



## RAGGING: A RECURRENT THEME IN MODERN INDIAN CAMPUS NOVELS

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### **Abstract**

*The vibrant tapestry of Indian campus life, as depicted in contemporary literature, holds a dark secret—the persistent presence of ragging. This practice, where seniors subject freshmen to intimidation, humiliation, and sometimes even violence, casts a long shadow on educational institutions, from prestigious IITs to local colleges. Despite legal bans, ragging continues, leaving emotional and psychological scars on its victims. Indian campus novels, a growing genre, tackle this complex issue head-on. Authors like Chetan Bhagat, Anirban Bose, and Sachin Garg utilize the familiar setting of a college campus to create narratives that resonate with their target audience – students themselves. These novels act as a mirror, reflecting the harsh realities of ragging and its impact on young minds. This paper delves into how these authors navigate the theme of ragging in their popular works. We will explore the various facets of ragging they portray, from the power dynamics at play to the psychological effects on victims. Furthermore, we will analyze how the "campus novel" format serves as a powerful tool for raising awareness and potentially influencing change within educational institutions. This analysis will not only shed light on the portrayal of ragging in literature but also explore its potential role in fostering a more humane and inclusive educational environment.*

**Key words:** Ragging, Hazing, Freshers, Campus Novels

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Definition**

The term "ragging" originally implied lighthearted teasing, intended to help newcomers adjust to their new environment. Seniors who engage in ragging often use this justification. However, the Supreme Court of India has established a much broader definition: "*Ragging is any behavior, verbal or written, that includes teasing, rudeness, or disorderly conduct. It encompasses activities that cause annoyance, hardship, psychological harm, or fear in a new or junior student. Additionally, it can create feelings of shame or embarrassment, ultimately impacting their well-being.*" This definition clearly highlights the negative aspects of ragging, including rudeness, indiscipline, fear, and emotional distress. It emphasizes that these actions, often disguised as fun or a way to get to know newcomers, can cause significant harm. (Vikas)

### **1.2. History of Ragging**

A 2007 research report by Harsh Agarwal (CURE) and Michael Britton highlights the universality of hazing practices. Terms like "ragging," "hazing," "fagging," and "pledging" all describe the same phenomenon – the often brutal welcoming of newcomers into a group. The report traces the possible origins of this practice back to 7th or 8th century Greece, where athletes endured humiliation and teasing to build team spirit. Over time, this practice morphed and was adopted by military forces, eventually entering educational systems.

In the 18th century U.S., student organizations emerged, and rudimentary hazing practices existed. The first recorded hazing death occurred at Cornell University in 1873. World War I significantly impacted hazing. Soldiers returning to college brought back harsher methods learned in military camps. As fewer veterans enrolled, these practices were passed on to others who may not have understood their original purpose, leading to a more brutal and dangerous form of hazing.

Today, ragging is a global issue. Many countries have outlawed it due to the humiliation (mental and physical), servitude to seniors, and overall negative impact it has on new students. These



practices can lead to discouragement, depression, and even suicide. Consequently, many countries are implementing stricter laws to punish perpetrators. Places like Canada and Japan have reportedly eradicated ragging entirely.

### **1.3 Ragging in Indian context**

The practice known as "ragging" has become entrenched in Indian educational institutions. While it may have originated from lighthearted pranks by seniors welcoming newcomers in some European universities, the practice in India has become far more severe. A committee formed by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) under Dr. Raghavan, following a Supreme Court directive, found that 'medical colleges are the worst offenders of ragging in India'.

Almost all professional colleges, country's premier institutions like IITs, IIMs and reputed schools have become fatal arenas for this brutal act of ragging. Many untoward incidents have been reported from different parts of the country. To quote Dr. Raghavan committee report- "In Bhagalpur, an altercation over ragging is reported to have led to bomb-blasts.. Mukesh of Andhra Pradesh was sexually assaulted during ragging and his mother could not bear the ignominy leading to her suicide... A Naga medical student was found hanging in his hostel room at his institute in Imphal after he had been ragged... Stripping and branding of junior students has been reported from Gujarat Vidyapeeth, ironically, an institution founded on Mahatma Gandhi's call... Girl students of Viswa Bharati at Santiniketan allegedly forced a junior to undergo group sex. The Committee was informed that in July-August, 2003, in IIT, Delhi over a hundred 'freshers' were stripped naked and paraded through the corridors of its 'Kumaon' Hostel". The report clearly explicate that ragging is prevalent in India in its full extent,

where a few educational institutes across the country are exceptions. These are a few reported examples whereas many other incidents of ragging might not have seen light because of various reasons, but they are happening repeatedly in many forms and at different places.

