



# **Ragging and Its Impacts on the English Language Use of the First Year Undergraduate Community: Sri Lankan Perspective**

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## **Author's contribution**

*The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.*

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## **ABSTRACT**

Ragging is a form of teasing introduced into Sri Lankan universities with an alleged aim of assimilating new students to the university culture. The origin of ragging is not known and over the years ragging has become a form of violent action and bullying, which harms junior students physically as well as mentally. It is generally accepted that classroom interaction would help develop students' English language proficiency, especially speaking skills. Among some of the reasons for students not to involve in interaction with lecturers, ragging (hazing) in universities seems to play a significant role.

The study focused on the effects of ragging on students' participation in language classes and their involvement in classroom discussions with lecturers, especially in the English medium content classes. Classroom discussion in the English medium classes is believed to be effective in improving the comprehension of content matters while offering a platform to develop language skills as well. Data were collected through focus group discussions and personal interviews with students and the staff of the university. The study revealed that multi-faceted sub-set of factors influenced students' behaviour in class. Students' perception and justification of the said behaviour

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affect classroom interaction. Among the significant sub-set of factors, culturally embedded behavioural patterns perpetuated by senior students that come in the form of ragging seem to restrict the classroom interaction of the students in English. The study stresses the importance of examining the influence of culturally embedded behavioural factors on classroom interaction of the undergraduate community.

*Keywords: Ragging; English language use; lecture comprehension; classroom interaction; Sri Lanka.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This study is a follow-up to the findings concerning ragging obtained in a lecture comprehension study [1]. Ragging is prevalent at the higher educational institutes in Asian countries like Sri Lanka and India. Also, ragging is known in different names in Pakistan such as teasing, ducking, and ragging [2]. In the western world, it is commonly known as bullying [3]. Senior students, commonly called seniors, exert a kind of practical jokes on freshmen or commonly known as juniors. These two terms, seniors and juniors, are very common in Sri Lankan higher educational institutes.

Ragging influences junior students' life in different ways; it increases students' anxiety in campus life, disrupts normalcy, brings mental and physical torture, and affects the learning environment. Nevertheless, at times it is considered an enjoyment for both seniors and juniors. Despite the fact that ragging brings many inconveniences for the students' learning, how it influences students' learning, especially English language learning is a matter of investigation. Even though a similar pattern of bullying is apparent in Western countries, for example in the UK universities [4], the extent to which it influences students' academic activities is yet to be explored in Sri Lanka or overseas.

Gunatilaka [5] has provided a comprehensive review of ragging in a recent study. She defines ragging as a traditional and systematic human right abuse in the field of education in universities or institutions. She adds that the freshers are traumatized both physically and mentally 'deriving a sadistic pleasure by the seniors amounting to gross violation of basic human rights' (P. 92).

The situation in India seems to be similar to Sri Lanka with regard to the effects of ragging. CURE (Coalition to Uproot Ragging from Education) [6], an organization which campaigns for the eradication of ragging in Indian higher educational institutes, reveals that another

hidden ugly face of ragging is sexual abuse. It reports that nearly one-fifth of the ragging incidents in India is sexual abuse. In the recent past, there have been several sexual complaints about ragging but they are yet to be surfaced.

Waghmode et al. [7] think that ragging is a western concept brought into Asia. They claim that ragging was found in the British era, in English colleges and universities but slowly it spread to almost the entire Indian educational institutions. Hence, they categorized ragging into different types, and among them, the most common ones found in Sri Lanka are (i) Dress Code Ragging: the juniors are asked to dress in a specific dress code for a particular time, (ii) Verbal Torture: the juniors are asked to utter vulgar languages and sing songs using abusive lyrics, and (iii) Sexual Abuse: this commonly takes place when the juniors are forced to strip. Some other forms of ragging are juniors have to do physical work for the seniors such as cleaning, washing and in rare cases, juniors can be compelled to use drugs even, as reported by [7].

The University Grants Commission which is an apex body of the universities in Sri Lanka has taken several steps such as bringing regulations and passing laws in order to control ragging. Many of the ragging related studies deal with psychological (e.g. [8]) and physical abuses (e.g. [9]). How ragging influences students' learning is yet to be investigated and this study sheds light on an area that has rarely been studied.

