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Cyberbullying and Punishments (Concentrating on Kerala Women)

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CYBERBULLYING AND PUNISHMENTS
(Concentrating on Kerala Women)

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- Kerala a South Indian State

Kerala is a south Indian state, where the literacy rate is 100%. Kerala also has the highest Human Development Index rate in India. In Kerala, from past years, women who are open about their opinion are the easy targets of cyberbullies. Death threats, rape threats, and body shaming are often used by bullies. Even though cyber harassing cases are increasing, there are no laws that are helping women. I am trying to analyze the ethics of some of the punishments given to cyberbullies by the Kerala society and what makes Keralite women easy targets of cyberbullies. Even after being one of the highly developed states in India, why is this happening in Kerala?

- Cyber Harassment Cases in Kerala and Culture

Currently, cyber harassment cases are increasing in Kerala. If we look closely into it, we can understand that most cyberbullying is against women. Men who defend the harassed women are also the target of cyberbullies on Social Media. According to the article *Cyber Crimes in Kerala: A Study*, Kerala is in the 6th place when it comes to cyber-crimes in India. They also point out that 5 out of 8 cyber cases are against women in Kerala. According to the State Government of Kerala, most women bullied online are teenagers or young women. Most cyber cases in Kerala are reported in Kochi, the commercial capital of Kerala.

Women in India are expected to be ideal. Mostly they are categorized below men. This old-fashioned mindset exists in Kerala too. The increasing number of cyber-crimes against women proves it. Kerala's sex ratio (women to men) is the highest in India and the only state where women outnumber men. Compared to other parts of India, women hold a much important household. Still, women are expected to restrict themselves from voicing their thoughts for their benefit. According to the article *Rape victims in Kerala*, rape victims and their families face public humiliation.

- How fish fries can make someone feminist?

In India, from birth onwards, girls are subjected to several unwritten rules. It is applicable in Kerala too even if the intensity of these rules is less. Typically in a Kerala household girls and boys are treated differently. There are chores that only girls can do or are supposed to do! Most household chores are the responsibility of girls. She might be responsible for washing the unclean utensils of her brother and other household members. There are even some unwritten rules in serving food at a dining table. Rima Kallingal, the recipient of the Kerala state award for best actress in 2013, in a TEDx talk shared how she became a feminist because of three fish fries. Her story is the best example to showcase the discrimination girls face at their dining tables.

When Kallingal was 12 years old, her family was having dinner. She, her grandmother, her father, and her brother was seated while her mother was serving the food. Even though the mother can sit down if everyone serves their meals that never happened. There were three fish fries which Kallingal's mother serves to the males and her mother-in-law. The youngest girl starts weeping thinking why she does not deserve to have the fish fry. Her mother considers this as an overreaction. I think little Rima Kallingal might have received the fish fry if the maternal grandmother was seated instead of the paternal grandmother. Kallingal's mother who refuses to give fish fry to her daughter is probably doing it because she might not have probably got fish fries her entire life.

Upon publishing Kallingal's TEDx talk she received massive criticism and online trolling from social media platforms. She was brutally bullied online. Some bullies said that Rima Kallingal must be given three fish fries immediately to shut her up. She was trolled and criticized by the patriarchal elements of society. Her troll videos were in trend in video streaming

websites. One of the major criticisms Kallingal faced was that she is being silly and should move on from the fish fry. I agree it is silly for all those privileged males who were served fish fries even before asking for it. This is not only the incident where Kallingal was cyberbullied.

I surveyed eighteen Keralite women, nine mothers in their 40s and early fifties, and their daughters who were between the ages of 18 and 21. Every three mother-daughter pairs were Christians, Hindus, and Muslims. This was to examine how religion affects their views. Considering these eighteen women, I found out that religion did not play many roles. Mother-daughter pairs were from different parts of Kerala. When asked except one 20 years old, all were never bullied online. It was later revealed that it's because they limit what they post online. More than 76 percent agreed that they think twice before posting something online. That is the main reason why they were not bullied. Women have less freedom of expressing opinions in public.

