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The Public Secrets of Malayalam Cinema

By: J Devika

The Hema Committee report on the women in Malayalam cinema has made public what was whispered earlier. The government's limp reaction has revealed the cosy relationship between politics and stardom.

An avalanche of allegations against leading male actors of the Malayalam film industry in the wake of the delayed release of a report on issues faced by women in cinema continues to stun the authorities in Kerala.

The Hema Committee, which submitted its report in December 2019, was set up by the government of Kerala in 2017 under pressure from a newly formed women actors and technicians group in Malayalam cinema, the Women in Cinema Collective. The Collective itself was an outraged response to the atrocious [kidnapping and sexual assault of a female actor](#) which was allegedly planned by a male actor known for his deep and wide influence in the Malayalam cinema industry and outside.

A [redacted version of the report](#) was released in August. The contents are not really new. Besides a growing nexus between male stars, directors, producers, distributors, fan-armies, and forces outside the cinema industry, the committee's report pointed to the appalling ways in which women in Malayalam cinema were discriminated against, exploited, and cheated outright. Most importantly, it highlighted the alarming extent to which sexual harassment and violence were normalised. In a situation in which entry into the film industry seemed to be contingent on giving sexual favours, women's consent became completely meaningless, the report implied. The un-redacted report named many leading male actors, directors, and technicians as directly responsible for many of these violations and as perpetrators of sexual violence. These names were concealed in the released report, which seemingly protected them. But such stories were already circulating as whispers and had travelled as efficiently as news.

Starstruck society

The highly iniquitous structural nature of the Malayalam movie industry was never a secret. Writing on the formation of the WCC in 2017, [social scientist Tara S. Nair](#) noted that the 2000s had a “stunting effect” on the quality of Malayalam cinema, with film-making that was more and more formulaic, “based solely on the assumed prowess of superstars, aided amply by screenplays manufactured to project the ultra-masculine image of male protagonists, seriously impaired the aesthetic and cultural value of cinema in Kerala during this period.” Power in Malayalam cinema became concentrated and “regulated by “sanctions,” overt and covert, issued by associations and unions to punish artists and technicians who “defy” their diktats in speech or action.”

Sexual harassment and violence in Malayalam cinema is pervasive at all levels, and that it is inextricably intertwined with three other kinds of egregious violations, notably, discrimination, exploitation, and retribution.

In the subsequent years, powerful actors have been making a cautious entry into the political field in Kerala, which often prided itself on having stayed away from the depoliticising influence of movie-stardom. Communist parties fielded male film stars as candidates. [Mukesh](#), whose family has roots in the progressive communist cultural mobilisations of the middle decades of the 20th century, became an MLA. (The actor has been [charged of sexual assault](#).) To the utter horror of the WCC and their supporters, [Innocent](#), who repeatedly and publicly denigrated them, was picked to be the ruling Left Democratic Front's candidate for a by-election. This came soon after the controversy around the entry of women of menstruating ages into Sabarimala, in which the WCC had been a [strong cultural ally](#) of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM). [Mammotty](#) and [Mohanlal](#) have consistently conveyed the impression that they are on the side of the Left and the Hindutva Right, respectively. Mohanlal seems to have come close to pulling off a [Pavan-Kalyan-like stunt](#) with his ‘service-oriented’ [organisation building](#).

Not to speak, of course, of the large fan armies of highly insecure, unthinking men that many of these ‘superstars’ possess, who can collectively make or break their critics on social media. Their actions are solely about protecting their star. When the actor [Parvathy Thiruvoth](#) – associated with the WCC – criticised [Mammotty](#) for a misogynistic performance, these fan armies made her life impossible on social media. But when sexual conservatives attacked members of sexual minorities celebrating [Mammotty's](#) ‘progressive’ film [Kaathal](#) (which ostensibly redeems a gay man), they go for the sexual conservatives with a vengeance and force the police to file

cases against them.

Lending heft

Yet the impact of the information from the Hema Committee's report has been, to say the least, unprecedented, to the extent that the most powerful gatekeeping lobbies (masquerading hitherto as 'welfare associations' or even 'trade unions') are reeling. For example, the entire executive committee of AMMA (Association of Malayalam Movie Artistes), controlled by powerful male actors, had to [resign en masse](#). So did the director and scriptwriter [Ranjith](#), from the chair of the state-run Kerala Chalachitra Academy, following allegations of sexual harassment. The anger against the unabashed sexism, misogynistic violence, casteism, and anti-minority flourishes in his movies of the 1990s and after seems to have finally found ample and public release. [Skeletons](#) came tumbling out of the cupboards of even the much-celebrated new generation of Malayalam cinema. All of this has happened through the public discussion on the report.

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What makes the contents of the report, the elements of which were already circulating since long in Kerala as gossip – indeed, from the 1970s, one could claim – so powerful?

A credible answer to this question would require us to set aside the reduction of this moment in the history of Malayalam cinema by substantial sections of the Malayali press to 'yet another #MeToo outburst'.