Hence, this study focuses on the following research questions:

1. What impacts does ragging have on first year students' language use?
2. What influences does ragging bring on first year students' classroom interaction?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Even though ragging takes place in other Asian countries, such as Malaysia and Bangladesh,

there is no sufficient published literature on ragging in general in the Asian countries. In Sri Lanka too, only a few studies have been undertaken on ragging [9,10,8] including the comprehensive review of ragging by [5]. A few newspaper articles and opinion columns including the report by [11] consider the worst effects of ragging in terms of loss of life and physical injury to juniors.

Premadasa et al. [8] investigated the harassment caused by the senior students to the juniors at the Faculty of Dental Sciences of a Sri Lankan university. The study included 89 new students to the faculty and their opinions were obtained using a structured questionnaire. The students reported that they were subject mostly to verbal abuse, followed by sexual harassment, which was verbal (e.g. sexual comments, jokes), and least of all is physical abuse. Though this study is the first systematic study to investigate ragging in a Sri Lankan university, the present study differs from it by investigating the influence of ragging on students' educational activities, while [8] focused on verbal and emotional abuse.

In fact, ragging in Sri Lanka has forced junior students to commit suicide and also, in a few instances, resulted in students becoming paralysed. Besides the mental and physical tortures resulted from ragging, [12] describes other attitudinal problems created by ragging in Sri Lankan universities. He mentions that senior students advise juniors not to maintain any kind of relationship with lecturers, and not to ask any question in the classroom. Even though many of the features [12] describes are found in this study also, his argument is based on experience and assumptions, but not based on any empirical evidence. Moreover, he considers ragging to be a result of the involvement of antigovernment political parties (i.e. JVP – Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, a Sinhalese political party which believes in Marxism, also described in Wikipedia as a 'Marxist-Leninist political party in Sri Lanka') in the university.

Weeramunda [13] studied student violence and indiscipline in universities in Sri Lanka. In his study, it is revealed that most of the unrest in universities arises because of ragging related incidents, particularly when the authorities try to punish the students who are involved in ragging. He cites a study (Wijekoon Banda, 1995, as cited in [13]) which was carried out to look into the sociological aspects of ragging, but the wider social or psychological implications of ragging have not been studied, as he states:

Obviously, neither the author nor any other academic or researcher has gone into the negative aspects of the phenomenon or its wider social, political and psychological implications [13].

Despite the limited number of studies in Sri Lanka, there are a few in India, the neighbouring country. Nevertheless, those studies that describe ragging explain the harm done by senior students to junior students in terms of loss of life and other physical abuses, but they rarely address the effect on learning from ragging. For example, in a research report on ragging published by the Coalition to Uproot Ragging from Education (CURE) [6], of the 211 incidents reported between 1998 and 2007 in Indian colleges and universities, all address physical harm.

On the other hand, as opposed to the negative effects of ragging discussed above in the literature, some students believe that ragging brings happiness to them. A study by [14] reports that almost all (99) of his respondents felt that ragging is necessary to build a relationship between seniors and juniors. He conducted the study among the medical students at a Medical College. Despite these positive thoughts, ragging has been a form of torture that disrupts junior students' ability to learn. An investigation on how it influences junior students' learning is an interesting point to look into. Hence, this study brings to light another hidden side of ragging which has not been the focus of attention so far but which influences considerably the students' learning activities, through negatively influencing student attitudes.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted at a national university in Sri Lanka, known as South Eastern University of Sri Lanka (hereinafter mentioned as SEUSL). There are 15 national universities in Sri Lanka. In this particular university, around 5000 students are studying in six faculties.

This study adopts the mixed methods approach. A questionnaire survey was followed by focus group discussions. Initially, the questionnaires were distributed to 70 students who are in their second and third years of the study. These students were selected from five faculties, except the Faculty of Applied Sciences where the researcher had already found the influence of ragging in a lecture comprehension study. The completed questionnaires were returned by 52

students, comprising 30 female and 22 male students and the questionnaire survey had a return rate of 74%.

