**A Brief Report of the**

**Conference on**

**#Metoo Moment in Our Film Industries**

Session 1: #Metoo Moment

Compiled by Vasudha Katju

**Aakriti Rastogi ‘**The Grapevine List – Hindi Film Industry Professionals Post #MeToo’ **(**akriti.miranda@gmail.com)

Aakriti began her presentation by describing her M. Phil research, which involved interviewing entry-level professionals from the Hindi film industry. This work involved understanding their precarity and aspiration. She referenced the ‘grapevine list,’ the informal list of sexual harassers that circulates amongst film industry workers.

Aakriti spoke of how the List of Sexual Harassers in Academia (LOSHA) had contributed to a widespread movement. LOSHA enumerates at a glance. In the case of Bollywood, Tanushree Dutta spilled the secret of harassment. Yet there hasn’t been a list. There is a closed network and a power-driven work culture. There is an absence of a crowdsourced list and the hearsay list is a way of managing daily work. Within Hollywood, the metoo movement challenged studios and brought women together. The metoo journey began in 2006.

In India, Aishwarya Rai received no support when she discussed attacks by Salman Khan. There is a difficult but much-needed discourse today. Radhika Apte and Sonam Kapoor have been voices of support. Metoo arrived in India 2018. But a list has never been attempted. There are names circulating in whisper networks and through grapevines but work culture skips list culture. There is a fear of job loss.

A list of men accused of sexual harassment has been published in Indian Express, this is a list of men who do not have much power.

There has been a shift in the industry’s power dynamics with women coming out, but there may never be a list in the Hindi film industry. Its absence marks the power structures in the hindi film industry. This is a quasi-feudal structure where networks and lineage matter. Now however there are alternates to entry through Instagram and YouTube.

Aakriti reiterated that entry-level workers into the film industry rely on the grapevine list. The information remains within networks and informants need anonymity.

**Chinmayi Sripada**

Chinmayi began by saying that Sandhya Menon tweeted about predators in October. At that time she (Chinmayi) didn’t have the courage to name her own abuser, Mr. Vairamuthu. She had texted his son, who is her friend, and said that she will not have the courage to speak. His son told her that he was sorry for what happened and said that his mother was aware of the incident. Chinmayi said that she has not told Mr. Vairamuthu’s wife anything and therefore she must have seen something.

Vairamuthu turned out to be a serial offender but being part of the DMK, enjoys immense political clout. Most recently, Radha Ravi made derogatory comments about Nayanthara at the release of her own film’s trailer. No one wants to spar with him because he is foul-mouthed.

Film unions are hardly forthcoming as they tend to identify with the industry than with the wronged woman. Even though the dubbing union takes a 10% cut of members’ earnings and uses that money for legal battles, when a member of the dubbing union named Vairamuthu 2-3 years ago, she herself was banned. The union in fact has byelaws that prevent members from going to the courts, media, and police.

Those who complain of harassment are marked and denied work. Chinmayi herself has not got any work in the past four to five months despite her previous work, success and delivering huge hits like ‘96’. Also very few come forward to support the women who name harassers. Chinmayi wondered why others have remained silent. She said that her husband has been a source of immense strength and if she had married some asshole she would have remained silent. She also received support from her parents-in-law. Her mother asked as her not to speak, to support other women but not speak about her own experiences. However she felt that it would be going against her truth to ask others to speak but herself remain silent.

She spoke of slut-shaming that she has faced so persistently that she has stopped feeling ashamed. Periyar was a revolutionary but the DMK today has changed. The twitter exchange between Renuka Shahane and Sudha Krishnamurthy on this exemplifies the nature of slut shaming of women naming their harassers. In fact, a lot of women seem to be engaging in slut-shaming.

Chinmayi strongly feels that women in the industry do need male mentors. She asked - is it wrong to trust and look up to men? She said only Vairamuthu groped her– that is the truth. That only Vairamuthu misbehaved with her, elsewhere she has felt very safe – that is also the truth. It does not mean that she puts down others’ experiences about other men. She wants to look at the people she previously respected, differently. She said that while everyone claims to care for Nirbhaya but not for Nayanthara, Sri Reddy, Chinamayi. People seem to think that they do not deserve respect. She herself, as a divorcee’s daughter, was expected to be extra careful and to put her chastity constantly on display.

While women at least can speak anonymously, men don’t even have the chance to speak about what happens to them, because of homophobia. For transpeople, this is their daily lot. In fact, industry harassment is part of the larger picture. Since she started that twitter thread, hundreds of people tell their stories to her everyday – men, women, transpeople, including children.

She said that there was no ICC anywhere in the film industry. She said that she has been asking for one for six months. She finds that the predators are back on television channels as judges of talent shows in which they had harassed the young women. Where are the ethics in these cases? Due process has failed her and others and where does one go? Now a lot of girls tell her what has happened to them but she does not know what to do with this information.

In Tamil Nadu, whenever anything happens, caste always comes up. She is being seen as a casteist for naming Vairamuthu. At this stage in her career, she does not know if things would change.

**Asha Achy Joseph and Merab Manu, WCC** ‘Braving the Real and Encountering the Reel: Women in Malayalam Cinema’

Asha described how WCC formed in Feb 2017 with a complaint by one of their colleagues. People at this time were talking about sexual harassment but not workplace harassment. The actors’ union did not support the complainant, who then resigned from the association. WCC met the Kerala CM, who appointed a special commission to look into women in cinema.

WCC, in two years, has grown into an entity that is beyond sisters in solidarity – it has grown into a collective. It has all kinds of workers as members. There is a debate on membership. Some women don’t want to join formally. They praise the work of WCC but don’t join. Others want to join. So it now needs to ask itself which ‘we’ they represent and are.

Asha pointed to the various problems in the film industry. One is that of structural lacunae in terms of financing and legality, the other is about labour above and below the line. There is a lack of clarity about what sort of legal entity the film space is: is it a workplace or an industry? There are no laid out definitions and no ownership from the government or any regulatory bodies of the film industry. In many productions houses, there are no contracts, and nowhere to go with complaints. The structural violence in the film industry involves the casting couch (casting calls, casting ‘agencies’, auditions). There is also online harassment and below the line labour.

Female actors often have ambiguous status as workers, on and off screen. They are absent in positions of power and often do have little bargaining power singly or collectively. There are huge wage gaps between the leading heroes and heroines, as the latter are imagined as less important to the film’s success. In terms of their representation in the medium, they only get certain types of roles and different types of roles are assigned after marriage. Mature roles are not thought for or written for women.

In terms of perspective cinema is seen and imagined from a male perspective. Women’s cinema has hardly even emerged. The huge challenge is in reclaiming the language of the camera which is what some of the women like her are doing. It is in this sense that harassment in the cinematic space is quite different. Cinema as art is missing from the definitions of harassment. The love of cinema as an art (not the fame as people proclaim) makes aspiring women actors go through a lot of exploitation. She mentioned the case of an actor who had to go to the producer’s apartment for 2 years. Her case failed to materialize because she could not remember the date of the first rape.

One needs to remember that when it comes to the response to the sexual harassment by the industry, we have to understand access. A senior actor like Dilip is important because a lot of people have taken his help. Also, a lot of capital is invested in him and people do not want him to collapse.

Women are supposed to sacrifice, and that is how they are portrayed in cinema. Women have not fought back, women have to fight back. Privileged or not, they have to fight. But fighting against patriarchy and misogyny is extremely stressful. Women in WCC have developed physical ailments due to stress, as the process of fighting is tiring and time consuming.

WCC is now seeking to build solidarity with other movements in Kerala. In Kerala, there have been five prominent protests by women in the last three years: Pembila Orumai, women showroom workers fighting for the right to sit, private hospital workers fighting for minimum wage, nuns supporting another nun who accused a bishop of rape and Sabarimala. WCC believes that collaboration and strategies are very important to hold hands and go ahead. It gives strength. Solidarity building is the cornerstone of activism and change-making.

**Discussion**

One question was whether there is any ICC in Malayalam film industry and in the Hindi film industry: Asha said there is no such entity and each case requires its own constant struggle as it is difficult to come up with a mediation process. Aakriti: there has been naming and shaming of talent company CEOs but they have not stepped down

Aakriti: what will happen if a list is made? To make a list together, take names, put the list maker on the stand. Why talk of a list: it becomes a place of conversation and reference for people outside of the industry. It would help as a tool to understand the gravity of the situation. Asha: what does reclaiming the language of the cinema result in? Women filmmakers’ efforts to tell a story in the way we experience it has been difficult because this language has been set for 100 years by male artists. It is difficult not to use this grammar and craft and think of a cinematic expression not of the male camera. In india it is very difficult, there is no discourse, no filmmakers.

The Kerala experience: how much solidarity do you see? There is a perception of solidarity.

Session 2: Unions and Struggles

Compiled by Shraddha Chekurer

Meera Sanghamitra, the moderator began the session by asking: along with individuals who spoke up, what kind of organising has been happening? What are the kind of challenges for unionising in the film industry?