Nearly all professional colleges and prestigious institutions like the IITs, IIMs, and renowned schools have tragically become breeding grounds for the heinous practice of ragging. Numerous disturbing incidents have been documented across various regions of the country. For instance, the Dr. Raghavan Committee's report highlights appalling instances such as an altercation over ragging in Bhagalpur resulting in bomb blasts, the sexual assault of Mukesh from Andhra Pradesh during a ragging incident leading to his mother's tragic suicide, and the tragic suicide of a Naga medical student in Imphal following ragging. Additionally, incidents of stripping and branding of junior students have been reported from Gujarat Vidyapeeth, despite its association with Mahatma Gandhi's principles. Shockingly, reports even detail allegations of forcing a junior student into group sex at Viswa Bharati in Santiniketan. These scary stories show how widespread ragging is in India. Almost all schools and colleges have this problem, except for a very few. These are just a few cases that get reported, there are probably many more that no one hears about. It's clear that ragging is still happening everywhere in India, in many different ways, and it keeps hurting people.

Some colleges in India, like the IITs and Birla Institute of Technology and Science, have cracked down on ragging and it seems to be working. But an anti-ragging group called SAVE says ragging is still a big problem, especially in engineering colleges and hostels. In fact, a study found that India and Sri Lanka are the only countries where ragging is really common.

Today, the phenomenon of ragging has entrenched itself deeply within the framework of Indian education. Originating from certain European universities where seniors engaged in playful pranks to welcome newcomers, this practice has now escalated to alarming levels. According to findings from the Dr. Raghavan Committee, established by the Indian Union Human Resource Development ministry under the directive of the Supreme Court of India, "medical colleges are the worst affected in India."

Almost every professional college, including prestigious institutions like IITs, IIMs, and renowned schools, has become a dangerous battleground for this vicious form of hazing. Numerous



distressing incidents have been documented across the country. The Dr. Raghavan committee's report highlights some chilling examples: "In Bhagalpur, a dispute arising from ragging reportedly resulted in bomb blasts... In Andhra Pradesh, Mukesh was subjected to sexual assault during a ragging incident, leading to his mother's tragic suicide... In Imphal, a Naga medical student was discovered hanging in his hostel room after being subjected to ragging... Instances of stripping and branding of junior students have been reported from Gujarat Vidyapeeth, ironically, an institution founded on Mahatma Gandhi's principles... At Viswa Bharati in Santiniketan, female students allegedly coerced a junior into participating in group sex. The Committee received reports that in July-August 2003, over a hundred 'freshers' were stripped naked and paraded through the corridors of the 'Kumaon' Hostel at IIT Delhi." These accounts unequivocally demonstrate the widespread prevalence of ragging in India, with only a few educational institutions standing as exceptions.

Over time, several colleges, such as Birla Institute of Technology and Science and certain IITs, have implemented strict bans on ragging, yielding positive results. However, the Anti-Ragging NGO, Society Against Violence in Education (SAVE), has warned that ragging remains alarmingly pervasive, particularly in engineering and other institutions, primarily within hostel environments. Indeed, research conducted by the Coalition to Uproot Ragging from Education (CURE) indicates that India and Sri Lanka are the sole countries where ragging persists to a significant extent.

## 2. RAGGING PORTRAYED IN INDIAN CAMPUS NOVELS

Campus novels, which mirror college life, frequently feature ragging alongside subjects like dorm life, peculiar professors, and student hardships. The genre addresses the darker side of ragging in addition to the obvious joyful pranks. Beyond academics, these novels delve into the fun, friendships, heartbreaks, and social issues faced by young adults. Ragging, campus politics, and evolving friendships become part of the rich tapestry woven by campus novels. The paper presents ragging as depicted in three selected novels like *Five Point Someone* by Chetan Bhagat, *Bombay Rains Bombay Girls* by Anirban Bose and *A Sunny Shady Life* by Sachin Garg which tried to describe campus life in the country's reputed premier institutions. They have some similar approach in the depiction of Ragging.