For this study, the researcher wanted to identify the students who had had an experience of being ragged. It was assumed that they may express their problems well and be able to reflect on the existing situation. So, a snowball sampling technique was used to identify the students. It is a non-probability sampling in which samples are obtained from a personal reference. Forty-two students, comprising 22 male and 20 female students, participated in a personal interview using different media; face to face, WhatsApp and voice calls. Five lecturers were also interviewed to get further information on ragging. The lecturers were selected based on their involvement in the activities concerning the control of ragging in the university.

#### 4. FINDINGS

Findings are divided into three parts: (1) General impacts of ragging including the perceived benefits, (2) Impacts on the use of English in the

university and (3) Influence of ragging on classroom interaction.

The following section describes them in the order:

#### 4.1 General Impacts of Ragging Including the Perceived Benefits

During the first semester, first year students (junior students) face the problem of 'ragging'. In the case of SEUSL, it lasts for a semester or more from the day students enter the campus.

Out of the students who participated in the questionnaire survey, all the male students and 80% of the female students faced ragging. Some of the students who are day scholars to the campus and those who wear religious dresses (e.g niqab, covering the face) escaped from ragging.

Students were asked about the different forms of ragging they faced and they were asked to identify whether they liked the particular form of ragging.

**Table 1. Percentage of students who faced a kind of ragging**

| Whether the students faced any ragging in their first year | % Male | % Female |
|--|--------|----------|
| Yes  | 100    | 80       |
| No   | 00     | 10       |
| Did not respond  | 00     | 10       |

**Table 2. Students' responses to forms of ragging (questionnaire survey)**

| Forms of ragging  | % of male students reported    | % of female students reported | % like the form of ragging (both male & female categories) |
|---|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|--|
| Doing cleaning and washing for the seniors in the hostel                                    | None                           | None                          | None   |
| Greeting seniors whenever they see them (e.g Use Sir or Madam)                              | 55                             | 40                            | 75   |
| Not allowed to use English words when speaking  | 95                             | 90                            | None   |
| Wearing dress code  | 70 (only in certain faculties) | 50                            | 30   |
| Involving juniors in a performance like singing, dancing, making a speech, etc.             | 85                             | 70                            | 40   |
| Being scolded using abusive language  | 50                             | 30                            | None   |
| Being advised by seniors on classroom behaviours (e.g. don't ask questions in the lectures) | 80                             | 85                            | 25   |
| Physical ragging  | None                           | None                          | NA   |
| Doing assignments for seniors   | 20                             | 35                            | 30   |

**Physical ragging:** When students were asked about the types of ragging, especially physical ragging, none of them reported that they faced it but from time to time the physical ragging was reported at the university as well as from other universities. It was difficult to find whether they were telling the truth.

**Using dress code:** Seniors ask the juniors to wear particular dresses, may be white shirt and slippers, etc. The Muslim female students are asked to wear the same dress known as 'black hijab' by the seniors at the university. Even though some of them like to wear shawls in different colours, they are not allowed to do it during the period of ragging. But these students do not feel that they are denied their freedom to dress as they wished. This is because of the religious and cultural values found among the majority of students who continue to wear a black hijab even after the end of ragging. These students treat the black hijab as a symbol of religious values and protection though the colour of the hijab is changing gradually. Some students opt for different colour hijabs nowadays.

**Ban on the use of English:** Many of the students stated that seniors never allowed them to use any English words while speaking. This led to different punishments (e.g. repeat an utterance in L1 (mother tongue/first language) again and again, sometimes up to 1000 times). Furthermore, seniors advised the juniors not to ask questions from the lecturers as it would lead to a misunderstanding of the junior students by the lecturers. As a result, students rarely asked questions in the lectures even though the lecturers tell the students to ask for any clarifications in the content of the subject. Further discussion on this is given below.

#### 4.1.1 Junior students' positive thoughts about ragging

It is claimed by some of the senior students that ragging is essential in universities in order to equalize the status of students. The students, they further claim, come from different social statuses, such as wealth and educational background. According to them, the students who come from elite families do not mingle with others easily, while those who come from rural backgrounds hesitate to talk to others. Hence, the seniors feel that ragging can help students overcome the anxiety students have in communicating with each other as well as make everyone equal. But the reality of this claim is a question.

These findings are similar to that of [14]. His study also revealed that senior students feel ragging as a way to make the students who come from remote backgrounds socialize and mingle with a larger student population.

