P. (2016). *Some Recollections and Reflections*. Delgoda: Akila Publication
- Wickramarathne, S. (2012). *Matakaye Randi Katha*, 38th Anniversary and Get together of the Faculty of Arts – 1974 Batch. Peradeniya: University of Peradeniya Publications