

Some Experiments on Resolving Problems through Relationship rather than Punishment

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Some ragging incidents occurred last year at a premier engineering institution in Hyderabad. The events, underlying efforts and their handling have changed the institution in a major way..

First year undergraduate students arrived at the campus of the institution on 10th July 2006. Senior students arrived 3 -4 days later. Mentor teams of selected senior students were already formed to guide and help the new students, with a mentor attached to every 6 – 7 new students. As part of the academic curriculum, the new students were undergoing a week long intense workshop on Jeevan Vidya to explore their life goals, relationships in family, harmony in society and nature. There were no other classes at this time.

Some 2nd year undergraduate (UG2) students took an initiative against ragging and started organizing open introduction sessions every evening at 9 pm where new students could meet old students and display talent. These were held in an amicable environment, on which some senior students remarked that the senior students are also performing in front of juniors (We are being ragged!)

Information was received on 15th July that some cases of ragging have taken place and that UG1 are afraid of going to one of the student hostels. Immediately discussions were held in the Jeevan Vidya workshops on how to deal with ragging or rude behaviour of seniors. Whether to follow what you are asked to do. Besides this, the Director, Dean (Academics) and Chairman of Student Life Committee (equivalent to Dean of Students) addressed students of UG2 that evening, and UG3 and UG4 in their hostel that night. Ragging was defined to be equivalent to humiliation, and it was clarified that there is no fuzzy dividing line between interaction and ragging, the line is very sharp. When you humiliate a new entrant it is ragging, and you know it ! The degree of ragging could be black, blacker or blackest, but that is needed to determine the punishment. It is ragging all the same. Dos' and Don'ts' were also distributed to the students.

The mentor network reported the next day 16th July that there have been cases of more ragging. Formals written complaints were filed by some the UG1 (new students) with the help of mentor network. The Disciplinary Committee(DC) met the same day (on a Sunday) and started the proceedings/hearings. DC gave the verdict on 20th July as a result of which five UG2 students were punished (mildly) that they would have to

give a written apology and that they would not be eligible for any teaching or research assistantship, or be a student representative for two years and that they would be denied placement services of the Institute. Parents of three other UG3 students were called to the Institute.

This set off an interesting chain reaction. The batch of UG2 felt that one of the five students who is a popular student would not have indulged in any serious ragging, and the punishment meted out was harsh. The batch decided that not just those five, but the entire batch would give an apology, and if interaction with new students is called ragging, the entire batch would stop talking henceforth to the new students.

This creates a situation where the punishment totally fails to bring about any long term change. The batch feels that no wrong has been done by the students, and authorities are unduly being harsh. It creates a cleavage between the batches, as well

Students in the mentor network approached and said that one of the five students should be let off as his role was very minor. Then the request came that all five should be let off. The discussion led to a proposal that if the entire UG2 batch were to take the responsibility of good behaviour of these five students and also the “responsibility” of no ragging this year and next year, then the punishment would be withdrawn. This was discussed again the next day on 21st July with about 80 students of the batch in an open meeting. It was mentioned that to stop ragging next year, it would be important to have strong relations with the new students (current UG1) because they might think of indulging in ragging a year later. This was accepted by everybody present and the punishment was withdrawn. This defused the sense of opposition and, hopefully, guided the students in thinking in the right direction.

The parents of the three UG3 students had arrived by now and had discussions with Disciplinary Committee (DC). On 22nd July evening, the punishment of suspension for a semester was given. This sent a shock wave, as it was perhaps widely perceived that the punishment was much too harsh for ragging acts which were not that severe. After all, no physical harm was done, at worst it was verbal abuse.

The parents of the three students met the Director on 22nd July at 9 pm for a meeting that lasted for about 3 hours. The parents deplored the acts of their sons but felt that the punishment was much too harsh. At this an offer was made that the punishment would be withdrawn and instead they should go and work in an NGO for a semester. This will give them exposure to larger aspects of life and give time for self-reflection. There was discussion on whether they could work in a local NGO and also attend classes at the same time, otherwise they would lose a semester. Reply was given that since this is an opportunity for reform rather than a

punishment, institution would provide all help so that the students can finish within the normal period of 4 years. When they spend time at the NGO, they could study two courses of Humanities and Social Science under suitable faculty there, which are a normal part of academic requirements. However, it was pointed out that it is necessary to go out of campus for the change to be effective. The institution will bear all the normal cost of board and lodging, etc. at the NGO, as this is not a punishment. Institution would also help in identification of NGO, and an NGO at Mussoorie was ready, and had the capability to teach HSS courses.

The next day 23rd July an open meeting was held with 100 UG3 students at 8 pm who felt that severe punishment should not be given. Along with them had come, UG1 students who were victims of ragging. They also said that such harsh punishment should not be given. It was mentioned to them that it is not a punishment at all but an opportunity. It is compulsory, however, just as data structures course is compulsory, to ensure learning. The UG3 students then said that they are also willing to take the responsibility of their three friends just as in the case of UG2. It was told to them that the two situations are dissimilar and for things to be effective, it would be important for the three students to be out of campus.