**Nirmala M.N.** ‘Selective Deafness, Sexual Harassment and Misogynist Film Union: A Study on Unionization of Female Artists in Indian Film Industry’ - nirmala.msg@gmail.com

Nirmala began by clarifying that the idea of the unionization in the film industry as different from unionization of labour outside which is more for rights. For the film industry it was for facilitating the production process. One of the first to unionize was drivers and then, production assistants who supply food etc to the set. As part of her Ph.D she looked at the unionization in Karnataka, Tamilnadu and Andhra Pradesh.

Each industry has its own history. In Karnataka- shifting the base from madras to Bangalore was the reason for formation of the unions. They began as trade organisations. Till 1960s film studios and companies dominated by entering long term contract with artists, female and male. Gradually, freelance artists impacted the functioning of the industry and wage division.

In the history of unionization, opportunity to work and equal pay are usual concerns. But other issues impact the lower strata of workers. For instance, in the notorious studio fire where 200 junior artists died on the sets of Sword of Tipu Sultan television serial, compensation was paid for less than 60 because claimed that they were on-lookers not artists. Less than one lakh was paid to each after 15 years of fighting. Compensation was paid more to dead men’s families because it thought of that they were the breadwinners while women were not. Union card made all the difference as in this case of accident to identify and to settle claims of compensation was facilitated through it.

Coming to women’s organizing in Bollywood, women did form significant part of the film making, Phalke’s wife being a good example. In 70s an all-women’s organisation was formed and fought against sexual harassment but has not written or spoken about because it was formed by the lower strata of film industry. Among the 22 crafts unions of Bollywood, all have their own bylaws. Having started as early as 1950s, they keep revising their by-laws, keeping them male-dominated and some strictly prohibited women. For instance, hairdressers can be women but cannot be make-up artists, not even assistants. Gender inequality has continued to remain contentious since women are not allowed to be in union and without card cannot get any work. Prominent organisations which have significant women members are- cine artists association, junior artists’ association and dancers’ association whereas stunt women are freelance. Women artists are exploited, have short shelf life, and as they get older, they don’t get regular work.

Only unions can ensure regular work. Casting couch affects everyone but junior artists face painful harassment at the hands of agents and others. As daily wage workers they lack the wherewithal to be on social or other media. Therefore the recent initiatives by women artists constitute important steps for curbing harassment.

In the past, such initiatives were taken by women artists in 70s- against SH and wages. Mahila Kalakarsangh of 1974 broke away from common association with men. In Mumbai, this period constituted the peak of unionization of lowest strata film workers with a lot of effort from below. Junior artists like dancers, stunt men used to assemble in public place- for instance, Dadar waiting for suppliers to collect them for day’s work. Wages were fixed according to supplier’s discretion. At this time they were called EXTRAS. This nomenclature changed after unions came into the picture. From extras they turned into junior artists while suppliers began to be called co-ordinators.

Unions had a turbulent past of union-office in crowded localities. Office spaces show the struggles as well as change in status of the union. In the 1970s, junior artists got graded into categories- age, personalities, decent class, A class and B class. Based on this grading, payment was decided for the rest of their lives. In 1973, women artists separated from men and started Mahila Kalakar Sangh exclusively for female artists. What we know of them today is based on their narration since there is very little archival work or research on this. Few of them remain alive and even those are reluctant to talk.

They recall the highly hierarchical gendered attitude of film industry and the struggle of women in a male dominated space. When the association was at Saathrasta (a locality in Mumbai), men and women were together. Road was narrow, dirty, men would pass lewd comments and it was difficult for women what with policemen asking for their ids. They’d to be in office 3 pm to 7 pm or longer. But women had to sit behind and climb up benches in the gallery room. There were a series of SH complaints. Slowly a few women leaders emerged. Tina Katkar (mother of well known actor Kimi Katkar) got the timings changed to ensure the women reached home earlier. As SH cases continued to grow, they decided to separate from male union. Federation came up with a suggestion of casting bureau and asked them (junior artists) not to form a union (at all). The idea was opposed by male and female artists but men were also opposed to women forming a separate union, as they could negotiate more work for men when they were together (as a family).

Female artists struck work and stopped shooting for 15 days in Mumbai in 70s. Tina Katkar was assaulted and hospitalised. Finally, they were allowed to form a separate union. From 1970s till date this separate union functions. It not only managed some social security but also bought an office eventually. When Tina Katkar quit, the suppliers took advantage and regained control. They decided to buy an office space. They even allowed men’s union to use their space when they did not have an office of their own. Nepotism prevailed because suppliers’ daughters were part of the union.

How unions are looked at is also changing. With production houses, non-union members began to function as suppliers. Union membership isn’t cheap, its 1 or 2 lakhs. The Union card isn’t transferrable unless there are family members. Mahila Kalakar Sangh attempted to make an inclusive work space, over the years without proper leadership, they have not been able to what they set out to do.

**Sherin B.S.**

As a feminist historian, Sherin said she will try to look at the phenomenon of WCC and what they were trying to do. She would look back at different formations and trace unionization in the film industry and ask how the question of labour was constitutive of these associations.

Feminist labour movements came up with demands for equal wages and better working conditions in the second wave women’s movements across the world. Most of the early organisations in Hollywood took up the question of wages, working hours and equality. The Screen Actors’ Guild that came up in 1912 had to contend with the prevailing atmosphere where Communist ideals were not to be defended. Anything beyond capitalism which leads these industries was an anathema. In 1940s two confederations came up in Hollywood, after a huge labour dispute. Studios had to intervene and manipulate to put an end to it.

As feminist movement got involved in the industry- in 1970s, lot of thought about women’s activism went into organizing. But the organisations which came up during this period were not completely labour oriented. WIF- women in film, 1973- for instance cannot be called a trade union or a feminist organisation as it tried to straddle all these- funds and grants for films, networks, scholarships etc. as well as in preserving women’s legacy.

Women make Movies- a non-profit media art organisation also worked with women of colour as a policy. Women Film Critics Circle was another such forum. During and along with 2nd wave feminist movement, they worked mostly as networking platforms, which promoted women to be in movies.

Sherin then proceeded to show two video clips. The first was about Gandamma- who started a union in 1978, who did menial jobs so to say on the sets. The second was from a WCC press conference after AMMA office bearer addressed them as ‘some women’. It was an extremely powerful intervention.

The difference in Kerala- it is a different kind of film industry which caters to a literate audience, audience which grew up in political movements, who knows what communism is, equality is. In this environment leading actors had to come and introduce themselves as actors because they were hurt. What happened hurt most people, the indifference with which their pain was received. Till then one thought one was living in a sort of egalitarian society.

How do you think about women’s agency in the industry not just as artists, technicians? What is the binding factor which we have to think about? Where is the capital located? Sherin argued that the question of capital is problematic as the female body is also the site of desire, sexuality, it is not just contributing to agency in terms of labour. The performative nature of female body in the film industry has to be taken into account along with the way they are treated. For example, Reema Kalingal, an appealing actor in Kerala at one point, now moved to join hands with many important movements in Kerala. In this shift between activist and the actor, how it would affect the notion of capital as-in-body? How we one move beyond this strange collusion in the female body? This issue needs to be taken up in terms of feminist law and feminist politics.

Is it enough to have ICC or how can we deal with the whole culture of patriarchy which permeates, domestic violence being naturalised in our movies- never discussed in a society which is literate and politically forward.

Charu Khurana, Make-up artist

“I was 18 when I entered Bollywood. I went from delhi to Bombay to do ad-films and commercials. But when I was working, sets were raided and I was asked for a card. I had to pay a fine of 500. I asked them to make me a member. They said I had to have Maharashtra domicile. Being a female also barred me from becoming a member. So I continued to pay fine to keep working. I struggled to pay fine. For a long time, I would be working in the caravan while someone else’s name appeared on screen, representing my work. I was young.

To become a part of Bollywood, I did a course on special effects and prosthetics. When I was working for a film for Kamal Hassan, again the make up artist union interrupted. I had to pay a fine of 25,000 to complete that project. Kamal Hassan spoke to the union. But they said that membership could not be given for women. I had grown a little more mature by this time. I asked them to give the same restriction to me in writing. They argued that men will be deprived of livelihood if they register women. Women could be hairdressers, they said.

For ten long years, I worked underground by paying fine or donation while someone else represented my work. I wasn’t given any credit for my work. At this point again, the Union raided the set and shooting closed down for 2 days. All the people stood helpless. I talked to directors, pleading with them to do something. I asked them to push for a change in the by-laws. But the producers’ council said, ‘Madam this is your fight. The union is very powerful. How will you challenge bylaws?’ All gave emotional support but no one stood with me. Actors, producers - no one would leave shooting to fight for me. They preferred to replace me. Lot of actors tried to speak to the union. I tried to file an FIR but was refused. Sexual Harassment (SH) kiya kya? I was asked. Mental torture hua hai!