Similarly, some students felt that writing assignments in English for the seniors helps them develop their own language ability. When the lecturers give assignments for senior students, they may ask the juniors to write assignments for them. They do this in the pretense of ragging but it was also revealed that those seniors are weaker in English language proficiency, thus they get the help from the juniors.

#### 4.2 Impacts of Ragging on the Use of English in the University

Traditionally, senior students do not allow the juniors to use English words when they speak in their mother tongue. In my previous study [1], it was found that this situation was common among Tamil as well as Sinhala L1 speakers. Students are not allowed to use even a single word in English during the ragging period. Hence, using English words with seniors leads to several punishments. If junior students happen to use any English words while talking with seniors, they have to face several consequences. For example, the seniors may scold the juniors. In one instance, the seniors asked a girl, 'are you from London?' for using English words while speaking in L1<sup>1</sup>. Some of the students enter the faculty having studied their school studies in either English or Sinhala, another second language for Tamil speakers. These students face the worst of this situation when they are forced to speak in Tamil. A student told that she felt giving up studies when she was not allowed to speak in English or Sinhala, the two languages she was fluent with, rather, the seniors compelled her to talk in Tamil, which she was not familiar with. She told 'I was crying everyday to my father telling that I wanted to come home but he comforted me to stay on the course'. In another incident, the junior student was forced to buy food from the canteen using English language. It led to an embarrassing situation to communicate with the canteen manager.

Moreover, junior students are not even allowed to use simple greetings in English such as 'good

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<sup>1</sup>This L1 could be either Tamil or Sinhala – the two national languages in Sri Lanka.

morning', 'thank you' or 'sorry.' Junior students are afraid to tell the time in English either. Further, students are not allowed to use the word 'seniors', rather they need to use L1 equivalent (Tamil word 'Siresda Maanawar').

Another problem with students' learning of English takes place during intensive courses in English. These are pre-academic programmes to teach English to the students before the commencement of their academic studies. Some students reported that they are not allowed to carry notebooks or any handouts to such English classes. They are sometimes barred from attending the classes. Moreover, the mindset during the ragging period is not conducive to learn the language as reported by the students. However, many students did not support the claim that seniors prevented them from attending English classes.

I asked a few seniors the reason for not allowing the juniors to use English words or speak English. They could not give a proper explanation, but informed that traditionally this attitude continues. Further, in the society when someone speaks English he/she is looked as showing off, leaving others to make fun of him/her on his/her face or behind. This thinking is rooted in the rural areas and from these societies, it would have been carried to the schools and to the university as well. That is, any student who tries to communicate in English with others who share a common L1 with him or her is looked upon as showing off. The co-interlocutor may not respond in English even though the person tried to communicate in English.

#### **4.2.1 Special treatment for students who study English as the main subject**

In the Faculties of Arts and Culture and Arabic Studies, it was revealed that students who take English as the main subject have to face more ragging in comparison. When the seniors come to know that some junior students are taking English as the main subject<sup>2</sup>, those students are ragged more. The seniors ask different questions making fun of them. Sometimes the seniors keep the juniors away from them. That is, these students are separated by the seniors from other juniors and do not interact with them at all. This is also a kind of mental torture for these students.

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<sup>2</sup>In these faculties students can take English as one of the three main subjects for their degree, while all students have to study General English throughout the degree.

A male student reported 'when seniors come to know that English is included in our main subjects, they maintained a gap at the beginning but after a few months the gap was not maintained'. Here the gap means the seniors do not interact with the juniors and keep them away from them. This is also a kind of ragging.

Junior students are afraid to tell seniors that they are studying English literature as the main subject if they were asked about the subject combination. In an incident when the seniors came to know a girl was offering English as the main subject, they asked her to teach English to a group of juniors under a tree. This is also an embarrassing situation for the juniors, especially for girls.

#### **4.3 Influence of Ragging on Classroom Interaction**

Interaction between lecturers and students is essential for understanding the content lectures as well as developing language proficiency [15,16].

Out of several reasons that affect students' participation in classroom discussions, language problems and culture of not asking questions were mentioned by the majority of the students as the most important reasons. Other reasons were seniors' advice and speaking anxiety. The seniors' advice occurs in the form of ragging or sometimes seniors advise juniors because of the misconceptions they have regarding the classroom interaction. This is explained further under the subheading 'misconception.'