After this a meeting was held with the parents again where it was emphasized that this is an opportunity for change. However, it would be effective only if they sent their children with the right frame of mind. The meeting ended around 10 pm.

The three students came and met the Director the next day. By then, almost all the parents had left. It is significant that two of them said that they are going with a positive mind because the Director has said it is not a punishment. They are now looking forward to this as an opportunity. The third student was silent and clearly disagreed, his eyes said so.

This set off a larger debate on what is the institutional culture. Is it based on relationships or one upmanship? Is it one of abusive language or normal language? One forms deep bonds while living together with friends, but are we caring about each other's feelings. Two open panel discussions were organized by the students on institutional culture.

Weekly discussions with UG1 students on various aspects of life continued to be held as part of Human Values course. These take place in small groups with 20 students to a faculty member.

The incidents generated turmoil. There was a feeling of unhappiness in UG3 that three of their batch mates had to go away for a semester. But it did not create a strong feeling of opposition because instead of

punishment a path of relationship was chosen at every opportunity by all the parties including the students, faculty and the authorities.

Epilogue

The three students of UG3 spent a semester at SIDH at Mussoorie. There they participated in teaching in a rural school, living with dedicated people, interacting with visiting youth, carrying out readings and discussions in two HSS courses, and attending Jeevan Vidya workshop.

They returned to the institution in November 2006 with a new vision of life, and a desire to bring about a positive change in their family and friends, and the overall institute culture. They have become more regular in their daily routine, taking better care of their body, more focused in their studies, and more aware of their relationships. They, in fact, feel that the people around them are living a life in which they are not ware of themselves or their larger surroundings. They are living with many “assumptions” as they say. They have an intense desire to tell their close friends all that they have experienced and known in the past few months and bring about a change. But soon after returning they realized that it is not easy to share such insights. Friends might say you have been brainwashed. So they have settled to a normal life, in which things would be conveyed through actions rather than words. The friends are already amazed at what they are seeing.

A visible difference after they arrived back is the way the Felicity’ 07 (a youth cultural festival) was conducted. It had a lot richer content in all aspects – including music, dance and drama. There was also the presence of a street theatre group from Delhi called Jamghat.

A positive change is underway, and it is hoped that next year there will be truly “zero” ragging. On the contrary, a “red carpet” welcome group might get set up where in the newcomers would be welcomed and helped as if new members are joining a family.

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Appendix

Dynamics of Ragging

This describes the environment in which ragging takes place.

1. Many students feel that to know a new person, ragging is alright. (They are ignorant that there can be other better ways to interact and know a person.)
2. Many people feel that there is a limit above which their teasing actions and bad behaviour towards new students is ragging, and that they would stay within limit. (It is important to convey to people that ragging means humiliation. Even a word uttered to humiliate a new person in that situation is ragging. The person doing it knows it, so there is no grey area above which it is ragging and below which is not ragging.)

One can talk about black, blacker and blackest ragging as regards punishment,

but it is ragging all the same. Most students do not realize the above, some faculty members also sympathise and the wide spread beliefs like these provides acceptance of the menace.)

3. Some students believe that ragging is necessary to bring out cultural or other talents among new students. They say that only when forced, new students sing, etc. otherwise they are inhibited. (They are simply not being creative enough to bring out talent among people without humiliating them.)
4. There are only a few students who have a complex of some kind and they take sadistic pleasure out of ragging. (However, in the prevailing atmosphere of laxness, they are able to get away with the blackest kind of ragging.)

Dynamics of Punishment after Ragging:

After a case of ragging is caught the following dynamics gets into motion:

- (a) Disciplinary committee and some faculty members feel that after all it is just a small incident. They think that the incident of ragging was after all not that severe, for example, only verbal humiliation was done. And that

the punishment would affect the life of the students who ragged or that institution name would be sullied. So the students who ragged are let off mildly.

- (b) In cases, where a punishment is given, it does not have a lasting effect, but only a temporary one. A small set of students who are punished are affected directly. The larger mass, particularly the batch of the affected students, feel that a punishment is given to the entire batch unless the ragging incident is seen to be extremely severe. This creates a feeling of solidarity in the batch. It also creates a division between this batch and the batch of new students. The net result is that there is no remorse, and the ragging continues year after year unabated.

What is the Answer?

1. There is a need to introduce and build human values as part of education. It would mean incorporating them in academic curriculum with **ALL** the teachers participating in it along with the students.
2. Introduce activities through which students learn to manage their own affairs. This would inculcate a sense of responsibility and enhance awareness about their surroundings.
3. Any incidents of ragging are handled through relationships rather than punishment. This would mean involving other students. Hopefully, this will lead to engaging students in a long term dialogue on the ultimate culture in the hostel and the institution.

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