

Bangalore Times

Bengaluru's student unions: All for one, one for all

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Student unions are a vibrant and vital part of college campuses in Bengaluru. Election season on campus is electric, and post the polls, councils have a jam-packed schedule of conducting and participating in fests, addressing grievances in and outside campus and more. As part of Bangalore Times' Get Inclusive campaign, Rony Rajan Oonnoony, cultural secretary of Kristu Jayanti College, Shwetha Menon, vice president of Mount Carmel College (MCC), K Rebecca Raj, vice president of Jyoti Nivas College (JNC), Shreyas Sharma, treasurer of St. Joseph's College (SJC) and Ashutosh A Kumar, head of the organising committee at Jain (Deemed-to-be) University, engaged in a discussion about the student unions' contribution to creating an inclusive campus space for peers.

'THERE'S INCLUSIVITY BETWEEN STUDENT BODIES FROM DIFFERENT COLLEGES'

Shwetha: The bond between student bodies from other colleges usually begins at the investiture ceremony, where we invite student unions from other colleges.

Shreyas: We visit each other's colleges often and invite them personally for our events and fests. This allows us to have a friendly rapport and it makes them comfortable when they visit our campus.

Ashutosh: During college fest season, the friendly bond between colleges often is very evident. While the competitive spirit remains, the bond remains unshakable. We are often supportive of each other and don't let rivalry get in the way.

'HIERARCHY DOES NOT MAKE US UNAPPROACHABLE'

Shreyas: Most student unions have a six-member council with a president, vice president, and so on. If it is a cultural event-related query, it is raised with the cultural secretary. However, if someone is unaware of who to reach out to, we lead them to the right person. The hierarchy creates an order in the student union, but it does not make us unapproachable to fellow students.

Rebecca: At JNC, the different designations are more known within the union. To students, we are just known as student union members.

REPRESENTATION IN STUDENT COUNCILS

Shreyas: In our college, the vice president's post is always reserved for girls. In general, any student can stand for any post during our council elections, including the year students as well.

Ashutosh: We don't have reserved posts, and students are chosen purely on talent. Anyone who has the required capabilities can contest the elections.

Rony: At Kristu Jayanti College, students are nominated by teachers and peers on the basis of their academic merit and prowess. The students-in-charge work in tandem with teachers and the administration.

TACKLING ISSUES THAT ARISE OUTSIDE COLLEGE PREMISES

Shwetha: Several students approach council members with incidents of bullying outside college. When such complaints come to us, we go to the place

where the incident took place, look at the CCTV footage and, if need be, approach the cops. It's a long process, but we take necessary action and ensure that the issue is resolved.

Rony: We have an anti-riot committee on campus. If anyone feels uncomfortable or needs help, they can get in touch with the members of the anti-riot committee and action is taken immediately. There haven't been any issues in the past, but having a committee like this helps.

Shreyas: At SJC, we have a counselling cell, where a psychology lecturer is present at all times. If any student feels low or just needs to speak to anyone, they can always approach the cell. The college also has a medical team on campus for any sort of emergencies. At any given point, students shouldn't feel that they cannot approach us for help.

'ATTENDANCE IS MOST COMMON ISSUE FACED BY STUDENTS'

Shreyas: When events are conducted during classes, students are unable to participate. This was brought to our notice several times, following which we conducted all intra-college events during break time to ensure maximum participation from students. We keep in touch with class representatives and make sure no student misses out on attendance if they are out participating.

Ashutosh: Since many of us go to different colleges to participate in fests, maintaining attendance is a constant issue. At Jain College, we introduced a method called the Pink Slip — through which students can register attendance online — to keep a track of our attendance, which has made the process simpler.

'WE SEE NO DIFFERENCE IN INDIVIDUALS BASED ON GENDER'

Shreyas: When it comes to equal representation and industry, we don't have any bias based on gender. We have conducted rallies and seminars in our college to lend support to the LGBTQIA+ community. We've also had representatives from the queer community talk to the students and faculty members.

Shwetha: Even before last year's historic Section 377 judgement, it has been all about acceptance at MCC. When we've had panel discussions, we always have a member from the queer community representing them, so that their point of view is heard. This is to ensure that members of the community feel represented.

STUDENT UNION GOVERNANCE AND POLITICS

Shreyas: When we contest elections, we have to sign a document that says we are not associated with any political party and that the elections are held in a democratic fashion.

Ashutosh: In the past, one or two seniors have shown interest in the field of politics after graduation. As a policy, our college doesn't support any political party. However, we do have in-house debates, so that students are aware of current political issues. Politics in college and outside is very different.

Shwetha: Even if students do not wish to actively take part in politics, there are many who aspire to take up civil services like IAS, IPS and so on.

Rebecca: I think what makes student unions different from political set ups is that we act as mediators between students and the administration, and not like ruling parties.



GET INCLUSIVE
COMMUNITIES ON CAMPUS

AT JAIN COLLEGE, WE INTRODUCED A METHOD CALLED THE PINK SLIP — THROUGH WHICH STUDENTS CAN REGISTER ATTENDANCE ONLINE — TO KEEP A TRACK OF OUR ATTENDANCE WHEN ONE HAS GONE TO OTHER COLLEGE FOR FESTS AND EVENTS. THIS HAS SIMPLIFIED THE PROCESS

— ASHUTOSH A KUMAR, JAIN (DEEMED-TO-BE) UNIVERSITY

WE VISIT EACH OTHER'S COLLEGES OFTEN AND INVITE THEM PERSONALLY FOR OUR EVENTS AND FESTS. THAT ALLOWS US TO HAVE A FRIENDLY RAPPORT AND WHEN STUDENTS VISIT OUR CAMPUS FOR EVENTS AND MORE, IT MAKES THEM COMFORTABLE

— SHREYAS SHARMA, ST. JOSEPH'S COLLEGE

STUDENTS ARE NOMINATED BY TEACHERS AND PEERS ON THE BASIS OF THEIR ACADEMIC MERIT AND PROWESS. THE STUDENTS-IN-CHARGE WORK IN TANDEM WITH THE TEACHERS AND THE ADMINISTRATION THROUGHOUT THE YEAR

— RONY RAJAN OONNOONY, KRISTU JAYANTI COLLEGE

I THINK WHAT MAKES STUDENT UNIONS DIFFERENT FROM OTHER POLITICAL SET UPS IS THAT WE ACT AS MEDIATORS BETWEEN STUDENTS AND THE ADMINISTRATION, AND NOT LIKE A RULING PARTY. WE ARE APPROACHABLE AND IN TOUCH WITH STUDENTS, AND ALWAYS OFFER TO HELP

— K REBECCA RAJ, JYOTI NIVAS COLLEGE

EVEN BEFORE LAST YEAR'S HISTORIC SECTION 377 JUDGEMENT, IT HAS BEEN ALL ABOUT ACCEPTANCE AT MCC. WHEN WE'VE HAD PANEL DISCUSSIONS, WE ALWAYS HAVE A MEMBER FROM THE QUEER COMMUNITY REPRESENTING THEM, SO THAT THEIR POINT OF VIEW IS HEARD

— SHWETHA MENON, MOUNT CARMEL COLLEGE