I realised that it is important to have everything on paper. So, I paid 10 thousand as a bribe to register FIR against the Union. Then with that copy I went to women’s commission in Hyderabad, Chennai and Bombay. For 2-3 years, I was boycotted from the industry. They said it was too much trouble to have you on the set. Then I went to National Commission for Women. It took me 14 years to fight my battle. Supreme Court registered the case and it took three years to fight that battle.

Without work, I had two kids. Why women were not allowed? Where will our 3000 men go? If women enter they will bring up SH cases etc. all kinds of excuses were given for not letting women enter. The system has to change, it is my legal right t practice my profession. When I talk to make up artists they said that they do not have the financial wherewithal support to fight a case. I was the only person who could do it thanks to support for my parents. Meanwhile, they changed the bylaws of the Union. When my case was in SC, they hiked the fee to 1 lakh. I had to challenge that as well. Why should I pay 1 lakh? They were dividing the country by asking for Maharashtra domicile. What do I teach my kids? That such a basic right to work is not possible in my own country?

After I won, there is a cordial relationship of men and women working together and more than 5000 women registered as make-up artists till now.

Discussion

Anjali Menon: I am part of WCC and fighting lot of people, and it is very disheartening. I wonder if any of this is going to make any difference. Listening to you made me feel so good. When we do research, all cases quote CharuKhurana. You’ve become a concept, no longer a person.

Suneetha- Nirmala, can you say more about other industries? Also, women’s movement engagement with gender, our focus has been on legal reform, more in terms of violence but not much in terms of discrimination. Questions being articulated as harassment, while discrimination and H overlap, they are also separate

Nirmala- In Telugu film industry, in 2011 stuntmen went for protest for 1.5 months across India. Telugu filmmakers were not supposed to shoot. Karnataka dancers went for a strike, industry was shut down. But it never happens for make-up artist or with individual fights.

In TanushreeDatta case, MNS formed unions across film industries. They serve dual purposes. They go for protests as well as for work in a crowd scene. Otherwise, how does one explain the crowd gather for Nana patekar’s defence right during the incident?

In TamilNadu unionization started around the same time as Bombay, in the 1950s. They have a building, structure, regular meetings, education fund, retirement fund, marriage fund, women are active members of the committee.

In Telugu film industry, crafts unions are not very strong. The space itself, just below Annapurna studio, in a slum area. In 2014 they had some structure in place. They do not have fixed pay.

In Kerala there was a chair protest- most junior artists are not allowed to sit on chairs, especially women not given chair. They are fighting for basic things toilets, changing rooms. Only difference over the years is that certain things have come onto the paper.

In Bombay, agents are stronger because they are producers today.

Charu Khurana - South Indian Industry is much more organised as compared to Bollywood, more professional.

Sherin B.S: It is an important terrain to consider. In Sabrimala discrimination came up as the main factor.

Nirmala- Until the ICs are in place we should called H.

Susie- very interesting to discuss unionization in film industry since there are so many different crafts, another reason is caste being important and sexuality. Dance, entertainment, junior artists category will be infused by caste not just different class, but also tradition groups who have been drawn upon. In unionization, both these seem to be disappearing.

Nirmala- tried looking at caste. In Mumbai it was more about religion. The constant complaint was Muslim community is dominating B’wood so organisation important. Earlier there were lot of Christians but this has reduced over the years. I got to know that most are from broken families, children of junior artists etc. In the South, the suppliers (coordinators) are from dominant castes like Reddys and Goudas, while the artists are from various caste groups. But they are not ready to identify.

Sherin- representation is a tricky issue. There is a difference between the caste of the person and the body that is represented on screen. Mammotty, for instance, not represented as a Muslim body, in most movies, he’s upper caste elite hero. They always cater to mainstream.

Padmaja – An issue after Sri Reddy’s protest was that the non locals were being employed for roles in Telugu industry, non-ethnic telugu who are light skinned. Other thing- even in television, female roles are being given to women from elsewhere whereas men continue to be from local region.

Sherin- there was a time in Malayalam industry when our stars preferred heroines from outside but younger strong actors are now present, no dearth of talent. New heroines, it is like new wife every night kind of patriarchal thought. Like Bond movies.

Nirmala – I heard of the anecdote. In the famous Guru Dutt’s film, the not so good looking background artist was not shown- Sakhiaajmujheneendnahiaayegi. In the entire song you don’t get to see their faces. While model co-ordinators, not local, across industries there is a list of artists whom they can call anytime.

Vasudha Katju- Charu what has been your opinion of the Union now that you are part of it? how did the union receive you after the judgement?

Lots need to be done. They should hire more educated (trained) people, should have to improve, regular new technical skills should be provided by the unions, they will be up to the mark.

The union took some time for them to gulp it down their throat that they will have women also. I would get calls from men who worked as my assistants that they are out of work because women are getting it. I asked them what their qualifications were, if they have done courses and told them to upgrade their skills.

Suneetha- You say that there are 5000 women registered in the Union. What are the issues of the women now, now that they have entry.

The bylaw says the fee is is 1 lakh rupees. Irrespective of trade, why such a hefty entry fee be there to enter a trade? Is it guaranteeing you 200 days of employment? No, it is just protecting our rights. We are still discriminating against poor people. You (the poor make up artist) are getting 1300/- and you are paying 2.5 lakhs. That is exploitation only.

Beena Paul-SH complaints, how has union reacted?

I am totally unaware. I have never seen the union standing for me. Someone approached and the union said you did not come to us when you signed the contract

Beena- they are welfare bodies, not a union, without collective bargaining power. That’s another disturbing thing in the industry.

Asha Achy Joseph- Above the line organised and below the line is unorganised. Whole set is divided in terms of labour. People keep upholding Kerala for no reason at all. No Sh case dealt with proper in the last 25 years. In that sense even Marxist govts are not gender oriented

Vasudha- I am not speaking about caste but on srireddy also you are saying they have been coming up with SH but we end up with changing rooms and bathrooms and we are getting into unionisation.

Madhu- Sound of silence, Beena’s film. It is an amazing film , 2017, interesting point- in a land which seems paradoxical now. Women talking of being chased out of college campuses by 4.30- go back to hostels. Young college girls are jokingly saying how this is an interim period before getting married. It is a very problematic area.

Sherin- I am not a Kerala apologist. It is fractured and lot of work around that by feminists scholars has occurred.

Susie- something we need to think about. We know that in the industry, we know the big stars tend to come from one caste. Very important when we think of SH, the taken-for-grantedness in the ways women are treated. We need to be looking at caste and sexuality

Large number of transpeople work in the industry, they are drawn for specific capabilities. We don’t discuss this, the grounded connections the industry has with caste and sexuality and all that…. we say it for manual scavenging.

Meera- transgender people are not given roles, where cis-gender people portray trans roles and inappropriately. Sona pointed out to very unique issues which trangender people face as junior artists face are just not on the agenda. How functional are these unions which are present?

Session 3: Rethinking Masculinities

Compiled by Koyna Sinha Poduval

The moderator, Prof. Susie Tharu, begins the session by pointing out that unlike femininity, we haven’t had a movement to investigate masculinity: “I wonder how they [men] grew up, what their sufferings and pains were, how they reacted to violence—we know so little about it.” Writers and filmmakers are always exploring areas, ideas that others dare not touch. With its widespread popularity and accessibility, cinema becomes a place where we learn about men and women as the sexuality question is central to creating a screen image.

## Anjali Menon

Anjali Menon begins her talk by describing her childhood: she grew up in a house with boys, a wonderful father and more male friends than female. Male and female isn’t a binary but there is a whole spectrum within them— “We have to individualize and not compartmentalize. Male and female shouldn’t have to be entirely separate.”

Since the industry produces so much content, films are usually and largely perceived as entertainment. In a film festival, people may enjoy watching new, unexplored, unknown ideas but in the theatre they want to watch what they can relate to, what is familiar. Thus it is very difficult to have a new voice while trying to ensure that your films are seen by large numbers.

As a filmmaker, one has to understand the psyche of the audience (which consists of very few artists). One becomes the “surrogate audience”, because the audience becomes central to every decision one makes. The director who made *Ustad Hotel* was very commercial and there were many arguments concerning the portrayal of masculinity and femininity in the film.

“I’m referred to as a female film maker, whether I like it or not” says Anjali, and the onus of making women oriented films is constantly put on her. “But what about the men?” she asks, since they are making so many more films.

“What you see is what you know and what you know is what you become.” We need to have more female centered roles but we also need to change the way masculinity is portrayed. The man can save the world but we also have to show what they feel, how they react, empathize, grow—an alternate to the boring alpha male has to be presented. We also have to pay attention to the fathers and brothers portrayed on screen.

“What is culture at the end of the day?” It is a shared set of practices—when we let one gender be superior over another, we are perpetuating a culture. As film makers, we have the privilege of creating new characters, to show potentially better people. It is very rare that we see women as strong on screen as they are in real life as it is rare to see men as strong on screen in real life. A picture says a thousand words and in films, there are 24 pictures per second—how many words is that?  
  