- Parvathy Thiruvothu- A Fearless Woman

Parvathy Thiruvothu is an Indian actress who predominantly works in the South Indian film industry (Malayalam, Tamil, and Kannada film industries. In India, states are divided based on the language spoken. Malayalam, Tamil, and Kannada are languages spoken in southern Indian states Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka respectively.). She is a two-time recipient of the Kerala State Film Award for best actress. Parvathy Thiruvothu formerly known as Parvathy Menon changed her surname since it represented her caste title. Thiruvothu is widely known for her fearless statements on public issues. When male superstars take a safe stand by not intervening in public affairs, Thiruvothu is one of the few film stars who grab attention for bravely publishing her statements. One might ask what is very courageous in posting something online, it is just a matter of a click. Thiruvothu's case is different. She is in a place where

feminists are shamed online and where some people (including women) still believe that women are inferior to men. One response from my survey said that women are inferior to men. Thiruvothu has faced cyberbullying multiple times. As a result of years of cyberbullying, she took a break from social media in 2018. She eventually returned a couple of months later.

One of the main cyberbullying Thiruvothu had to face was when she openly expressed her disagreement with the misogynistic scenes from the 2016 Malayalam movie '*Kasaba*'. *Kasaba* stars one of the superstars of the Malayalam film industry, Mammooty who has a career spanning over four decades. According to an online news website *Firstpost*, at an open forum at the International Film Festival of India in 2017, Thiruvothu, while discussing misogyny in movies, referred to *Kasaba*. This irked Mammooty fans all over the world and she was continuously bullied on social media. One fact that might shock someone is that some of the most hate Thiruvothu received were from women. The fact that Thiruvothu was sharing the stage with Rima Kallingal and Geetu Mohandas (Indian Director and Actress) angered the cyberbullies more than any other. The consequence was, she faced rape threats, acid attack threats, and death threats on social media. The controversial scene in *Kasaba* displays a misogynistic attitude. Thiruvothu argued that it leaves a message that doing such things might look sexy and cool even if it is not.

Prominent Malayalam stars including Mammooty did not come to publicly support Thiruvothu. A writer-director Vishakan K.P. criticized Thiruvothu by calling her a fascist. According to *newsminute.com*, *Kasaba* director, Nithin Renji Panicker posted on social media that Thiruvothu is trying to be popular by shaking a big tree. My question is, why would Parvathy Thiruvothu who went to the International Film Festival of India in 2017 to receive that year's best actress award, who is already the center of attraction, say something to get more

attention? Another prominent derogatory comment was from Malayalam film producer Joby George. He said,

"If Geethu aunty and Parvathy aunty tell me the dates of their birthday, I will show Kasaba in the full house as my birthday gift." (*thenewsminute.com*)

Thiruvothu lodged a complaint against the Mammooty fans who abused her on social platforms. Some namely Printo and Rojan from the Kollam district of Kerala were arrested in connection with the case. Both were released later. Upon release, Printo was offered a job by producer Joby George. There were also people like Kerala Finance Minister Thomas Isaac, who suggested the cyber attack was deplorable and praised Thiruvothu for making Kerala proud by winning the best actress award at the International Film Festival of India.

- Bhagyalakshmi and group

On 26th September 2020, around 4 pm, Bhagyalakshmi, a famous Malayalam dubbing artist along with two other activists (Diya Sanaa and Sreelakshmi Arakkal) confronted Vijay P. Nair, a YouTuber for posting abusive videos against women. Bhagyalakshmi and the group, video recorded the whole incident. Arakkal live-streamed it on Facebook. The Youtuber was slapped and poured motor oil. The protesters forced the man to apologize to his bullies. Nair was in his lodge room at Thiruvananthapuram, the capital of Kerala. His laptop and other electronic gadgets were taken away by the women. These were later submitted to the police by the women themselves for proof against Vijay P. Nair in Thampanoor police station.

Nair who claims to have a doctorate in clinical psychology identifies himself as an author on his youtube channel and made derogatory comments against women for months.



