

RAGGING IN THE UNIVERSITY: A PROBLEM IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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During the early stages of university education in Sri Lanka, the light-hearted tradition of having fun at the expense of the newcomers was described as ragging. During the last few years however, ragging has undergone a complete metamorphosis from the Oxford and Cambridge abbreviated form of RAG (-Royal Admission Games). This tradition which was meant to pave a path for the so-called 'freshers' to mingle with the seniors and to get to know the ropes of university life has deteriorated over the years resulting in humiliation, sadism, torture and even death to the victims thus reaching criminal heights. As a result, ragging has become a major focus of attention among the authorities, staff and students in universities, mass-media and the public in general.

In this study, ragging was defined as 'the process in which newcomers to the student population were subjected to forms of physical and verbal abuse' (Silva, et al. 1998). In view of the sensitive nature of the subject matter of this research a combination of different methodologies were adopted to gather data. The sample consisted of 300 students of different years drawn from the seven faculties in the University of Peradeniya. The sample included 80% of Sinhala students and 20% of Muslim and Tamil students. The primary mode of data collection was the focus-group interviews. In addition observations and individual discussions too were held. The group discussions were conducted by four senior research students. The sessions were held in lecture halls, canteens, and in halls of residence depending on the convenience of the responding students.

The findings indicate that while a majority of the students in fact enjoyed ragging, a minority group was completely against it. They rejected the concept, the mode and all other activities connected with it. Some of the respondents in the latter group stated that they did not even want to speak to those who subjected the freshers to 'inhuman mental and physical torture'. It was also evident from the data that emerged that though ragging was intended to be a "social equalizer" on the contrary, it deepened the gap between the social classes.