We have to stop normalizing things that are not normal, explore characters endlessly, and create new icons for people to admire. Men are not some alien species; they have grown up here, grown up with us. It is crucial that we explore masculinity, “as a woman, I want to explore much more of the male psyche.”

**Mohana Krishna Indraganti**

“When I landed in India with a degree in filmmaking, I started pitching a thriller to various studios, actors and they said ‘the heroine is doing too much, the hero should be doing all that. Just make her cute and loveable.’”

There seems to be a bizarre disdain for educational qualifications in the Telugu film industry. People don’t understand why someone with an MA/MPhil is working in films. “It’s like education is not culturally viable.”

All the male actors that approach Mohana are either going through a lean patch or have become successful enough to dabble in ‘art cinema’. Male actors have very little patience with script narrations. They only want 20 minutes and of the parts that they are in.

Being trained in classical screen writing, a conflict is central in his films. The alpha male character in Telugu cinema gets the girl, saves the village but he does not overcome anything. “Goosebumps” is a popular term in social media among Telugu fans; so popular that it has become a criterion by which movies are judged. It denotes masculine strength, aggressiveness and machoism.

In his first film, Grahanam, an older woman—played by Jayalalitha—seduces a younger man. Many people from the industry including directors and producers came to him saying that this particular cast choice made them think that this was a true story. They were disappointed on learning that this wasn’t true, moreover, they were surprised that she is such a good actor.

Mohana has been trying to humanize his characters, especially to portray men differently and it has taken him fourteen years to consolidate his place in the industry. Today he has the tag of “decent family director” although as he points out, not one family in his films has been completely functional. In his next film, he hopes to lose this classification and wants audiences to be able read the subtext, the commentary on society and politics in his films.

Discussion post panel presentation

Q. [To Anjali]: What are your views on the claim that ‘women choose patriarchy’?

A. It is true to a degree, that can’t be denied. In joint families, the senior women are responsible for perpetuating patriarchy. Women may find certain values attractive in it because its comfortable, its tradition; they don’t want to change. But ‘if you cannot evolve, you might as well be dead.’

Q. [To Anjali] When you say that ‘women are as responsible’ [for the nature of masculinity]do you think there has been any change from 30 years ago to now or is the same?

A. Important to recognize that from generation to generation there does seem to be a shift; increasing social awareness is changing men and women. It is slowly but surely happening.

Q. [to Anjali] Where would you place yourself in the industry in the industry in terms of the masculinities you present and what is your response to the variety of masculinities that are represented by the industry?

A. Now is a very exciting time in Kerala where Malayalam films are throwing up all kinds of characters. How men and women should think are being challenged and challenged very beautifully. We have fantastic film makers, beautiful writers and I feel like I have to pick up my game. Parari’s *Sudani from Nigeria* is such a delight, to see how those characters are evolving, to see how real they are and the fact that audiences are going in droves to watch it. Very encouraging for us as film makers to see that it is being accepted so well.

Q. [to Mohan] How exactly do you go about creating a female character?

A. I haven’t written an overtly aggressive character—I think women in my film fight their battles but they needn’t be aggressive. None of the women in my family had an overt desire to change things but they fought their battles and they did make a difference, at a basic level. I try to create the people I see around me. I’m allergic to using cinema as a vehicle for social change; I don’t think it’s the job of cinema. Its an art form for me where we distil our awareness into a narrative and create characters that represent rather than foreground the change that we want to see. The struggles that happen subtly, within families, are equally important and real change does come from there as well. I have done female driven films like *Ami Tumi* where the women are very aggressive. But an aggressive female character also runs the the risk of being stereotyped. I try not to fall into that.

Q. [to Mohan] The fact that families are saying you’re making a ‘family film’ after your 14 years of direction might be their way of acknowledging that you’re portraying women in a way families like rather that the way you’d portrayed them earlier and therefore you might want to create a system of dialogue to make that shift…

A. That’s why I’m here—I’ve made a name, distributors are saying people will come and watch a film for me, doesn’t matter who’s acting. In my recent film, the mother sat and ate with the family—this stood out for the audience. In *Sammohanam*, the brother tells his sister to stay away from cinema people because they have no character and the sister replies: “who told you I have character?” Lots of girls told me this is how I fight at home. This is how I want to make interventions.

Q. [to Mohan] How do actresses react to your script narrations?

A. I’ve had the privilege of working with really gifted actresses and they enjoy it because I *write* parts for them. Pavitra actually told me that you’re the fast director in Telugu cinema who has narrated a story to me; most of the time, all they say is you’re the hero’s mother. All the actresses are hungry for more. Frances McDormand says women are props in action films. There are so many talented actresses—they are much smarter than the heroes. They have to play the game, roles are not written for them but they’re waiting to push the envelope. We have to write more complex characters. But yes, most actresses are willing to do my film, even if they are paid less.

Q. Actresses like Parvathy have become become important enough for scripts to be written for and yet there is such a disparity in pay with films like *Take Off*… is there any hope, any change possible in the near future?

A. [Anjali] The idea that we have actresses today who can command that kind of attention from the audiences is great, that they can shoulder films is wonderful. In my last film, we had women queueing up on the first day, first show and that hasn’t happened before. In Hollywood actors are taking pay cuts so that their female co stars can be paid more. I would love to see that happen here. When Nazriya made a comeback in my film, one of the questions posed to me was “did Faahadh allow her?” Even off-screen, the perception is that you belong to somebody. The support from the marketing and distribution for men and women is leagues apart and all of that makes a difference.

[Mohan]: In the Telugu industry when big actresses are acting with not so famous actors, then they are paid well but not when they are pitted against a bigger star. The male star is paid much more. They don’t even understand the concept of equal pay right now. When a female star is cast opposite a big hero, people think that she is blessed. In that context, its impossible to think of equal pay.

Q. In the Telugu industry, in the fifties and sixties, there were some very prominent actresses who were paid more than the actor; when did that change and why? And, do you see any difference in the masculinity has been presented historically to now, particularly after the nineties?

A. [Mohan] The macho man started with NTR as he became a god-like superstar. Post 90s, the toxic male emerged and I’m yet to figure out how. After liberalization, which changed the way we live economically, there was a polarization of rural and urban. Ravi Teja etc. foregrounded this highly aggressive man, not very educated—the precursor to this Chiranjeevi. Actually maybe he’s the one who started this hyper masculine trend.

I think the last major star would be Vijayshanti. And she was the hero, male actors didn’t want to work with her. Once women from hindi film industry started coming in, they were underpaid.

[Anjali] When you decide to make a female the lead, its very difficult to cast a man who will agree to be a lesser role opposite her. Revathy who made *Mitra*, spoke of how difficult it was to cast someone opposite Shobhna. The 80s did have fantastic directors so it seems that the 90s were the toxic time of the alpha male.

Asha Joseph: there was a time when Prem Nazir was paid 7000 rupees and Miss Kumari was paid 25,000 rupees.

Q. Do you correlate the industry changes in the 90s to the economic changes? Why exactly?

A. [Mohan] the opening up of markets led to larger female working force; women started occupying spaces that were considered predominantly male. They were able to earn equally, sometimes more—they started drinking and smoking. Thus, there was a threat to the male space and so that heroes had to ‘put them in their place.’ Women are more liberated but at the same time, men became more aggressive.

[Anjali] With liberalization, we also satellite television come in when previously there was only the sanitized doordurshan. Suddenly there was a major shift in content.

Q. How do you decide the gender of your characters?

A. [Anjali] When you think of characters, you don’t have to assign characteristics based on gender. There is no need to compartmentalize. “Jump out of the box but don’t jump into another box.” Lets just try to communicate and say what we want through our story. We have to rethink our process. We have to “Trojan horse” our ideas of freedom. Quietly swing through so that people realize what you’ve done only after they’ve bought into it.

[Mohan]: it’s the aesthetic of writing. In the telugu industry, my problem is we have not trained the audience to decipher dialogue, refined writing. Iranian cinema writes very liberating films in a subtle way. That is much more powerful than pamphleteering.

Session 4: Women Writing Film Histories

Compiled by Vasudha Katju

Madhumeeta Sinha (Moderator): This session will engage with the past and with contemporary history, filling gaps ian archives but engaging with techniques which keep patriarchy resilient. The papers deal with gender, caste, class, region and space.

**Uma Bhrugubanda:**  ‘Women Film-makers in the Early Decades: A History for the Present’ umabhrugubanda@gmail.com

Uma shared her new work: to look at women in film industries in the 1930s, 1940, 1950s. She said she places it in the context of the new work on actresses of this period. In the absence of official archive, where many films have been lost, scholars have taken film journals, memoirs, biographies, autobiographies, song books. They have also used gossip and scandal as this is one way they become visible to us. From these sources, they are being refigured as modern professional working women.

Early actresses came from the tawaif/devadasi background after dissolution of earlier forms of patronage. Cinema was seen as an avenue. Amidst growing nationalist movement, debates about bringing in respectable women emerged, especially of bringing in Brahman women.