Students reported that the seniors' advice of not to ask questions in lectures has a greater impact on how students behave in the classes, especially in EMI (English Medium Instruction) classes. They are afraid to ask questions or answer the questions. If the seniors come to know that anyone asked questions in the class, they are treated differently. They may be portrayed a 'level' person (a colloquial word used to describe someone who shows off). Not only the seniors but also his or her batchmates treat him or her like this. This has happened to a student who had an extrovert personality and who had had his education in bilingual classes. It was reported by the students that when this student asked a question in English of a lecturer in the class during the ragging period, this was brought to the notice of the seniors and the student had to face severe ragging subsequently.

**Table 3. Reasons given by students for not asking questions in the classroom**

| Reasons   | Rank order (according to importance) |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| a. Language problem   | 1                                    |
| b. Culture (attitude of not asking questions of the lecturers in the class) | 2                                    |
| c. Seniors' advice  | 3                                    |
| d. Fear of public speaking/ Speaking anxiety                                | 4                                    |

A few students mentioned that they may be subject to severe physical ragging if they ask questions in the class. This information is passed to seniors from their batchmates. In my previous study, lecturers mentioned that fear and language problems are the reasons for poor interaction with lecturers. Hence, this fear is caused by ragging, and this prevents students from interacting with lecturers. The situation remains the same over a few years in the university.

#### 4.3.1 Misconception of classroom interaction

It was identified during course of the interviews that senior students exerted a considerable influence on junior students through ragging. Many of the senior students are rooted in the belief that lecturers should not be asked questions. This is treated as challenging the authority of the lecturers. This is closely connected to the Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) and has been discussed in another paper [17]. This belief goes to the extent that students should not answer the questions asked by the lecturers either. If they answer, it is considered an act of exhibiting their talents. These senior students continue to pass this misbelief to the juniors and this keeps on moving year by year. There was no proper guidance from the academic staff on this falsehood because these kinds of issues are yet to come to the surface. One student told in anonymity that an active junior student who tried to interact with lecturers in English medium lectures was nicknamed by the seniors as "*Englanthe Kumarihami*" (L1 Sinhala) (A girl from England) and also they threatened her to be silent. The reasons for this kind of activities are not apparent but most of the time those who involve in ragging have poor English proficiency and they would not like their juniors to be good in English.

#### 4.3.2 Lecturers' views of ragging

Lecturers are aware that ragging takes place in the university. However, many of them do not want to get involved in controlling ragging. They

feel that the senior student counsellor or the marshals (officials appointed by the university to control ragging) should play a role in controlling ragging. However, they were not aware that senior students exert control on juniors' learning, especially language use. Even though lecturers agreed that there could be different forms of ragging in the university, they did not have an understanding of the influence of ragging on language use and interaction of the students.

## 5. DISCUSSION

Karunatilake [18] describes ragging as 'a ritual which has been in existence throughout the history of university system', (p. 18) and is practised in Sri Lanka as well as other Asian universities. Ragging is a kind of mental as well as a physical abuse too. According to [18], 'ragging has become more violent in contrast to the way it was exercised in the past' (p. 18).

At SEUSL, students reported that ragging lasts for nearly a semester though this duration may vary from faculty to faculty. During the ragging period, the second year students (or seniors) verbally abuse the first year students (or juniors) or ask the juniors to perform some physical activities too. Some may be funny (e.g. to salute the seniors) and some are hard (e.g. push-ups). A student mentioned that he liked singing songs when senior asked, but some other forms of ragging he experienced were a 'torture', which led him to think of even giving up the course and going home. It was further revealed by the students that sometimes seniors go to the extent of nearly hitting the juniors.

Status quo has been a role to play in ragging as revealed in this study. When one becomes a senior student, he or she feels that the juniors have to respect them. Whenever the juniors do not take notice of the seniors or if the juniors pose like unintimidated for the seniors, they are subject to ragging. Another reason is the inferiority complex of the senior students. At SEUSL this has a hidden role in ragging. When the seniors feel jealous about the juniors the

juniors may be subject to severe ragging. [11] also revealed that the seniors compare them with the juniors in terms of knowledge, etiquette or wealth and if found that the juniors are in a better position than them, they involve in ragging their juniors.

