

STATEMENT AGAINST SEXUAL HARASSMENT AT ASIAN COLLEGE OF JOURNALISM, CHENNAI

In October 2017, a crowd sourced list of academicians from Indian universities, who had allegedly sexually harassed students was posted on social media. Names of prominent Indian academics and public intellectuals featured on the list, including of men from Chennai. It had very little traction in the city until an article by [Neerja Dasani](#) appeared in The News Minute. Though no names were named, her account of the harassment she had endured was poignant and disturbing; even more troubling was the identity of the man who had harassed her. Those familiar with the original list of possible offenders, immediately recognised who she was referring to.

On reading the article, some of us in Chennai, including past adjunct faculty of an educational institution where the alleged perpetrator teaches, got in touch with Neerja. Several young people who had been subject to harassment by the same individual also reached out to Neerja and to various of us. We were horrified at the stories we heard, especially of those that involved minors and members of the LGBTQI+ community – he had allegedly made sexual advances at people who used the well-known Chennai [cultural arena](#), Spaces, with which he is associated. We found out too that he had done the same in at least one other educational institution where he had taught earlier.

Since the people who had spoken to her were too vulnerable to come out with their stories, even though they wanted to call the man out on his sexual misconduct, Neerja decided to lodge a formal complaint with the Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) of one of the educational institutions where the perpetrator taught, and of which she herself was a former student. After three months of correspondence with the institution, she was told that the matter was time-barred since the said incident happened when she was no longer a student and at a location away from the college (the incident took place at Spaces). Even when she pointed out that there have been instances where such complaints had been granted the seriousness they deserve, the ICC refused to relent from its limited, procedural interpretation of sexual harassment. The fact that the alleged perpetrator continued to teach at the institute made no difference to the institute's decision to close the file without inquiry.

Meanwhile, students of that same institution had got in touch with Neerja. They also raised a separate complaint with the ICC, demanding an inquiry be initiated against this person since his name had appeared on the list, and some of his victims had spoken to them about being harassed by him. Their complaint, too, was dismissed.

While we are very aware that complaints and allegations of sexual misconduct need to be investigated and due procedure observed, this case clearly shows how individuals and institutions use the notion of procedure as a convenient alibi to not take sexual harassment seriously. Due procedure ought to be observed both by complainants and institutions, but sadly, the latter seek to subvert it rather than approach it with the diligence and empathy that is required in these matters.

It is in this context that we have sought to make public the name of the offender, and the institution where he is currently adjunct faculty. The man in question is Sadanand Menon, well-known and highly regarded cultural critic and journalist. The institution that has refused to consider Neerja's and the students' complaints is the Asian College of Journalism, where every year around 200 students enroll to become discerning, sensitive journalists.

Our demands are:

1. We would like ACJ to consider seriously the allegations against Sadanand Menon from the point of view of ethics and accountability and not cite procedural reasons for not wanting to do so. Prevention of sexual harassment is a mandate under the Sexual Harassment at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act whose underlying principle is that it is the employer/institution's duty to ensure that the workplace (in this case the institution) is safe for students. This inquiry must not remain a formal procedure but actually lead to appropriate punitive action. This is particularly important in this instance, where the individual concerned, Sadanand Menon, enjoys undisputed cultural authority and social power.
2. Further, ACJ also has a moral responsibility to assure students that it receives each year, that it takes sexual harassment seriously, and will do all it can to make its premises safe, not only for students but all others associated with it, including staff at every level and those who visit the institution for various purposes. The ICC therefore must be an enabling instrument, and one sensitive to how power plays out in institutions in our context.
3. We wish to note that Sadanand Menon is not only with ACJ, but also a trustee of Spaces, which, to all intentions and purposes, has served as a public arena, used by a range of Chennai-based artists, performers, students, political and civil society groups. Like all public arenas, Spaces, too, owes a measure of accountability to those that use it – and this is also a factor that needs to be addressed by those invested in sexual and gender justice.

4. Since Menon is associated with a number of other educational and cultural institutions it is incumbent on civil society as a whole to remind itself that powerful, charismatic men, charged with mentorship of the young can, and do, misuse the enormous goodwill and trust that young people repose in them; and that however progressive they might claim to be, they are not above treating young persons as sexual prey. In our social context, intellectual authority and allure are not as relentlessly interrogated or made accountable, as more visible and crass expressions of power. This grants intellectual mentors an impunity that urges them on to sexual and other forms of misconduct. The challenge is to call them out, without demonising them or rendering them martyrs and to make them subject not only to the rule of law, but of civility and respect.

The questions we raise go beyond the legal, though the legal arena is where we translate civility into law. To balance legal as well as civic claims to justice and equality is a challenge and we trust and hope that our institutions and civil society meets this challenge in a creative and productive way.

Signed:

1. V. Geetha, Writer and Publisher, Chennai
2. Prema Revathi, Writer, Publisher and Actor, Chennai
3. Kavitha Muralidharan, Journalist, Chennai
4. L. Ramakrishnan, Queer and Women's Rights Activist, Chennai
5. Nithya Caleb, Journalist
6. PV Srividya, Journalist, Krishnagiri
7. Deepan Kannan, Queer Feminist, Chennai
8. Sudipto Mondal, Reporter, Bangalore
9. Sujat Ambedkar, Sub Editor, Prabuddh Bharat, Mumbai
10. Ayesha Minhaz, Independent Journalist, Hyderabad
11. Adv. S Devika, Theatre Artist and Lawyer, Chennai
12. Sharadha Shankar, IT professional, Chennai
13. Priyadharshini P, Filmmaker, Chennai
14. Sofia Ashraf, Writer and Rapper, Chennai
15. Archanaa, Writer and Environmental Activist, Chennai
16. Sharanya Manivannan, Writer, Chennai

17. Karthik Shankar, Writer, Chennai
18. Shweta Narayan, Environmental Researcher and Activist, Chennai
19. Dharmesh Shah, Environmental Activist & Public Policy Researcher, Chennai
20. Pooja Kumar, Environmental Activist, Chennai
21. Annie Thomas, Journalist
22. Lakshmi Subramanian, Journalist
23. DVL Padma Priya, Independent Journalist
24. Sriram Ayer, Founder, NalandaWay Foundation
25. Prayag Desai, ACJ 2018
26. Neha Mathews, ACJ 2018
27. Greeshma Aruna Rai, ACJ 2018
28. Eisha Nair, ACJ 2018
29. Chayanika Das, ACJ 2018
30. Vishwam Sankaran, ACJ 2018
31. Megha Kaveri, ACJ 2018
32. Kirthika Soundararaja, ACJ 2018
33. Trisha Jalan, ACJ 2018
34. Rochana Mohan, ACJ 2018
35. Sidharth Ravi, ACJ 2018