Bhagyalakshmi and and Diya Sanaa Confronting Vijay P. Nair at his lodge room. Image Credit: She The People

Bhagyalakshmi also filed a complaint against Santhivila Dinesh (an Indian Film Director). He also, just like Nair, abused women online especially on his youtube channels *Lights Camera Action* and *Talks-Let Me Talk*. Dinesh and Nair abused not only women but also older film personalities. Ahead of this confrontation, multiple police complaints were lodged against Dinesh and Nair across Kerala. But due to the lack of strong laws, no action was taken against the accused. Right after the incident Bhagyalakshmi and the group did not back off from answering the media's questions. Their immediate response was covered live by famous Malayalam news channels. According to Manorama News, Bhagyalakshmi said that they resorted to the protest as the police did not act on their complaint. She also said they were fed up with the insult they had been facing. The group of women also said that they are ready to face any consequence from the law that once failed to protect them. According to Manorama News, the protesters had filed a complaint against Vijay P. Nair and Santhivila Dinesh, with the State

Women's Commission, Cyber Cell, Women and Child Development department, and State Gender Advisor. The point to be noticed is that the women did not try to hide what they did, they even went streamed live the confrontation on Facebook. They called their act a protest against cyberbullies and laws. Bhagyalakshi and the group received both support and criticism from Kerala society. Charges were pressed against Bhagyalskmi by Vijay P. Nair for assaulting him.

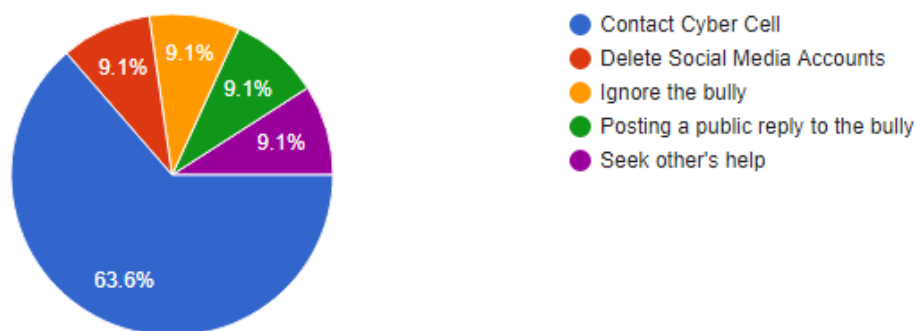
- Ethically Right Or Wrong?

If the police acted at the right time the incident could have been prevented from happening. After the incident police were able to remove Vijay P. Nair's youtube channel. The deleted channel streamed a handful of defamatory videos. Santhivila Dinesh's channels are still on youtube. It has not been taken down. As of 6th December 2020, *Lights Camera Action* has 55.4K subscribers. It means that there are at least 55.4K people who agree with what he says. His words influence these people.

Police only charged only three weakailable provisions of the law. Following were the charges pressed against Nair: Indian Penal Code section 354 A(1) – sexual harassment and sexually colored remarks; IPC section 509 – insulting the modesty of a woman, and section 120 (O) of Kerala Police Act – a public nuisance. The charges were not at all strong that cyberbullies walked out freely. In August 2020, Nisha Purushothamon, a leading journalist, filed a complaint on cyber cell after being cyberbullied. Posts containing vulgar messages were posted against her. The sections invoked against the accused were similarly used in Bhagyalakshmi's case. In Purushothamon's case instead of 354 A(1), 354 D (for stalking) was used. Two people arrested in connection were able to walk out free. A grand reception was organized by the Communist Party Unit in Chavara, Kollam. Diya Sanaa, a gender rights activist, who was with

Bhagyalakshmi while confronting Vijay P. Nair, filed a complaint in cyber cell of Kerala against a cyberbully a month ago before the incident. No charges were pressed against the cyberbully. There were no existing provisions to arrest the accused man.

If you ever get bullied online, what will you do?



