**Sound & fury, but...**

BY Z U B E I D A M U S T A FA 2021-03-12

THOSE who sow the seeds of change must first prepare the soil for it. That is the immediate thought that occurred to me when I read about the Aurat March, its bold posters and the backlash last Monday. It created a rumpus but the gravity of its message was lost in the melee. That is because we never remember that we have to take it step by step when addressing sensitive issues.

For decades after the initial excitement of the early years of feminism had subsided, International Women`s Day had become a ritualised event to recall the achievements and non-achievements of women in their struggle against the burden of oppression put on them by the forces of patriarchy.

Once feminism stopped making ripples and frustration set in, it was time for change. And it came spontaneously in the form of the Aurat March in 2018. It was the radicals who responded to the challenge. I admire their courage to act but not their strategy.

Many of the problems highlighted by the Aurat March have existed for ages.

Feminists of my generation were aware of them too but were too slow in reaching the woman at the grassroots. The radicals have succeeded in mobilising a large number of people from all classes that we failed to reach. But do the leaders of the Aurat March have a solution? The real problem today is that the vast majority of women have internalised the prejudices we accuse patriarchy of perpetuating. The only tool to fight this war is education. But the forces of patriarchy are entrenched in the education sector. They ensured that women are not empowered.

Now we know that women at the grassroots are the ones who will hurt our cause most and also suffer the most from the backlash.

The fact is that our society has regressed over the years and it is more conservative today than it was before. The surge of religiosity and ritualistic faith has posed new challenges for feminism. On how many fronts will feminists fight? The Aurat March has done wonderful work in mobilising women especially students f rom universities and colleges. The fight has to go on after all.

What is heartening is the realisation that all these decades of activism, driven by the Women`s Action Forum, has at least made the women`s movement self-sustaining as is proved by its ability to survive the most misogynistic of military dictatorships and the most obscurantist of religious zealots who openly taunted women. The Aurat March would do well by taking a pause for some introspection and a public discourse.

In this context, Rubina Saigol`s new mon-ographisindeedtimely.TitledContradictions and Ambiguities of Feminism in Pakistan: Exploring the Fourth Wave, the publication enables us to take an insightful look at the women`s struggle in Pakistan. Rubina writes dispassionately, objectively and digs deep as a scholar should. Her focus is on the Aurat March, which, according to her, marks the inception of the fourth wave of feminism that has transformed the feminist landscape in the country.

In the three earlier phases, radicalisation of the women`s movement was a gradual process. WAF leaders continued to engage with the state and managed to have many progressive laws introduced and antiwomen legislation repealed.

Rubina identifies some features that have made `fourth wave` feminism so different from its predecessors. The participants come from all walks of life and cut across generation, gender (including LGBT) and class divide.

The Aurat March has refused to engagewith the state, the source of political power, political pardes and the mainstream media while connecting with one another on Facebook. If anything, it has challenged the state as well as the conservative ele-ments of society that means the majority.

Most importantly, the Aurat March has entered the `hallowed private sphere of the family, community and society`, evoking a strong public reaction the likes of which has neverbeen seen before.

Hence today there is more polarisation and confrontation between the sexes.

In the section `Way Forward`, Rubina makes some suggestions to the fourth-wave feminists. They make sense. Engage with the state where political power resides and which harbours patriarchy. Enter into a continuous dialogue with the media. Transition into a movement rather than remaining an annual event. There should be continuous engagement with the participants that would help them design their own strategies.

The fact is that the basic problem, which is education, has not been understood.

Today, we have a stratified society in terms of mindset and there is no will to tolerate one another. The Aurat March will have to rethink its strategy. Education has to be moved to the top of their agenda. m www.zubeidamustafa.com