*Concept Note for a proposed National Conference*

**The #MeToo Moment in our Film Industries**

*Dates: 29th & 30th March, 2019*

The abduction of an actress in Kerala, the accusations against top actor Dilip, the formation of the Women in Cinema Collective in Kerala in November 2017; aspiring actress, Sri Reddy’s semi-nude protest against sexual harassment in the Telugu Film Industry that led to many female character artists speaking out against pervasive sexual and economic exploitation in April 2018, Tanushree Dutta’s allegations against Nana Patekar and sexual harassment accusations against Vikas Bahl and the dissolution of the Phantom Films company in the Hindi film industry in October 2018 , and more recently singer and dubbing artiste, Chinmayi Sripada’s and others’ accusations against Tamil lyricist Vairumuthu and the various events that have followed in the Tamil industry. This short-hand list of names and events is sufficient to indicate that the last one year has been a momentous one in the history of the Indian film industries. Of course, shocking revelations from the world of the news media and on a lesser scale in the academia and the art and music worlds too have created quite a stir. All these events together have inaugurated what is being called the #MeToo moment in India. Finally, it seems the pervasive culture of male entitlement, sexual harassment and exploitation can be given its proper name, and discussed openly.

This proposed conference, will however, focus on the issues of sexual harassment in the film industries alone for two reasons. One, because, several of us from Anveshi, along with other women activists in Hyderabad, have been closely involved in supporting and documenting the protests against sexual harassment in the Telugu film industry. Indeed, it is this involvement that has prompted us to explore this issue more deeply both to understand the structural aspects of the problem and to better outline how it might be addressed in a constructive and fruitful manner in the long run and two, a specific focus on the film industries will enable us to explore and understand the particular problems that beset the industry and the distinctive nature of its work environment.

We are aware that the particular events and people involved in the different film industries have been different. In the Kerala case, the Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) was formed with the major actresses and women writers and directors coming together. The New Generation cinema in Malayalam which has broken the monopoly of Mohanlal-Mammootty duo and other male actors like Dilip by bringing a host of new directors, actors and producers seems to have enabled this move too. The WCC has articulated a very strong and powerful stand against entrenched patriarchal attitudes and practices within the industry. They have appealed to the State government which has recently appointed the Hema Commission to study this matter. The WCC has also filed a PIL in the Kerala High Court.

However, in the case of the Telugu industry, it was the women at the bottom of the pyramid who raised their voice. Sri Reddy, Apoorva, Madhavi Lata and the many character and dialogue artists who came out very strongly with their stories of sexual and economic harassment and exploitation are those with no clout or backing in the film industry, also raising issues of bias of colourism, locality and caste in the process. They received no support whatsoever from the top rung of the industry. However, many women’s activists and groups in the city have come together to offer support. The women’s groups have written to and met the Telangana State Women’s Commission, the Telangana State Cinematography Minister with representations about this issue. They have also filed a PIL in the state High Court demanding action by the government.

In the case of the Hindi and Tamil film industries, women who have come out with their stories of harassment have received much criticism and minimal support from their respective industries. It’s the pressure exerted by public support of high profile actresses to the #MeToo that pushed the Tamil industry to set up its complaints committee. In all the cases discussed above, women have had to face a backlash, counter-accusations, legal notices from the accused, and trolling and cyber-bullying. Some were forced to retract and apologize too.

It is within this broad context that we are proposing a national seminar. We hope that the seminar will allow us to take stock of the current situation and explore the issues that this moment has thrown up, some of which are outlined below. We hope, that this exercise will also help in making connections and building solidarities of women.

**Analytical papers, presentations including video presentations etc. are invited on the following themes and issues.**

1. **Nature of Sexual Harassment, economic and sexual exploitation**

**in the Film Industry**

* What is the nature of sexual harassment in the film industry? Given the fact that the film screen thrives on the sexualized bodies of young adult women, what is the nature of the work space and work relations that leads to greater scope for harassment?

* What patterns do we discern in the allegations/ revelations that have surfaced over the last year? How does the ‘casting couch’ as it is called operate? Has it changed in recent times?
* What kind of economic and sexual exploitation exists in the industry? How are/were working conditions or wages negotiated and settlements arrived at? What kind of framework does the industry adopt to understand wage gaps as well as blatant economic exploitation by the system of agents/brokers?
* What kind of unionization takes place in the industryand what sort of issues that they deal with? What is the history of industry’s response to unionization, wage gaps and exclusion of women from many crafts? What is the history of women who fought legal battles and won or lost to gain entry into excluded crafts?

1. **Histories and changing trajectories of women in cinema: :**

* This theme will focus on the social and cultural pathways that brought women into early cinema—the devadasi or tawaif traditions, performing castes and communities, theatre associations.
* Many film historians have remarked that early cinema in India saw many women in prominent roles—as actresses of course but also as studio owners and producers as well. This meant that they were in positions of power and influence. But that changed in later decades and led to more and more men taking over positions of power and women being relegated to relative powerlessness. In this context, one question that needs to be explored is how the off-screen presence or absence of women affects the working conditions in the industry and on-screen portrayals of gender.
* Women on and off screen from the 50s to 70s decades seem to have had successful careers after marriage and children too. The names that readily come to mind are Savithri, Bhanumathi, Anjali Devi, Lakshmi, Vijaya Nirmala and Sheela. However, particularly from the 90s onwards, actresses are expected to quit acting once they get married. Now, the heroine is much younger than before, slimmer and more light skinned and the roles she plays are mostly those of college girl or infatuated teenagers. We no longer see as many powerful women on and off the screen. What is the nature of change in the industry that has led to such changes in the position of women in the industry and their representation on the cinema screen?

1. **Masculinities and Femininities in the Culture of Cinema:**

* One noticeable trend in Indian cinemas since the 1980s has been the rise of the mass hero with increasingly hyper-masculine characteristics and sidelining other kinds of masculinities in the narrative. What kind of changes in the spectator profiles led to these changes?
* We also see a few attempts to play with/work with normative masculinity and bring onto the screen different representation of masculinity. What kind of changes in the industries are leading to such changed representations?
* Roles for women often fall into limited slots in our films: manic pixie dream-girl or the local variant *loosu ponnu*, mother/sister/sister-in-law, evil women, many of who are not central to the story. How do these affect opportunities available for women on screen?
* What are the changing representations of normative masculinities and femininities on screen? In what ways does caste shape these representations?
* The effects of normative masculinity seem to spill over into off-screen spaces too where the hero’s fans seek to regulate conversations around their hero, his films, his image and his family. ‘Fandom’ is a complex social and political phenomenon but what concerns us here is the way they seek to shape the reception of the image and film of their hero even by bullying. Taking to social media, a number of such fans seek to engage in cyber bullying and trolling, abusing actresses or other women who dare to question male privilege or accuse well-known actors or directors of sexual harassment. How do we understand this phenomenon?