

Helplessness of Anti-ragging Helpline Number (1800-180-5522)

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It will be shocking to know that there are perhaps more digits (11 in total) in this national anti-ragging helpline number than the number of ragging complaints on which helpline system has achieved any success in last thirteen months. And if we talk of the colossal publicity that this helpline received and the tremendous hope it generated then there is no comparison with the little or no utility that this number has shown so far. Or this may be my illusion. But what can I do, I have read so many media stories on how this helpline would help eradicate ragging, but I am yet to come across even a single success story. And on top of it helpline people never share their internal information with us citing confidentiality as the reason. Confidentiality in helpline- Strange isn't? If everything is going well as it was anticipated, then I don't understand the reason to hide anything especially from a voluntary group which is pioneer in anti-ragging campaign in India and running it for almost 10 years now.

Just to make things clear, I am not opposed to the idea of running an anti-ragging helpline. Anti-ragging helpline is indeed important for students who wish to report the incident but do not know where to complain. However I am vehemently against excessive expectation from this helpline number. We are treating helpline number as if it is elixir to the problem of ragging. I wonder if social problems could be solved so easily by starting helpline numbers then India would have got rid of dowry, caste discrimination, and several other social maladies long ago simply by starting helpline numbers.

What is disappointing is that we have suddenly transferred the entire burden of the anti-ragging campaign on this helpline number. We don't see it as merely one of the ways of lodging complaint against ragging but as a cure to ragging. Our too much optimism from this helpline would only lead us to disappointment. And I am saying this because our hope is based on a fundamentally flawed assumption that ragging victims have the

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courage to register complaint Here we are ignoring the immense role of fear involved in ragging and the pressure on students to anyhow survive in college as the stakes are very high- in term of getting admission and money and hard work invested on it.

If I recall my days in medical college, which I left 10 years ago because of ragging, I remember I didn't share my torturous ragging episodes even with my parents for a month. I was afraid if my parents went and complained to the principal, what will be the consequences. And re-imagining the terror that I lived with during ragging day, I can say that 999 out of one thousand freshers in that situation would prefer to endure the torture and take injury on their body than think of lodging any complaint. The terror of ragging is so severe and the fear of consequences of complaining so threatening that the victim doesn't want to confide the ordeal to anyone. If there is anything that can support my argument then there is nothing better than the revelation made by the government itself. This year in March, government on the floor of the parliament, admitted that helpline received 1.6 lakh calls but could register only 300 complaints. This skewed ratio might be surprising to many. However if we think little practically and understand the fear that a ragging victim has in giving sufficient information (name, name of the college, name of seniors, etc.) to lodge a complaint then we can easily understand why several thousand calls could not be registered as complaints.

The reason for my dissatisfaction is therefore simple. In May 2007 when Raghavan Committee made exhaustive recommendations to address ragging, I was extremely happy. I was full of hope because the committee had recognized all different aspects behind ragging- sociological, psychological and law and order aspect- and suggested appropriate remedies to cure them. But today we don't know the fate of those 50 odd recommendations that were made in the report after so much deliberation? Today from media reports we hear only about the technical problems that helpline is facing and how we are busy solving them. It seems that our focus on helpline is paramount and we are fighting the entire battle against ragging with this 11 digit number.

Our focus on the battle is lost so much so that recently even the news that 19 students died because of ragging in last one year, didn't make national headlines; Even news of Nayan Adak who 10 months ago tried twice to commit suicide because of ragging and died in the second attempt- the most shocking suicide case I have heard in my life- didn't make national headlines. Are we too busy rectifying the helpline? Sigh!

I am deeply saddened. Since my ragging in 2000 till now, 10 years have passed and 2 committees formed but we achieved only a defunct anti-ragging helpline. I really don't know when would we finally dial the right number to solve the menace of ragging? Is there a helpline for that?

(Harsh Agarwal is a Co-founder of Coalition to Uproot Ragging from Education (CURE, Estd in 2001) and a former Consultant to Supreme Court of India –appointed Committee on Ragging)