Not that this description is wrong. Yet it is grievously inadequate. The point is that the public reading of the report's observations seem to differ significantly from the dominant public reading of earlier #MeToo moments – as individual women either seeking justice from or targeting powerful men. In contrast, this #MeToo moment is being taken as the collective voice against the monstrous product of the traditional casteist denigration of the woman in the performing arts, and the culture of impunity that has sprung up around the masculinist ideal of the modern 'genius'. A significant section of the Malayali people hear it as a cry against rampant gender injustice in the system, just as feminists hope out of every #MeToo moment.

This has been made possible due to the Hema Committee's diligent investigation, which has powerfully bolstered this #MeToo moment. The report's properly spelt methodology and the careful collection of evidence transformed what had been consigned hitherto to the sphere of mere gossip and vengeance seeking into credible information. Equally important is the report's persistent effort to show the manner in which sexual harassment and violence in Malayalam cinema is pervasive at all levels, and that it is inextricably intertwined with other kinds of egregious violations: discrimination, exploitation, and retribution.

Not surprisingly, the spate of complaints filed by women workers in cinema in its aftermath are not by leading female actors alone. Nor are they only against leading male actors. They are not confined to just commercial cinema, either. Incidents relatively recent and rather distant have been reported. Women who spoke up earlier against their experience of assault and humiliation have stepped up to complain formally. A sizeable section of the Malayali public believes their pain (if not their truth) and stands with them. On social media, the troll armies of influential actors do not peddle their boorishness with the same impudence as before.

Opportunity squandered?

However, the report seems to have had a curious petrifying effect on both the Kerala government and the ruling CPM. Already facing the accusation that the government delayed the report's release quite unnecessarily for four years and then protected the 'good name' of alleged sexual violators through releasing a redacted version, the government seemed quite befuddled initially about the future course of action towards justice for the aggrieved.

In a style typical of Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan's dispensation, the government promised action through a [special investigation team](#) and encouraged women to complain – even as it refused to act directly on the testimonies made by interviewees before the Hema Committee. It claimed to be on the side of the aggrieved women – even as it did not dismiss [Ranjith](#), allowing him to step down on his own. It continues to [refuse](#) repeated demands that rose from their own constituency, the mainstream, pro-CPM [feminists of Kerala, and others](#), for the resignation of Mukesh from the legislative assembly. The suggestion of implicit conciliatory attempts led by the government, in the form of a [film conclave](#), only generated outrage even amongst avid CPM supporters in the Malayali cultural field. The dominant narrative stays at the level of sexual violence and assault charges faced by prominent actors and actor-politicians

and the government's and party's attempts to dodge them the best they can.

In the general air of high tension the Hema Committee's insight into the fundamentally intertwined nature of the violations women workers face in the Malayalam cinema industry stands totally neglected. The government and the ruling party, both committed to social democracy and socialism, ignore the fact that despite whatever misgivings they may have about specific allegations of sexual assault, the possibility of bringing about deep-penetrating and wide ranging reform in the Malayalam cinema industry is fully open to it.

The CPM has lost much more than it bargained for from the implosion of the male power-centres of Malayalam cinema – its defence of Mukesh will cost it much, indeed. However, addressing labour rights violations in the cinema industry with sincerity and thoroughness can be a way to save face and even gain a better grip over the narrative.

|| The mood of a minor revolution still hangs in the air. The iron is still hot for all of us who desire social change desperately – and the latter, I hope, includes the Kerala government and the CPM. They need to move fast.

Kerala's government must move speedily to ensure minimum (or indeed, fair or living) wages for workers in the poorest paid segments of the film industry; to facilitate the setting up of proper trade union structures that can negotiate wages for actors at different levels of their career; to take strong steps to ensure that basic requirements such as food, water, safe toilets in adequate numbers, rest-spaces, changing rooms, and basic medical care are available to all workers on all shooting sites, near or remote; to make available information about work opportunities in cinema projects through a dedicated website which can receive applications from qualified women workers formally; to make sure that a certain minimum number of women receive work opportunities in every movie project; to take measures to protect the interests of 'banned women workers' who are punished for complaining – all of this, besides adapting the provisions of the [law against sexual harassment at workplaces](#) to suit the fluid nature of cinema workplaces.

The weakest part of the Hema Committee Report is its claim that the Internal Committee (IC) system as required by the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 is not of use in Malayalam cinema industry workplaces. The report suggests comprehensive statute making to end discrimination and exploitation and prevent retribution against women who resist or complain, and a tribunal led by a retired woman district-judge to deal with complaints of sexual harassment and violence in the industry. The tribunal, however, would be a top-down mechanism and hence likely to be less accessible. It may actually erode the already-existing local mechanisms sanctioned by the act for the protection of informal sector women workers, the Local Complaints Committee (LCC). [Althea Women's Collective](#) has proposed that the district-level LCCs should be rejuvenated and enabled to create ICs on film sets, and this should be a necessary condition for granting shooting permission. Setting up the tribunal, if desirable at all, will take time, and women could not be denied legal protection in the meanwhile, making the LCCs appropriate bodies. However, all kinds of violations – sexual harassment and violence, discrimination, exploitation, retribution – need to be remedied simultaneously if the Malayalam cinema industry must be democratised. Without such democratisation, no governmental intervention can work.

At the moment, things look pretty unsettled. The mood of a minor revolution still hangs in the air. The iron is still hot for all of us who desire social change desperately – and the latter, I hope, includes the Kerala government and the CPM. They need to move fast.

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References:

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