It was discussed that the seniors influence the juniors' language use and learning too. Juniors are not allowed to use English words. In some cases, they are discouraged to follow English as the main subject. Also, they are not allowed to talk with the lecturers in the class to resolve the issues they face in lecture comprehension. This ban from talking in English may continue until the juniors are invited for a function called 'social function' which ceremonially marks the end of the ragging period. This period of ragging is usually a semester (15 weeks) and may go up to a year. When the faculty members insist on an early social function, the period may become shorter than a semester.

When the juniors enter the university they have a thinking that they have to learn English to study at the university but when the seniors tell them not to use any English words, it makes a kind of negative influence on learning English, as some of the students exclaimed. On top of that, some students do not want to follow an English subject in the first year because of the fear that they may be subjected to severe ragging. On the other hand, seniors to disseminate some fabricated thoughts among the juniors like English as a difficult subject, and also tell them that many students fail English as the main subject.

The universities have taken several measures to curb ragging within its premises but some of the incidents go unnoticed. Junior students fear to make complaints because he or she can be single out and ostracized from the student community. The fellow students, fearing the seniors, obey this rule. Sometimes they are physically attacked too. Due to these constraints, only those students who plan to leave the course and give up continuing the studies from a particular institute dare to make a complaint to the authorities.

This university as well as other universities in Sri Lanka has taken several steps to combat ragging. There have been proctors, student counsellors, and marshals in the university to deal with and investigate ragging related incidents. Some dedicated lines are open so that student can send texts or call the officials

including the vice-chancellor to complain about ragging related incidents.

The University Grants Commission, the apex body of the universities in Sri Lanka, has issued a circular 919 to prevent ragging and suggested actions for those who violate the regulations – spelled out ragging and actions to be taken against ragging [19]. This circular is known as 'Guidelines to be introduced to Curb the Menace of Ragging in the Universities or Higher Education Institutions.'

University Grants Commission also maintains a hotline and a special office to help students who have been victims of ragging in universities and other higher educational institutes. Students can make a complaint via an online portal (<https://eugc.ac.lk/rag/>) set by the UGC too. Ministry of Higher Education has launched an application (App) for mobile devices for Sri Lankan university students to inform the authorities of ragging incidents. This app is known as UGC Emergency Safety App (Anti-Ragging Mobile App) and was developed by ICTA (The Information and Communication Technology Agency), Sri Lanka.

The students can also complain about ragging at police stations. The government of Sri Lanka has passed an act to prevent ragging; Prohibition of Ragging and Other Forms of Violence in Educational Institutions, Act No. 20 of 1998 is currently in effect. Despite all these efforts, ragging continues to roar at the universities. The unwillingness of students to make a complaint and other related taboos make the ragging go unchecked. The authorities consider mainly the physical aspect of ragging. The other side of ragging that prevents students' free communication and learning in the classroom has not so far been looked into.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In this study, it was found that senior students influenced the behaviour or attitude of the junior students through ragging. In the faculties where L1 is the medium of instruction, those students who are interested to study English as the main subject are discouraged systematically by the seniors. Similarly, in the faculties where English is the medium of instruction, ragging seemed to have some adverse effect on students' learning including classroom interaction. Also, ragging prevents students from getting assistance from lecturers for their comprehension problems. The

findings discussed in this study concerning ragging may have more benefits to the universities not only in Sri Lanka but also in Southeast Asia, which face similar cultural and behavioural problems.

Even though lecturers and administrators are also aware of ragging at SEUSL, they did not have an understanding of the fact that senior students influence junior students' learning using changing their attitude and providing inaccurate notions about lecturers. This is one of the few studies in Sri Lanka to have unearthed the fact that ragging negatively influences the learning of the students by restricting classroom participation, and to my knowledge, no studies in Asia have attempted an investigation along this line. The outcome of the study suggests that future research is needed to investigate further the social and psychological face of ragging. Hence, this study acts as a precursor for a detailed study needed in this area in the future.

## CONSENT

As per international standard or university standard, participant's written consent has been collected and preserved by the author(s).

## COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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