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A Critical Review of the Report on the Issues in the Malayalam Film Industry 2020 - Hema Commission Report

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The article investigates the pervasive misogyny in Malayalam cinema by looking at its historical foundations, scriptwriting styles, workplace exploitation, and institutionalized discrimination against women. It starts with the story of PK Rosy, the first female actress in Malayalam cinema, who was shunned because she was Dalit. This illustrates how patriarchal standards have impacted the industry since its inception. The paper examines how women are frequently relegated to stereotypical roles in scripts by the male gaze and examines the Hema Committee Report (2020) testimonies that disclose rampant sexual harassment and poor work conditions for women in the workplace. The difficulties junior artists and crew members encounter — such as wage theft, exploitation, and a lack of basic amenities—are also addressed. The lack of Internal Complaint Committees (ICCs) and the shortcomings in existing statutes, such as the POSH Act, are touted in the article as robbing women of proper redressal mechanisms. The recommendations include the creation of tribunals that suit the industry, mandatory ICCs in all production houses, fair contracts that ensure fair compensation, and a greater number of women in senior positions. The Malayalam cinema can develop into a fair and inclusive industry that serves as a model for other Indian film industries to enact these policies while promoting ongoing governmental oversight.

Keywords: *film, Malayalam, report, industry.*

INTRODUCTION

The Malayalam movie industry, popularly known as ‘Mollywood,’ is one of India's most influential cinema industries. It produces exceptional movies with realistic yet fascinating plots and has recently started gaining pan-Indian recognition. Malayalam cinema stands out from other industries because it prioritizes cinematography and script over commercial and star values. It can do so because of Kerala's fairly sophisticated audience, who would make a movie a blockbuster if it's engaging, regardless of who's in the cast.

Recently, the Hema committee report, which was submitted to the Government of Kerala and talked about the problems faced by women in the industry, was publicized.¹ The report had a gruesome detail of the problems faced by women, which included things from sexual assaults to improper working conditions. Interestingly, misogyny and Malayalam cinema have been closely connected since its inception. The first Malayalam movie to be ever made, *Vikadakumaran* (1928), directed by JC Daniel, had its heroine, PK Rosy, targeted by an angry mob, pelted, and finally exiled from her home. She lived her remaining life somewhere in Tamil Nadu.² All this happened just because she was a Dalit woman who portrayed a Nair woman in the movie.

Misogyny is not an inherent trait of just Malayalam cinema but Indian cinema as a whole. As the Malayalam actor Prithviraj rightly said on this eve of the report, ‘Instead of seeing this as just the failure of Malayalam cinema, let this inspire other cinema industries to form committees and investigate the same so that when misogyny is finally removed from cinema, Malayalam cinema could proudly raise their hand and say we started this.’

MISOGYNY IN SCRIPT

The male gaze refers to the way women are portrayed in visual arts, in particular, films from a heterosexual man's point of view, reducing them to objects of male desire rather than

¹ Hema Committee, *Report on the Issues in the Malayalam Film Industry* (2020)

² Sowmya Rajendran, ‘PK Rosy's Story: How Malayalam Cinema's First Woman Actor Was Forced to Leave the State’ *The News Minute* (18 September 2019) <<https://www.thenewsminute.com/flix/pk-rosys-story-how-malayalam-cinemas-first-woman-actor-was-forced-leave-state-109169>> accessed 08 December 2024

individuals with agency.³ In Indian cinema, women are almost always portrayed in stereotypical roles like the submissive caretaker or the sexualized object. Malayalam films portray their women as passive and confined to traditional roles of wife, mother, or love interest whose personality is always secondary to the male protagonist's needs.⁴ The reasons for such characterisation can be taken from the classic Indian literature like Mahabharata or Ramayana, where women are portrayed as dutiful mothers and obedient wives.⁵ Such portrayals reinforce the notion of women being subservient to men.

Certain styles of cinematography further enforce the male gaze by reducing the introduction of female characters by emphasizing their appearances, leading to objectification.⁶ Even though Malayalam movies have long been detached from such practices, other industries still have this going on.

SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

The Hema Committee Report (2020) has horrible testimonies of women in cinema who were subjected to sexual assault by men of superior stature or position. Malayalam cinema, being a small-scale cinema industry, runs with the power of prominent actors. So most of the time takes their decision more seriously than those of directors and producers. The report talks of a few such men who use this unique power to subdue women into sexual favours. The women talk about constant 'knocks on the door' and sexually coloured messages. If the women refuse to comply with such requests, these men use their power to shun such actresses from upcoming movies and take their work from them.⁷

New and upcoming actresses are brainwashed into thinking that if they want to stay in this field, they'll have to make some 'compromises and adjustments.' They even go on to cite famous actresses and say they complied with such requests, and that is why they are in such good

³ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975) 16(3) Screen
<<https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6>> accessed 08 December 2024

⁴ Meena T. Pillai, 'Camera Obscura' to 'Camera Dentata': Women Directors and the Politics of Gender in Malayalam Cinema' (2020) 11(1) BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies
<<https://doi.org/10.1177/0974927620939330>> accessed 08 December 2024

⁵ Uma Chakravarti, *The Social Dimensions of Early Indian Literature* (Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers 1996)

⁶ Sundaram, K., *The Aesthetic Representation of Women in Indian Cinema* (Cultural Studies Quarterly, 2021).

