

## Ban on ‘Ragging’

Despite its seemingly innocuous connotations, “ragging” has come to denote a dreaded rite of passage that newly inducted students, especially those admitted to residential institutes of higher education, necessarily undergo. That ragging cannot be merely dismissed as simply “fun” is evident from narratives to the contrary and also the clear visibility of the police, as a preventive measure against ragging, at the beginning of every new academic term in several colleges and universities. Ragging as an accepted practice was fostered primarily in the military schools of a rapidly aggrandising Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries. Filled with notions of defending a nation and then empire, the military had to be a unit, tightly bound by ties of fraternity and loyalty.

It is a practice, however, that is now widely seen as cruel and for its victims especially, humiliating. In the last decade, several measures have been instituted to ban the practice in higher educational institutes. Tamil Nadu became the first state in 1997 to ban ragging when it enacted the Prohibition of Ragging Act. A year later the Kerala assembly passed a legislation banning ragging and Maharashtra followed suit in 1999. The former legislation also stipulated punishment for those guilty of ragging, including a two-year prison term and a fine, as well as suspension in the more extreme cases. Both these acts, as well as the Supreme Court guidelines delivered in 2001, offered broadly similar definitions of ragging: “Disorderly” conduct or “rowdy, indisciplined activity” that caused “annoyance, fear and apprehension in a fresher or junior student”. The apex court also directed institutions to constitute a proctorial committee at the commencement of an academic session to keep a watch over ragging and deal severely with the guilty. The punishment, the court suggested, could include the student’s expulsion or suspension from the institution, while the latter, for its failure, could even be denied

financial aid by the University Grants Commission. Several states have since passed circulars banning ragging, but it continues to be resilient. In most instances, institutes either deny the occurrence or incidence of ragging, do not report it to state agencies such as the police or a higher governing body, or otherwise appear unwilling to take action against the guilty.

The recently submitted report of the seven-member Raghavan Committee set up in November 2006 by the union human resource development ministry following directives from the apex court has recommended a comprehensive law to check ragging, one that would enforce accountability on educational institutions. It also recommended changes to the Indian Penal Code, as conviction rates in ragging cases have been low. On May 16, the Supreme Court directed all higher educational institutions to implement most of the recommendations of the Raghavan Committee: Imposition of exemplary punishment on students indulging in ragging, as also the mandatory filing of a First Information Report in instances where victims or their guardians have been unsatisfied with action taken. Delay in filing an FIR on the institute’s part could automatically lead to denial of accreditation or access to financial grants. The court also recommended that ragging cases be tried on the fast track so as to avoid impeding the students’ academic schedule.

Legal strictures notwithstanding, for the student in a new academic phase of her/his life, the necessity of “induction” remains, but perhaps needs to be redefined in a changing, transient world. But the challenge for college managements in India to redefine induction is a complicated one, intermeshed as this is with the many political necessities that govern educational institutions. By the varied admission procedures institutes choose to adopt, students perforce have to take on an identity, one based on community and caste – a factor that arguably plays a role in shaping student interaction. The electronic world, for its part, allows for student interactions and networks but these come with their attendant constraints. College managements must seek the necessary balance – to bridge difference and also foster an alumni spirit among the students. **EW**