### 2.1 *Bombay Rains Bombay Girls*

The general study of Ragging shows that out of all professional colleges, medical colleges are more prone to ragging. Anirban Bose, being a doctor chronicles his own experience at a medical college in the novel *Bombay Rains Bombay Girls*. Anirban Bose worked as Assistant Professor of Medicine and Nephrology at the University of Rochester till he returned to India to join the Rabindranath Tagore Institute of Cardiac Sciences, Kolkata, as a consultant Nephrologist. One can even guess some auto-biographical element in this connection. Some parts of the book deal with ragging, but it mainly focuses on love, heartbreak and friendship.

His debut novel begins at Adi, a small town 18 yr old youth, gets admitted in Bombay's Grant Medical College and Sir JJ group of Hospitals. He reaches there along with his father and is overjoyed upon landing in the city for the first time to study medicine from Ranchi. His self-contended and disciplined father is very much worried about him, and his studying alone in a city like Mumbai. Being counseled by his worrying father, Adi sets off his study of medicine in a very positive spirit.

His introduction to the other mates Harsha, Rajeev and Toshi takes place at men's hostel dormitory, a place infamous for ragging. These four 'freshies' have been placed in the center of the room rounded by group of seniors at midnight. The author Anirban is right when he describes 'the placid hostel buildings of fraternal bonhomie of the day undergo a Jackyllian transformation with the ragging during nights' (Bose 24). Pheru, the one who stuck in second year MBBS for the last four years, a notorious 'ragger-extraordinaire' takes the lead. He calls the 'freshies' one by one and makes fun of their names, hobbies and interests. He mocks over the names and uses filthy words like



Cockroach for Varoach and other words like cock's play and he links masturbation with Newton's laws to the delight of other seniors. This very act of obscenity creates in the young minds of juniors a feeling of hatred instead of love and respect for their seniors. One of the freshers, heavily- accented Jat from Haryana, Harsha is questioned regarding his virginity. Pheru proudly announces here in this context that nobody in the hostel is a virgin. Later, Harsha is asked to masturbate in public by visualizing Princess Diana by his side. The next turn goes to Toshi from Nagaland. Pheru intentionally makes mockery over Toshi's language and calls it Ching-chang. Even the name Adityaman Bhat, (another fresher, the protagonist) he utters it as 'I-did-it-a man's – butt' for fun. When Toshi and Adi confess that they are not virgins, they entrusted the job of teaching masturbation to Harsha who has proved to be a virgin. Then the seniors play a porno video, all the three juniors have to make a role-play imitating the movie. Thus, they have borne with the sadomasochistic ritual without making any protest. The humiliation they have undergone in the episode results in developing strong hatred against seniors especially on Pheru (Bose 36).

As Anirban says, the victims of the day curse the custom with helpless rage only to turn into major proponents the following year. These 'victim –turned- aggressors' will be baying for their share of fresh blood (Bose 24). Really, they take avenger on their juniors when they assume the role of seniors in the forthcoming years. They are even forgetting the agony they have experienced in the previous years and resort to ragging, and try many new, creative and frightening tricks on the freshers. Hence, the chain of ragging remains unending forever in academic institutions.

## 2.2 Five Point Someone

Chetan Bhagat is the renowned author of *Five Point Someone* and the other best-seller novels. His novel has been adapted into a major Bollywood movie 'Three Idiots'. He has quit his international investment banking career in 2009 to devote his entire time for writing. The novel opens up with a ragging scene in one of the most prestigious institutes of India, IIT Delhi. The three freshers Hari Kumar, Alok Gupta and Ryan Oberoi of Mechanical Engineering happen to introduce one another and one by one to their seniors at midnight as per the tradition for the first time. By the time they wake up at midnight, they are found rounded by seniors, a lungi-clad Baku being the leader of three member raggers group. "Off your clothes" is the immediate command from the raggers after knowing their names. It is the juniors turn to obey the order. Seniors enjoy the nakedness of the juniors laughing, smoking and commenting the shapes of naked bodies. Later, they are asked to bend down on all fours and participate in a naked cow race using empty coke bottles in indecent gestures (Bhagat 4). The seniors enjoy the episode calling them as 'Farex babies' while the victims request them to relieve them from this indecent event. Bhagat has aptly named this episode 'Bare Beginnings.'