⁷ Hema Committee, *Report on the Issues in the Malayalam Film Industry* (2020)

positions. It was also brought to notice that 'casting couches' still prevail. Women are still exploited in the name of casting calls. Such practices can be curtailed with harsher punitive laws, and the glorifying of leading actors should also be reduced.

JUNIOR ARTISTS AND CREW

According to SS Rajamouli, Malayalam cinema has the best background characters because they act so naturally. Yet junior artists are one of the most deprived classes in Malayalam cinema; they are underpaid and have inhumane working conditions. They are also subjected to sexual exploitation. Junior artists are usually hired and supplied by agencies to the cinema sets; therefore, the production controller pays the agency. Some testimonies go like this: on days when the producer decides to pay Rs. 5000 to each junior artist, the money, after going through the agency and all the middlemen, reaches the artist as maybe Rs.700-800. People who travel to the set from faraway places are not able to get substantial returns from this because of the travel costs.⁸ There should exist proper contracts between the person in charge and the artists so that they get the remuneration they deserve.

The work environment set for the junior artists is even worse. A set that requires 500 junior artists would ask for 1000. After selecting the few they require, they don't allow the ones that weren't selected to go in case they need to supplement. The selected and the not selected spend most of the time from 7 am to 10 pm with no resting facilities or anything. They are not even provided with chairs or restrooms. Even women are not given restroom facilities, which makes the situation even worse. There were instances where extras were shouted at for sitting in a chair and told they would never be called back. Women are not even allowed to change rooms since the set is in remote locations. The producers find it burdensome to provide dressing rooms for extras. It was proposed that circular curtain rods with thick curtains could be used for extras to change. This is economical for producers and gives privacy to the extras.

⁸ *Ibid*

There was an instance where Junior artists made a WhatsApp group to get to know each other and use the platform to put forward their issues. Something made with such good intentions was eventually turned into a ‘meat market’ where active soliciting occurred.

Female makeup artists face a lot of misogynistic rules and regulations in their associations. The association put an age restriction of 35 years old for female makeup artists to get a membership in the association, and production houses won’t work with people who don’t have a membership in this association. In essence, they are banning women over 35 from working as makeup artists when this association has not been conferred such rights. When the committee talked with the office-bearer, they were ignorant of the limitations of their positions and believed they had every right to impose such restrictions.

WHY EXISTING LAWS ARE INSUFFICIENT?

The report emphasizes that the implementation of the Internal Complaint Committee (ICC) prescribed by the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013 (POSH Act)⁹ is not done on most cinema sets, which leaves women without a formal redressal mechanism.¹⁰ The informal work structure where most people are working as freelancers, the lack of support from peers and authorities, and the patriarchal system that exists in the industry make women hesitate to make complaints.

The film business does not have any industry-specific rules or guidelines for dealing with gender-based concerns. There is a protection gap because standard labor or sexual harassment rules do not adequately address the particular difficulties experienced by women, such as gender-based pay disparities and casting couch practices.

⁹ Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act 2013

¹⁰ Hema Committee, *Report on the Issues in the Malayalam Film Industry* (2020)

SOLUTIONS PROPOSED

The govt. An industry-specific tribunal could be established that would handle cases of sexual harassment and discrimination in the cinema industry.¹¹ This tribunal would act as a dedicated body with the power to handle gender-based matters fairly and openly. Regardless of the internal politics of the film industry, it would give women an official forum to voice their grievances without worrying about reprisals or harm to their careers.

The government should mandate all production houses to constitute an ICC according to the POSH Act. The committee should constitute neutral members and offer a safe, structured way for women to file complaints of sexual harassment and discrimination. There should be an increase in women's representation in decision-making bodies. This would help women have control over the decisions that are going to affect them in terms of working conditions and content creation.

Standard contracts should be established for all film employees, particularly women, to guarantee openness regarding job requirements, compensation, and working conditions. The contract would also address the necessity of equal compensation for men and women in the sector and advocate for stricter laws to close the gender pay gap.

A support network can be established exclusively for women where they can seek legal advice and psychological counseling. This network would empower women to come forward with complaints and seek help without fear of isolation or reprisal. Finally, the government should regularly monitor and implement the measures mentioned above. This includes regular evaluations of working conditions and government supervision to guarantee that unions and production companies adhere to legal obligations.

CONCLUSION

Misogyny and gender discrimination have long plagued Malayalam cinema despite its reputation for artistic integrity and prioritizing script over commercial appeal. The Hema

¹¹ *Ibid*

Committee Report's recent public release highlights the harsh reality that women in the industry must contend with, including a history of harassment, exploitation, and deeply ingrained patriarchal institutions. Misogyny has permeated Malayalam film screenplays and working environments, from historical events like PK Rosy's exile in 1928 to current problems like the 'casting couch' and male performers abusing their position. Women are still relegated to passive characters, objectified by the 'male gaze' in scripts, harassed at work, and paid differently based on their gender.

The research also highlights the difficulties junior artists and crew members experience as they confront exploitation, subpar working conditions, and unfair compensation with little institutional protection or remedy. The problem is made worse by the insufficiency of current legislation, especially the POSH Act's uneven application, which leaves women without official channels for redress and feeds the cycle of oppression and silence.

Industry-specific tribunals, mandated Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs), increased female leadership, and standard contracts that ensure equitable treatment and compensation are the right way to go forward despite these obstacles. Together with continued government oversight, these measures could make the business a more secure and equal place for women. Once contributing to this misogynistic culture, Malayalam film is now at a turning point when it can spearhead the shift to a more equitable and inclusive sector, where the working conditions and the scripts both uphold the principles of equality and respect for all.