New fields, new working conditions, therefore new challenges as women from different backgrounds were looking to the film industry.

Bindu Menon’s work on P K Rosy, the early actress of Malayalam cinema from actress from theatre background faced a lot of resentment, ostracism and had to leave her village for acting. She was a Dalit. She also was not given many roles. It was a story of exclusion. Debashri Mukherjee’s essay talks of Devika Rani’s career as an actor. She and Himanshu Rai up a studio. Devika Rani became a star. And eloped with a costar. Nasim Bano was another actress with whom the last Nizam of Hyderabad was fascinated. Nasim Bano and Shamshad Begum moved to Bombay to the Hindi film industry.

Metoo in fact overturns the logic that gossip and scandal defames actresses, makes them ashamed. Focus shifts to the men, women refuse to feel guilt and shame. Shamshad and her daughter: the Nizam launched a smear campaign. They were undisturbed, said that fans would understand.

Neepa Majumdar’s essay on Shanta Apte describes her hunger strike as the salaried employee of Prabhat Studios, lying on a bench outside the studio in a pant and shirt. It created a scandal at that point. We have no idea about their conditions of work.

After the disintegration of the studio system, actors became freelancers. But till the 1940s – many actreses were stars with large salaries, more than their male counterparts. 2000-3000 per month. Not much information on their pay.

Uma said she will look at Telugu actress Bhanumati’s career 1939-1990 in this context. Shifts in the first few decades of talkies on and off screen influenced her career. We know that from 1950s onwards – rise of the male star and role in linguistic nationalism has been studied. But we have very little or no work on female stars. How did they disrupt language cinema histories across language cinemas (Tamil, Telugu etc.) as many were multi-lingual stars.

The movie Swargaseema in 1945 established Bhanumati as a major star. She portrayed the character of a dancing girl/street singer who becomes a major star. It dispelled her reluctance to appear in films. The film tracks the transformation of the character. In a way, it also reflected the behind the scenes transformation of Bhanumati as she was reluctant to act after marriage. She had modelled her character on Rita Hayworth. She was fascinated by Ingrid Bergman and the Hollywood actresses were her new role models. Bhanumati’s transformation into a star could be seen as the subsequent films tried to recreate those elements, eg of masquerade and double roles.

In 1954 she set up Bharini Studios. It made Chandirani: a trilingual film with NTR as male lead and Bhanumati as the main protagonist. Next year, it made Malaikkallan, with MGR, established him as a major star. Narrative agency was shifting to the hero. She had nothing to do. Changes in the film industry also paved way for new heroines such as Savithri who played demure heroine roles.

In conclusion, Uma said that stardom does not emerge from talent alone but requires institutional support. Bhanumati’s stardom was anchored in owning a film studio and support from her husband. Unless enough women occupy top positions, they would have no bargaining power in determining roles on the screen.

**Asima Jena** ‘Mapping Caste and Gender Hierarchy: Historical Trajectory of Kalavanthulu Women in Telugu Cinema’

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The presentation was based on her doctoral work, on the historical trajectories of Kalavanthulu women in coastal Andhra where an interplay of culture, caste and economy could be seen.

The landowning castes such as Kammas, Kapus, Reddys patronized kalavanthulu women, who as former Devadasi women were either temple dancers or were in royal courts. Rather than Devadasi ‘Kalavanthulu’ was the term preferred/invented by the community for political reasons. In 1930s devadasi system, nautch system got criminalised as immoral. Contesting the term devadasi, the community claimed that ‘we are torch-bearers of an art form.’ They also contested the other term ‘bhogam’ used to describe the community as bearers of entertainment, desire, sexualised identity. The kalavanthula community was from shudra communities but was not from any particular caste group, enumerated under shudra categories.

How they came into movies is due to several interlinked reasons. With loss of temple (endowment) grants, criminalisation, they lost patronage. But the revival of art forms in a modernised avatar that took the sringar elements and the development of movie industry provided the new context. Also Rajamundhry as the region known for cultural development often was the favourite scenic location for shooting for the new Telugu film industry.

Rajamundry being the centre of reform movements and film studios, of erstwhile zamindaries, temples and scenic locations as well as the prevention of upper caste women from joining the film industry paved the way for their entry. Caste, gender and sexuality, fused together, made this entry possible. While the zamindars and other landlords did the Kannarigam ceremony – initiation ceremony into devadasi work earlier, the rich men from the reddy, kamma, kapu caste did this to initiate the young women to the film industry.

Over the years, as ‘respectable’ women entered the film industry, Kalavanthula women entered the micro cultural industry of record dance programme, mostly during religious festival to bolster their caste status. In the films, kalavanthula women have been reduced to ‘extras’ or junior artists over time. But they use memory as a political tool to contest the histories presented by others. As recent scholarship excavating the memory, they reassert their past as having descended from Urvashi and Rambha as the repositories of ‘art’. If mind is colonised, everything is also colonised.

**Nikhila H** ‘Playing a “Sex-bomb”: Tracing the On-screen Function and Off-screen Life

of the Kannada Supporting Actor, Umashree’

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Nikhila’s focus was on the female comedians in Kannada cinema. She looked closely at the comedian pair Umashree and NS Rao who were active in Kannada cinema in the 1980s and 1990s who played explicitly sexual comedy – verbal and visual. And the actress Umashree’s life. Popularly known as ‘the one who spoiled Kannada cinema’, she acted in over 400 films from 1984-2005. The paper had two themes: 1. What it means for a woman to gain popularity through sexual roles. 2. What is the role of the comedy track in the film.

The paper juxtaposed Umashree’s autobiography with her on-screen presence and popular understanding of that presence. One cannot see any element of effacement or erasure in her autobiography. She described how the term ‘Sex bomb’ happened to her after the film ‘Anubhava’ through the role of Paddi. She says she didn’t know the implications of the film. ‘New sex bomb arose in the industry’. She talks in the third person, talking of subsequent roles as they came to her.

Umashree was already an established theatre artist. As theatre does not distinguish between main and supporting roles, she said she had idea of the implications of the Anubhava role. Her life was not easy. From the weaver caste community she was orphaned as a child and later had a violent and abusive husband. She took to the village theatre – roles for subsistence. Then she graduated to the amateur theatre roles. Neighbours and parents were dismissive. She left parents and took children away. She needed to bulid her and childrens’ lives.

Roles were not a cakewalk. Often naïve, she didn’t get the double meaning and only realised it later. She said that those who criticised her would not ensure her livelihood. She was also not offered other roles. Umashree and NS Rao – hugely popular were a big draw for audience. But she was still underpaid and afraid to demand for more.

Nikhila then discussed the kind of roles that this popular comic pair played on screen. NS Rao often played a nonperformer in bed while Umashree played the role of a woman who demands sex and wants her husband to perform, for sexual satisfaction and not for children. Man laughs about being weak or is unaware of what she wants or what he should do. There is direct talk of her needs and his inadequacy. Her body movement and intonation is deployed for comedy. It consisted of exaggeration which was a feature of theatre.

Nikhila presented two 2 case studies from 1987. In one NS Rao is a forest guard and Umashree is a tribal girl. In the second both are medical students. In the films, boundaries between her and the hero are quickly drawn. Films acknowledge the hero’s liaison with the sexed-up girl but leave her to NS Rao – the one good enough for her. While for the main romantic pair in the film the relationship includes wooing, betrayal, misunderstanding, resolution, for the comedic pair, there is no wooing. Also their natal families are not shown. If the woman in the pair has a relationship with the hero, he will have to tame her.

We are supposed to dismiss and disparage them. But we can take them seriously, like Umashree took them seriously.

Discussion

Rama Melkote (for Uma) Filmmaking has undergone transformations. Earlier there were many singing stars. Now even dubbing has to be done. It costs more today. What is the impact on stardom? (for Asima) Kalavanthulu – did they suffer a stigma?

Uma: stars in the 1940s/1950s different from the stars today. Only those who could sing could act. Actors had to be dancers and singers. Playback singing was seen as inauthentic.

Asima: transformations in record dancing: 60s-70s: Kalavanthulu women dancing, their men palying harmonium. Mimicking established stars. Now it is banned. Why does it have stigma: skimpy songs, references to the Kalavanthulu system. A ante Amlapuram. Sringaram – no display of vulgarity but through body/facial movements.

Suneetha: When we think of relations between sexuality and labour in films, when does the marriage question become important for actresses? 2. Question of writing: we have heard of autobiographies from the panel but not in the case of Kalavanthulu women. Writing enables distinguishing role from person herself.

Asima: Memory becomes a political tool for the Kalavanthulu women where they narrate and trace their lineage to top heroines.

Uma: Bhanumathi is an exceptional figure. Many top heroines did not quit after marriage. They continued, balancing a respectable image of themselves.

Nikhila: Agree that Umashree is telling her story while still remembered as the woman who spoiled the Kannada film industry. But no attempt to shirk the work she did.