At that moment Ryan got impatient and grabs the bottles from Baku and stamps him on the feet while other two are bearing the humiliation silently. The seniors have never expected such a retort and the fight runs for some time till the seniors flee from the hostel after giving a serious warning. Alok and Hari thank Ryan for his bold reply to seniors (Bhagat 6). The bond of friendship starts and develops with the incident among the three. Thereafter, the three boys become chaddi-buddies for the rest of their life and they take every major and minor jolt of life together.

In this context, to quote the Management Guru, Arindam Chaudhary who writes about his IIT Delhi friends "Well, their first months in IIT were traumatic to say the least. They would cry in front of me. They couldn't take in the humiliation of ragging. The humiliation of being stripped totally naked and being made to run around the IIT Delhi campus... The engineering and medical colleges of India are the havens of the worst possible ragging in this country".

Further, the personal experience of Sujit Saraf, a California-based filmmaker and playwright, an alumni of IIT-Delhi between 1987 and '92, reveals: "we crawled on all fours and barked like dogs; we brought cigarettes and Campa Cola for our seniors; we cleaned their rooms; we dropped our



trousers so they could measure our penises; we formed human trains — each car holding the penis of the car in front — and whistled our way through hostel corridors; we simulated orgies; stripped naked”.

If we scrutinize these personal experiences, we can conclude that Chetan Bhagat has presented a very realistic picture of ragging in the novel. The characters in the novel are real embodiments of characters from different backgrounds and diverse mindsets and social strata. They also bear the strains of humiliation they have undergone in educational institutes in the name of ragging. The emotional disturbance and agony they come across in a new college environment, the attitude differences in facing ragging as teenagers is painted by the author well in this context.

### **2.3 A Sunny Shady Life**

Sachin Garg presents ragging in the initial chapters called “Opening Innings” in his novel *A Sunny Shady Life*. It is a story located at Delhi College of Engineering. Sunny Singh, a guy who has lost his parents at young age and has experience in hostel life for fifteen years comes across seniors at Mech Cant i.e. canteen. Rumi, the senior boy accompanied by two girls approaches Sunny. He directly asks Sunny to find out the hotter girl between the two. Sunny is not in a mood to provoke any senior. So he points the fairer girl with unkempt hair as his reply.

Then the task given to Sunny is to propose her in public in the most creative manner. Creative sunny accepts it as a challenge and tries to use the given short time. Immediately, he picks up two sea shells with white glossy surfaces and arranges them in the shape of heart and wrapped red tape all over it. He stands before the girl on the knees and holds her hand. Then he hands it over to the girl. Sunny is successful in making her impressed with his short notes each time she unfolds a layer of the pack. Everybody shriek in excitement. He shakes hands with the girl and other seniors. Sunny, on that first sight and right on the spot, falls in love with the senior girl, Vartika. Rumi, the senior then ends the ritual by making a speech to juniors (Garg 14).

The incident of ragging has had its influence on Sunny’s life. It has given him a scope to build a bond of love with the girl. They continue the bond till the end of the novel except a short breakup in the last part of the novel but the reunion takes place in the end. Ragging has its positive effect on sunny which is a rare case. One cannot expect same to happen in all other cases because very often such incidents have the adverse outcomes.

## **3. CONCLUSION**

Despite regulations from the UGC and AICTE, and existing anti-ragging laws, the practice persists in many educational institutions. Government and NGO awareness campaigns haven't fully eradicated the issue. However, the three novelists discussed in this paper, with a strong sense of social responsibility, have effectively addressed ragging in their novels, reaching the student community. Chetan Bhagat's novel, *Five Point Someone*, with its clear and catchy title "What Not to Do at IIT," exemplifies this approach of using literature to spread a message.

Campus novels frequently explore the theme of ragging. While Chetan Bhagat and Anirban Bose share some similarities in their portrayal, Sachin Garg takes a distinct approach. Ragging is typically introduced in the novels' opening chapters, reflecting its prevalence during college freshmen's orientation. These authors, though not categorized as serious literature or traditionally trained novelists, have achieved immense popularity. Their success lies in capturing the authentic experiences of students on campus. Their novels resonate with a wide, youthful audience because they mirror real-life situations, making them both best-selling and award-winning.

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