

India's #MeToo movement suddenly takes off

MUMBAI, INDIA

But effect may take time in a deeply patriarchal and traditional society

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After a year of fits and starts, India's #MeToo movement has leapt forward over the past week, getting concrete action in two of the country's most powerful industries: entertainment and the news media.

Phantom Films, a major Bollywood production house that made "Sacred Games" for Netflix, was suddenly dissolved last weekend, with two of four partners publicly apologizing for mishandling an employee's complaint that she had been sexually assaulted in 2015 by a third partner, Vikas Bahl.

One of the country's premier comedy troupes, All India Bakshod, was on the brink of collapse with accusations by a comedian, Mahima Kukreja, that a former member of the group had sent her lewd messages and a picture of his genitals. After other women chimed in, the accused comic, Utsav Chakraborty, apologized, and the company's co-founders were forced to step away.

The Bollywood actress Tanushree Dutta filed a new complaint with the police, reviving her 10-year-old case against a prominent actor, Nana Patekar, who is accused of ordering changes to a movie dance sequence so he could grope her.

Inspired by Ms. Dutta and Ms. Kukreja, as well as by the Senate testimony of Christine Blasey Ford in the United States, dozens of women in journalism began coming forward on Friday,

describing a variety of inappropriate behavior by male reporters and editors at some of India's biggest news organizations.

"It almost felt like the women were waiting," Ms. Kukreja said in an interview. "Am I allowed to share my trauma? Am I allowed to share my story?"

By Monday afternoon, the influential political editor of The Hindustan Times, Prashant Jha, had been stripped of his management role as the company investigated a former reporter's complaint that he had sexually harassed her. On the same day, seven women sent a letter to The Times of India, the flagship paper of the country's most powerful media company, accusing a top editor of years of unwanted touching, explicit messages and sexual propositions. The editor, K. R. Sreenivas, was put on leave amid promises of "a speedy and fair inquiry."

Other journalists are under investigation by their employers or have apologized for inappropriate behavior, and #MeToo accusations have begun spreading to other areas, including advertising and politics. At least four women have accused a government minister for external affairs, the former newspaper editor M. J. Akbar, of sexually harassing them when he was a journalist. Mr. Akbar has not made any comment about the allegations.

On Monday, the Bollywood writer and producer Vinta Nanda posted a searing account on Facebook accusing a prominent actor, whom she later identified as Alok Nath, of raping her in her home in the 1990s. Mr. Nath — best known for playing father figures, such as Bill Cosby did in the United States — told the Indian news channel ABP on Tuesday, "It must have happened, but someone else would have done it." He did not want to discuss it further.

The flurry of activity has created a



ATUL LOKE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The writer Sandhya Menon, left, and the Bollywood actress Tanushree Dutta. Both have accused men they have worked with of making unwanted sexual advances.

commotion among the educated elite, but it has had little immediate effect on the vast majority of women in India, a deeply patriarchal and traditional society in which women and girls often have little control over their lives and are frequently abused.

Over the weekend, for example, more than 30 girls at a rural school in northern India were beaten by local boys and some of their parents after trying to stop months of harassment and lewd graffiti. Taking note of the attack during a hearing Monday on an unrelated abuse case, a Supreme Court justice asked: "A girl is not supposed to protect herself? If somebody tries to molest them, they must agree?"

The #MeToo movement's impact in India has been comparatively modest. In the United States, for instance, complaints about sexual harassment and assault have led to a prison sentence for Mr. Cosby, criminal charges against the

Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein and changes in both laws and corporate practices. The movement has also exposed deep social divisions, as evidenced by the battle over the Supreme Court nomination of Brett M. Kavanaugh, whom Dr. Blasey accused of sexual assault when they were teenagers.

Women's rights advocates said that for India, the events of the past week had been stunning, with the movement in the country gathering momentum.

"It's almost like a wave has come," said Vrinda Grover, a New Delhi lawyer and human rights activist who helped draft some of India's laws on sexual harassment and child abuse. "Until now, we have seen consequences only on the women who complained. This time, the consequences are for those who have committed the misconduct."

Sandhya Menon, a freelance writer who posted on Twitter the first public complaints about Mr. Sreenivas and two

other journalists on Friday, said her goal had been to improve men's behavior and to push employers to hold harassers accountable.

"I didn't expect this level of action," Ms. Menon said in an interview. (Mr. Sreenivas declined to comment beyond saying that he was cooperating with the newspaper's investigation.)

After Ms. Menon accused Gautam Adhikari, the former editor in chief of The Times of India, of unwanted kissing while she was working for him at another newspaper, a former Times of India reporter spoke up with a similar account.

"This behavior has to be shamed," the former reporter, Sonora Jha, now a professor of communication at Seattle University, said in an interview.

Mr. Adhikari, who is retired and lives in the Washington area, said in an email that he did not recall the incidents described. "I would sincerely apologize if I made anyone uncomfortable in my presence, but I deny sexually harassing anyone," he wrote. Nevertheless, citing the "stain on his reputation," he resigned as a fellow at the Center for American Progress, a liberal research institute, and said he would stop writing his column for The Times of India.

The public allegations against Mr. Weinstein a year ago helped #MeToo quickly become a powerful movement in the United States, but an Indian equivalent has struggled to get a foothold. Despite several attempts, including the publication of a list of academics accused of harassment, the effort failed to gain much traction.

Ms. Kukreja, the comedian, said that it had been cathartic to see so many women speak out now, but that it was also difficult to hear so many stories of men behaving badly. "I had four days straight of panic attacks," she said.

Speaking out has had its risks. The backlash on Twitter has been intense,

with some commenters demanding evidence or suggesting that the women had encouraged the come-ons.

Some of the women who shared their stories said that they had gone to their bosses or human resources departments, but that no action had been taken. India's court system moves at such a glacial pace that a rape case against one prominent editor, Tarun Tejpal, is still pending five years after it was filed.

And people accused of misconduct have often been quick to fight back in the courts. Rajendra Pachauri, who stepped down as head of the United Nations' panel on climate change after sexual harassment charges by a female employee, filed a defamation suit against Ms. Grover, the rights advocate, for releasing statements from two other accusers who said they were willing to testify against him.

The case of Ms. Dutta, the Bollywood actress, shows just how arduous it can be to pursue a sexual harassment claim.

She first made the allegations against Mr. Patekar while they were working on a film in 2008. Ms. Dutta said Mr. Patekar pushed to change a dance routine to make it more physically intimate.

She fled the set, and a mob surrounded her car, smashed the windshield and trapped her inside.

She filed a police complaint against Mr. Patekar, who denied the allegations. And she spoke openly to the Indian news media, which covered the story extensively for several days. Then everyone moved on.

Still, India is changing, she said. "Maybe the evolution is slower compared to the West, but evolution is inevitable. It is happening in the remotest, darkest corners of our planet."

Vindu Goel and Ayesha Venkataraman reported from Mumbai, and Kai Schultz from New Delhi. Hari Kumar contributed reporting from New Delhi.