Srivats: One can sense of tragedy through the presentations. There is a spectral trope acting in metoo and the stories.

Sherin: All three papers are trying to present historiography from the female vantage point. Can we think of film histories in this moment, is it possible, what can we take from this? Which would tell us of the current moment and female agency?

Uma: Very different kinds of women coming into the film industry today. Earlier, old kind of patronage made the actresses to live at the mercy of the big producer.She owed her career tosuch patrons while the situation is not so tied up for women of today. In the Bollywood, there is a different tone. There is recognition of actresses as professionals by the media. There is also a change in popular perception of the actresses.

Asima: Situation is changing, possibility of anonymity.

Nikhila: Different histories waiting to be written. Language based histories: silent cinema does not fit. Now women at all levels – what would the histories look like if told differently.

Madhu: Pays tribute to Agnes Warda, French cinema, who passed away on Thursday.

**Session 5: Caste and Representation**

Compiled by Tanvi R and Shraddha Chikurer

Asma Rasheed, the session moderator began the session by speaking about the imbrications of caste and sexualities with questions of labour that will be discussed in the session.

**Sowjanya Tamalapakula**  ‘K. Vishwananth and Construction of Brahmin Capital in Telugu Cinema’; sowjanya.tamalapakula@gmail.com

K.Vishvanath was one of the Telugu directors who mobilized Brahmin capital in the 1980s. His magnum opus, ShankaraBharanam, made in 1980, won several awards and screened at international film festivals. Many more films followed that catered to the taste of Hindu middle classes.

Significant characters in the films are Brahman, played by brahman actors, some characters of lower castes or Muslims to establish Brahman liberalism. His films enabled a place for Brahmins in the industry, otherwise dominated by Kammas and Reddys. His career peaked in 80s, though he made many family dramas earlier. When questioned for giving opportunity to his caste people- K Vishwanath replied that he also suffered the same stigma; that his personal make-up man was a Kapu.

Sowjanya went on to analyze four films made by K.Vishwanath. Shankarabharanam expresses the Brahmin anxiety about how to maintain power in modern times when the mass entertainment takes over. Swarnakamalaam articulates how Carnatic art forms have lost their lucre and thereby the performing brahmans have the lost to modernity. She illustrated it with a clip about a dream sequence where the Brahmin dancer is going on a bullock cart while non-brahmans are zooming by on motorbikes. In these films, Indianness is projected as synonymous with Brahmans where there is no mention of non-brahman or their art forms or their appropriation in post-colonial times. The third film, Sirivennela, she argued tries to offer an answer to the struggle from tradition to modernity of Brahmans where they renegotiate modernity. Sowjanya describes this as a perpetual transition or perpetual anxiety of Brahmins after colonization in response to the emergence of non-Brahmin culture.

A consistent theme in these films is the binary of good modernity and bad modernity where Brahmins are slotted as the former where non-brahmans belong to the latter. She demonstrated it through a clip from Shankarabharanam where the Brahman musician easily sings the Western pop music while the non-brahman characters playing the music loudly in the middle of the night, cannot sing a single note of classical music. The brahman was the one nurturing Indian tradition, quintessential Indian whereas the non-Brahman was the aberrant Indian.

In the third clip from the movie, Swarnakamalam, the old Brahman pandit man goes to get his pension gets disrespected by a clerk in the office. The scene portrays modernity and democracy as have benefitted the undeserving, with non-Brahmans getting into bureaucracy.

The film Swayamkrushi where the central protagonist is a cobbler sees his rise as a result of following Brahminical values. Other dalit characters around him are lazy, dishonest etc. which justifies poverty. The main protagonist prays to the Brahman man who helped him. Brahmin masculinity is held up as unquestioned and unquestionable.

The women in the films have to be chaste and virtuous. The westernized and modernized women i.e., those who smoke, drink and have pre-marital sex, lose out in their battle for the affections of the Brahmin man, the ultimate trophy for women.

**S.V. Srinivas ‘**Cinema of Immobility- Bahubaali and the frozen Social’

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SV began his presentation with the comment that it would talk about the non-Brahmin cinema, of the other dominant castes in the Telugu region.

One saw the emergence of reality-cinema-public performativity in 1982-83 when NT Rama Rao began his election campaign as a new star in politics. His films and filmic persona got transformed into propaganda material. People were provided food coupons and money to watch his films. With NTR the banal became performative in which the Eanadu newspaper played a key and significant role. Photos of him bathing, shaving and washing clothes were in the newspapers (slide), that portrayed him as the great man with common life.

With the deepening of democracy in the 1970s an increasingly powerful elite emerged. Telugu cinema can be taken as a textual evidence of a socio-political phenomenon to which it actively contributed. It has everything to do with the rise of the Kammas and other elites which K.Balagopal wrote about nearly 30 odd years ago.

Bahubaali is illustrative of another moment. It draws on regional resources, is committed to status quo where ‘feudal’ is packaged as a means of moving beyond the Telugu market to global arena. SV argued that, contrary to the descriptions of the film as a fascist, it needs to be seen as a strategy of going to markets well beyond cinema, into that of games franchise, merchandise etc.

NTR’s rise was not just about Kammas but also accompanied the sharp rise of attacks on dalits and the marginalised, not only by Kammas but by other dominant castes as well. NTR was symptomatic of the rise of a powerful elite which was till then restricted to the countryside- Telugu Desam was the front end.

Paradox is that NTR’s election was the perhaps the first mass mediated election in the country. No earlier election ever had such heavy duty use of the mass media. It was a paradigm setting one in complex ways in which all kinds of media was used- newspapers, campaign films, audio cassette and speeches. So, in terms of scale, it was small but not qualitatively different from what’s happening today.

How did the media work? It worked in a totally in a propagandist manner, if innovatively so. Editorial polices were undone by the possibilities that this opened. Every newspaper began to use the same tools, with the result that despite the editoral policy of Andhra Jyothi to support Congress, it adopted the same methods.

What is the significance of Bahubali in our democracy? Bahubaali was casteist, sexist, anti-democratic but it is talking to an actively functioning **democracy.** First is the scale of production with an entire franchise- graphic novel, television, web - across formats, toys and so on that demonstrates that Bahubaali is trying to be something much more than the film. It is a kind of Indian version of Pokemon. Pokemon is not one thing- its many things including one film in every festival season in Japan.

Second, is the kind of reduction of the common man is the member of the cheering multitude. By setting up a pre-modern princely scenario to mount the princely figure, it is signalling the vulnerability of this elite. The elite in political and film are the non-zamindari elite. Their power and prestige is a consequence of post-colonial changes. It is a particularly vulnerable elite in that sense. The use of feudal to describe these elite is therefore cautionary, needs footnote. This feudal authority is nothing if not supported by popular democracy.

We have moved quite far from the cinema all our mobilisation is following cinematic logic and the problem of imbrications of propaganda in democracy is very real. It is all about caste but not only about caste; it is about how it remains to be perched precariously on a democratic system.

Session 6: Men Acting and Reacting

Compiled by Meghana R

Moderator: R.Srivatsan

**Deepa Sreenivas** ‘A Brief Outline of the Visual Essay: Three Tales of Muslim Masculinity’

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Deepa Sreenivas traces the Muslim experience in Bollywood, as an entanglement of the actors’ screen personas and their real selves. In her paper, she maps the various factors that impact these men, even those apart from their religion. More specifically, Deepa writes of how Muslim identity figures in the lives of three actors; Naseeruddin Shah, Nawazuddin Siddhiqui and Ranvir Singh. Two of them are Muslims, whereas the other has infamously played the country’s favourite Muslim villain, Alauddin Khilji. What’s common between them is that they’ve all been at the receiving end of Hindutva wrath.

Recently, one of the many actors to come under fire was Naseeruddin Shah, who expressed concerns over the safety of his children in this country, in an interview, saying "So I fear for my children...Because if a mob gathers around them and asks them are you a Hindu or Muslim, they will not have any answer...Because they have no religion."  While looking at Naseeruddin Shah, it’s crucial to take note of his background. He’s from an elite, aristocratic family in Uttar Pradesh, and is highly educated. Incidentally, his brother is a decorated army officer and the currently, the vice chancellor of Aligarh Muslim University. He is not a routine Bollywood actor has talked about feeling uncomfortable in the world of commercial cinema. In addition, Shah is not a practicing Muslim either. Nothing could set him further apart from the stereotypical regressive Muslim male of the nationalist imaginary, but he has played several roles that sympathise and humanize this very archetype. Yet, he did not escape the precarity of his Muslim identity, and in fact, many compared him to some of the characters that he has played on screen.

On the other hand, Nawazuddin Siddiqui gives us another perspective on Muslims in the film industry. He shares neither Shah’s elite background nor level of education, and instead made his way upwards in film. But like Shah, he isn’t a routine Bollywood actor, and he is not a practicing Muslim. In 2016, he had to pull out of the Ram Leela project after the Shiv Sena protested against his participation. However, he later agreed to play the part of Bal Thackeray, the Shiv Sena leader, in his biopic. When he was criticized for being a hypocrite, his response was to fall back on his identity as an artist and argue that as an actor, he could not cater to ideology, that he would play Manto and Thackeray in the same spirit.