In my survey, 63.6% of women said they will contact the cyber cell of Kerala if they face cyber harassment. But will justice be served? Rima Kallingal, Parvathy Thiruvothu, Diya Sana, Nimisha Purushothoman were only four of many who were not served justice after officially filing a complaint. In September 2020, there were no cyber laws that were able to be used against cyberbullies like Vijay P. Nair. But today as a consequence of Bhagyalakshmi's case Kerala cyber laws are being reformed. It is right that Bhagyalakshmi, Diya Sana, and Sreelakshmi Arakkal took the law into their hands. They physically attacked Vijay P. Nair. Physical attack is a criminal offense. Right after the confrontation Vijay P. Nair reportedly said that he will not file any charges against the protesters. He even admitted his fault publicly. But after some time he declared that he is going to legally file a case. What might have led to his change of decision? There are widespread anonymous reports that some members of the patriarchal society are behind this decision. It is a molester's world.

Physically hurting someone is not right. It is morally wrong. In November anticipatory bail was granted to Bhagyalakshmi and two others by the High Court of Kerala. Justice Ashok Menon granted bail on the execution of a bond of Indian Rupees 50,000 (Almost US\$ 680). Ashok Menon suggested that even though vigilantism shown by the group cannot be accepted, imprisoning them would not teach them a lesson. The fact that Bhagyalakshmi and the gang reported themselves before police right after the incident, and never attempted to escape from police suggests that they were willing to cooperate with the police. These ladies also did not have a criminal background. So can they be labeled criminals? By taking the law into their hands, what this group of women did was morally wrong. But were they not forced to do this by the system? The fact that new cyber laws are being made is proof that their action is making a positive difference. If Kerala has stronger cyber laws, women would not be forced to take laws into their hands.

- A Positive Change

Some shocking comments that I came across during the survey are that women are being cyberbullied because they do not know how to properly use them. When Thiruvothu's and Kallingal's cyberbullying cases were reported a few years ago, more than support, they faced backlash. They did not physically handle the cyberbullies. But in 2020, surprisingly three women who confronted cyberbully received support from the Kerala Society. It can be viewed as a positive change. One of the criticisms the Bhagyalkshmi faced was why she did not take her grown-up sons with her to confront Vijay P. Nair. According to them, if her sons confronted Nair it would be considered as an act of heroism. When a woman slaps a man her status is diminished. K.K Shailaja, current Kerala Health, and Social Welfare Minister, publicly announced her

support to the three women. Former Malayalam actress Lissy called Bhagyalakshmi and the group's activities, a strong step against cyberbullies. Consequently, Chief Minister of Kerala, Pinarayi Vijayan announced that Kerala Government would not allow any sort of insults against women.

Why are women cyberbullied? Why are they cyberbullied again and again? Women are cyberbullied more than men. This is not just the case in Kerala. It applies to the whole world. According to the article *Battle of the sexes: An examination of male and female cyber bullying*, women are more likely to get cyberbullied online. It is because still, even some people think that women are inferior to men. According to those people, women are still the weaker sex. During my talk with a forty-eight-year-old Keralite woman, Leela (pseudonym), she argued that women are not superior or inferior to men. She said that all genders are equal. That is when the question about physical strength was raised. When we examine physically aren't the men stronger usually? Her reply was no. She argued that with the advent of modern technology women can do any hard work that requires physical strength. She also pressed on saying that intelligence weighs more than physical strength.

People will have opposing views on different matters. Some of the views might be wrong. But those people with wrong views think that their views are right. What people with morally right views must do is to speak out. During 2017, all social media in Kerala brutally criticized women for publicly expressing their concerns and opinions. Those women's social media posts were bombarded with derogatory comments from cyberbullies. We should appreciate the fact that Thiruvothu and Kallingal did not back down even when their career came at risk (they were threatened that they will not receive job offers). But today, in 2020 these same women are receiving support from the public. Current supporters supported these women in 2017

too. The thing is they only started to publicly express their voice now. It is a psychological fact that humans tend to back down from expressing their views if they are surrounded by people with opposite views. But if you start expressing your opinion bravely, others with similar opinions will come together. I think we should continue doing that not only in Kerala but also around the world. Remember that social reformations started when some people bravely came forward.

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