A world apart from these two men is Ranvir Singh, who’s a Hindu and is also a mainstream Bollywood actor. In recent times, he has played two big Muslim roles , Alauddin Khilji and later Murad, in the movies Padmaavat and Gully Boy respectively. While his portrayal of Khilji can be criticized for being historically inaccurate and also Islamophobic in a context where the ruler has been routinely demonised, Singh adds a twist to the character. He breaks the boundaries for masculinity by depicting Khilji’s metrosexuality and femininity. This breaking of boundary can also be extended to Singh sporting a skirt on a red carpet. Later, he was criticized for meeting PM Narendra Modi in the light of his new movie, Gully Boy, which highlights the problems faced by the Muslim community. His response was that he has no political beliefs.

The picture that Sreenivas is trying to paint is that these men are answerable to completely different frames of thought. Ranvir Singh is not haunted by the same expectation of the Good Muslim Masculinity that the other two actors are, which is exactly what allows him the freedom to break boundaries. And one can see the clear web of identity and personhood that never quite leaves Muslims in film, an identity that surpasses practice, background or artistry, affecting their work and their interactions with the world.

**Anna MM Vetticad**

Anna MM Vetticad began by addressing her experience as a South Indian journalist based in North India, and her areas of specialization include the Malayalam and Hindi film industries as a consequence. According to her, she doesn’t commit to being a ‘fan’ of anyone anymore; mostly as a professional requirement so as to not give anyone the benefit of indulgence one would as a fan.

She remains skeptical of the enthusiasm surrounding the Malayalam film industry, stating that it’s really not the progressive paradise that it’s often imagined to be.

As far as the #MeToo movement is concerned, the reaction of the Bollywood industry was rather disappointing, despite the all round optimism. Although there seems to be a lot of vocal support for the cause, there is hardly any change on the ground, especially in the content that is being produced in Bollywood. The latest trend of “women centric films”, she argues, is a lazy tactic. Anna is extremely suspicious of the token feminism in Bollywood, where she finds that the underlying misogyny is hidden under layers of sophistication. “All the right noise is made”. Whereas in her native Kerala, the bigotry is hard to miss, and perhaps this is easier to battle than the obscured misogyny of the north.

The difference between the MeToo movements in these two regions has been that in the south, an extremely powerful director was accused, and this sparked lots of hullabaloo. But in its northern counterpart, accusations against Rajkumar Hirani (another big director) were greeted with radio silence. This is perhaps a classic example of an industry that’s often hypocritical about its values. However, the Malayalam industry is not innocent of these crimes either, as pointed out by the movie Lucifer, directed by Prithviraj Sukumaran, the newly actor turned director. Despite being vocal in his support for the MeToo movement, his movie portrays women in the same, age old misogynistic manner

Anna also expressed her apprehensions regarding the complaints committees that are being set up and they have questionable panelists, such Raveena Tondon.

Tony Sebastian ‘Bodies of Comedy: Representation and Regression in Malayalam Humor Films’ - hitony91@gmail.com

In his presentation, Tony Sebastian delves into the world of Malayalam mimicry, its lineage and implications, tracing their complex narratives as reassertions of non-hegemonic masculine power. Here he analyses the role that mimicry and its brand of humour has played in constructing discourse surrounding marginalized identities in the Kerela public sphere. Under constant accusations of misogyny and casteism, this form of comedy, Tony argues, takes the blame for reinstating hegemonic notions of gender, caste and sexuality through stereotyping and attuning to certain parochial values. And of course, that this happens under the disguise of ‘humour’ and is hence, brushed aside as ultimately harmless.

The emergence of Malyalam comedy films can be traced back to the 1980-90s. This is when mimicry helped comedy establish itself as a serious form of art, worthy of being incorporated into the narratives of cinema. But much of this misogyny filled humour can be understood as a reaction to the feminist movement as well, which had resulted in some loss of male power in probing women, at least in the public space. In other words, a ridiculing of the concept of women’s empowerment. Most of these mimicry artists were lower caste men, as this stage provided them with opportunities that were previously unavailable to them. Jenny Rowena argues that mimicry might as well be the lower caste man’s desire for the unattainable upper caste women, and the disgruntlement a result of his lack of success perhaps. But Tony doesn’t argue along these lines, and instead reasserts that the misogyny is the reemergence of the hegemonic upper caste masculinity, which he comes to later.

Taking from Subhas Chandran’s novel, Manyushyanu Oru Amukham, he also locates one of the targets of mimicry as Muslim men, whose sudden prosperity (money from the Gulf) was blamed as one of the causes of unemployment amongst the now disgruntled upper caste men. This, he quotes from the novel, manifested itself as the Nair youth turning the whole situation into ridicule and making fun of religion, caste, women, and basically anyone whom they considered inferior to them.

Tony identifies the voice of the mimicry artist at the voice of the Malayali; predominantly male, upper caste, educated and secular. This is perhaps why he dismisses an earlier question of caste playing a role in these narratives, because the identity of the Malayali has to render those of caste and religion secondary. And hence, though most of the mimicry artists were lowe caste men with very few exceptions, their voice was neither was of neither their social or economic background. But rather, it was the voice of this new Malayli Man, who was imagined quite like the hegemonic upper caste man.

This wasn’t helped by the fact that women had very limited access to the world of mimicry, either as comedians or an an audience. Hence, the Malayali Woman was a perennial subject of their humour, which constantly reinforced her role as the docile mother or wife who had to remain in the confines of her home. In this way, they ‘othered’ the modern, sexually promiscuous and independent woman, who was a threat to this hegemony. Tony argues that the inherent violence of the humour can also be understood as a threat of transgression of the woman’s hegemonic role.

But what sustains this constant alienation of an ‘other’ is the voice of the Malayali, meant to be a unifying, hegemonic force, though a newly constructed identity. It serves three purposed; reinstating the collective public indentity; authenticating and defending the artist’s role to criticize society; and legitimizing mimicry as an art form. However, this can only happen by the radical alienation of the non-hegemonic identities. And in conclusion, the use of humour is a method of softening the blow perhaps; the cost of the laughter of the audience is a passive acceptance of marginalization.

Session Seven: Women Organising in the Film Industry

Compiled by Ajay and Sandesh

**Eswari and Angel Philomena**

**Angel** goes first, starting with a brief introduction about herself: been in the film industry for a while, and has had the best of guidance and safety measures provided to her, so that she could travel and progress in the industry. The overall conditions of women however are often in stark contrast. She said she learned this once she met Eswari.

She was part of the Directors’ Association, but that did not necessarily mean she was part of the conversations, so she was not active. There exists a communication gap between the associations (unions) and women’s issues. Angel was not really a part of the Directors’ Association. After so many years, she hardly knows a handful of women technicians in the industry, and directors as well. The idea for an association for women for support and networking came from Eswari partly as a remedy to not knowing a lot of women technicians in the industry.

**Eswari** takes over, and introduces SIFWA – South Indian Film Women’s Association. SIFWA’s inspiration is drawn from Gandhamal, a maid servant in production houses to whom only meals were given in exchange for her labor. She was the first person to demand monetary wages in this line of work, and was subsequently fired – led to her starting an organization called South Indian Film Women’s Association, with the original demand of a 1/- rupee minimum wage – even this was refused.

There are no basic facilities for women on sets like toilets, baby sitter, green rooms etc. Women are still not allowed in a lot of the 24 crafts trade unions. SIFWA was started on 1 May 2018, focused towards issues like this, and wider social issues like the Pollachi case.

[Switches to Tamil] In the 24 crafts, women are not even allowed to enter into some of the unions. Make up union doesn’t even accept forms from women. Still photographers’ union, cooks’ union too, don’t accept women. SIFWA also faced difficulties being recognized by the FEFSI.

When they talked about #MeToo, there were a lot of negative responses and even threats from the industry. SIFWA is also involved in cases of sexual harassment.

Women sometimes have to travel 2 kms for a restroom. Similarly, there are no dressing rooms for dancers, babysitters are not allowed despite long, “slavish” working hours. It took FEFSI so long before they listened. People cannot raise their voices because they are too afraid, the associations and male colleagues are too powerful.

SIFWA tries to explain and solve such problems but people are either hostile or diffident to such cases – the individuals are either or interested or too busy. How long can a woman raise her voice alone? Organization, association are very powerful. Only these can ensure that women don’t raise their voices by themselves. Media doesn’t allow voices to be raised – only organization and associations can ensure against that. Media also asks questions intended to humiliate and degrade, tries to ensure that women do not and cannot raise their voices – associations only can protect against this.

**Angel**[summarizing Eswari’s talk and adding on]

All the unions are very strong in their own contexts and concerns, they’ve been there for a while and system is very strong – for men. A lot of them do not allow women to enter. Even in 2019, this is the situation. They are used to traditional practices, in the way women are portrayed on screen – stereotypes like mother, daughter, lover etc. – and the way they’re treated off screen.Nevertheless, there are a lot of women on screen, and some of them are strong representations, critiquing society etc. But lot of the women in film are not seen on screen. A lot of them work behind the scenes and are not apparent to the viewing public.

There are very few crafts into which women are easily pulled. But what about other crafts? SIFWA trying to make it easier for women to enter into these, has conversations with the unions to ensure women can enter into. SIFWA is coming out with a magazine about women in film industry by women in film industry.

People ask how they will separate industry specific issues from general social issues – SIFWA has concrete claims and demands to address issues specific to the film industry, like ensuring recognition for hard work etc.

Again, individuals are either unable or unwilling to participate in SIFWA and other such organizations. They are the only industry-based body to support the #MeToo movement.

There are mentors in the industry and for SIFWA in particular, like PC Sreeram and Revathi, and young actors for support, strength, and solidarity. SIFWA focuses on skill development, information dissemination, contacts, finding appropriate projects etc. as well.

[Videos of SIFWA]

**Leena Manimekhalai**: I’m not part of any producers’, directors’, writers’ associations – because they are all boys’ clubs. Started as assistant director, opted out of mainstream filmmaking because of how they treat fellow human beings – not because of how they portray stuff on screen – hierarchical, misogynist, patriarchal, it was humiliating to be in that set up. Hence she is independent filmmaker since 2005, left-leaning politically. She writes poems too, and is not part of the BAPASI – the publisher’s union.

Again, the publishing body is no exception – it’s about the rich and powerful men – lot of casteism and patriarchy, created problems w.r.t publishing her literary work as well. This is why she makes films and writes poems independently. Her poetry and films are banned, cases filed against her poetry because it was “pornographic” and insulting Hindu gods, from an ultra-left group too, for disrespecting Lenin, Marx etc.

She is ostracized by everyone in the in the industry for her stance on #MeToo – by not inviting her to speak at functions or letting her write in influential magazines, by not including her in social circles – but “I cannot be banned from existence”. They can silence her, but not her work.

She was kicked out of her home and was not able to find other places to live for around 6 months because of her public profile, her political stances in general, and her appearances in the papers for the “wrong reasons” – added on to the fact that she finds it difficult to find accommodation as a single woman anyway.

There is definitely hope because we have a long history of women fighting for their rights – she is a product of a long history of feminist struggles.

She is thankful and grateful to the WCC for the solidarity and strength it offers is momentous, historic. No newspapers report it, but WCC was primarily on social media, less on TV.

She is very active and aware politically, and has taken numerous stands over the years against mainstream spaces and organizations, but when it came to sexual harassment, she didn’t have the strength initially to speak out.

She wrote her #MeToo post by taking inspiration and strength from WCC, from women speaking out elsewhere. She revealed the name of her abuser a year after the original post, after seeing how WCC was shouted down by the media during the press conference, and how Chinmayee was trolled after her revelation. She called out the name of her abuser partly because of the anger at this state of affairs. Realized that that man and other men like him have to be exposed.

She ended up taking a class on #MeToo movement for journalists who turned up for her press conference in response to her allegations of abuse, because no one was aware of what the #MeToo movement was.

In TN, #MeToo movement was characterized as a BJP ploy to defame TN and Dravidian politics, especially because of Chinmayee’s associations, political affiliations and old tweets.

Journalists constantly ask questions intended to demean, humiliate, dismiss, ensure that the woman can never speak out again. They try to pass it off as the woman’s ploy for popularity. She has faced such reactions because of her political stance even before #MeToo, but the abuse and trolling went to another level after #MeToo.

#MeToo was not seen and given due rights as a civil rights movement, only as a controversy in TN. Marxists, leftist and all sorts of feminists were all silent, from both left and right. Left, right or center, gender discrimination is a norm, and one has to stand in solidarity with everyone, even if Sushma Swaraj comes out with a #MeToo post, they have to stand with her in support – that was SIFWA’s position.

She got to know about SIFWA only post #MeToo – she was reminded of the all-woman trade union in Munaar – “Rosa Luxemburgs” of Indian women. SIFWA is a proper trade union modelled after this.

Individuals still refuse to come out for organizational support – AIDWA (All India Democratic Women’s Association), PWA (Professional Writers’ Association) were the ones consistently working for women’s empowerment, and only they came to SIFWA’s press release – and some men, very few.

She receives a lot of #MeToo posts by mail, but she refuses to publish them and end up having to take them up legally. Some individual agency and strength is required.

#MeToo messages from different fields, involving her male friends etc. are there. How can more women come out when there is no institutional and organizational support, when there is no safe environment, and so much negativity? This is not a case of putting the onus on feminists for what is a common cause – “If we are not doing, how will we expect other people to do it?” We should focus on nurturing that space, that support system, that trust that would enable them to speak out. If we have to strengthen, gather women, we need to build that support system and work together.

**Pushpa Bhaskar**

She has been in the Telugu film industry for 15-16 years. Started her own casting agency 3 years back. She joined the association called VOW- ‘Voices of Women’ for female technicians in Telugu film industry. She has been educating new actors both male and female in the industry. She has been a first person contact for new comers to the industry. She has been educating on how to ‘come out of any trap’ and talk to organizations. Directors in the industry never wanted a female casting director. Now, the situation is slightly improving.

The ‘Metoo’ movement is male centric also. The names of the bigger stars in the Telugu industry will never come out, unlike other industries like Malayalam. Takes time and courage.Sri Reddy’s efforts have been diluted. Gender sensitization programs have been taken up by VoW. But support of other organizations is required.

**Jhansi Laxmi, VoW**

She spoke of her experiences in the industry and as a representative of Voices of Women. The battle in the industry will be a solitary battle. She said that the Telugu industry has not yet faced the kind of fights like Malayalam and Tamil industries. She said that Sri Reddy’s coming out did not garner much support from the industry because no one had the guts to do that. She said that no women actors, producers supported Sri Reddy. And that the attitude shown by the the Movie Artistes Association was biased and selective. Sri Reddy, Apoorva, Gayatri all given different responses by MAA. Most Journalists never supported the movement. No associations within the industry supported. Absence of an internal complaints platform was a major reason for the escalation of the grievances. Requests for an ICC within MAA brushed off. Producers Council never wanted the ICC. It is in this context that a group of 5 women decided to set up an authentic body within the Film Chamber. Only 2 producers talked to them when contacted. There are no women representatives in the executive bodies. She spoke of the dire need for a support group for women. It started as a small group of 15 women of different crafts. Now the group has 80 members meeting once a month. VoW has influenced the chamber to set up a complaints grievance cell. Film chamber took credit for the setting up.

Telugu film chamber has not finalized the resolutions she said. Some of the VoW women came forward against the derogatory remarks of a well known television anchor Sambasiva Rao’s against women actors. They pushed MAA to take a stand. They signed a petition and filed a case with IPC 506 and held a press meet against this. However not a single journalist reported on the press conference. Their fight was not against one man. It was a fight against a news organization letting off people making lewd comments. Sambasiva Rao filed a counter case against all the women for criminally intimidating him. VoW was trying to become a common platform for women across different kinds of media, and not be bound by specific media houses or organizations. They have received no complaints till now because women have been afraid of revealing their identities. She said that one cannot afford to isolate men in the struggle. After the ‘Metoo’ moment, outspoken women have been ostracized. It will take at least 5-6 years for the Telugu film industry to come out, she said.

Vasudha Nagaraj, Advocate

* One year since Sri Reddy stripped in front of MAA. This conference is a first year anniversary of Sri Reddy’s protest.
* Three images: 1) Sri Reddy sitting the parking lot of MAA and asking why she should sleep with men to get a role in the industry.

2) MAA declaring a ban on whoever works with Sri Reddy

3) Mahaa TV expose against Telugu film producer Vakada Apparao.

* Women accused for wanting to get publicity, slut shamed.
* Media trial in which Sri Reddy was supported. Also the time of complaints against Harvey Weinstein.
* Started writing testimonies. No single criminal case filed.
* Shocked at the practices of the workplace within Telugu film industry. Workplace is diffused: from acting schools, auditions, outdoor locations, director’s guest house etc.
* Only the bottom of the pyramid complains. Sri Reddy was a case in point. No artist of ‘renown’ comes out unlike WCC and Bollywood.
* Who is the employer? The producer or the director are not the employers of the ‘mass’ artistes who do small roles.
* Most women working on the sets don’t have a contract with the co-ordinator or the director/producer.
* Sexual harassment law presupposes employer –employee contract.
* An ICC has limitations if employer-employee contract.
* Requires a foundation in labor law: Registers, paper trail. Recognition of women as an employee.
* Cannot rely on the Telugu film industry production houses. The role of the state in this. Like the sexual offenders registry in Kerala.
* PIL: A high level committee to understand the workplace in Telugu film industry.
* Need an enabling regulatory mechanism before even the demand for an ICC.