**Revisiting the terms of debate**

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Over the last few months, the country was rocked by a number of anti-women incidents that brought the state of women’s rights into the limelight. Brutal and fearsome as those individual incidents were in their own right, they did highlight a pattern of impunity that defines the conduct of those who think that they can violate women’s rights without any serious consequences or repercussions.

The public backlash was spontaneous in its articulation, marked by an increasing realisation that there is something fundamentally wrong with the way our society treats anti-women incidents. A combination of dread and horror shaped the default behaviour towards the sheer ferocity of the events.

As with many issues of social interest, the life of debates on the suggested ways and means to safeguard women’s rights through institutional reforms is directly proportional to the amount of time and space the reprehensible incidents occupy on the national media. As soon as the news cycle is replaced by another set of news, there is a discernible decline in interest.

Social media platforms may enjoy more freedom in terms of the wider participation of the people and unrestricted flow of thoughts, but they also cannot help being influenced by the chain of events that push the issues out of public attention.

The purpose of mentioning this aspect is to outline the daunting nature of the challenge faced by women’s rights groups and individual campaigners whose courage and determination remains inspirational in an environment stuffed with the heaviest of the odds.

The problem of attention deficit is just a part of the entire gamut of obstacles. The more formidable ones relate to the deeply entrenched misogynist behaviours, patriarchy, and more importantly, the myriad of structures that make this fight so unequal.

It indeed goes to the credit of rights activists that they have carried on with their mission undaunted and did not allow these obstacles to stand in their way. One must be imbued with a real sense of purpose to advocate these social causes in an environment that is becoming inhospitable by the day.

As in the case of other causes that seek to transform society fundamentally, there is always a need for a review of the existing approaches and consequent improvisation in strategies to maximise the efforts. Such a revision is also necessitated by the principles of evolution.

While the core problems may remain the same or even become more complex, the way they are framed and articulated changes over time. Logically, the forces of resistance are also subject to the principles of evolution and find newer and more innovative ways to continue the fight. Hence, all the more need for a mid-course correction.

Over the last few years, since the Aurat March emerged as a symbol of our women’s relentless fight for their rights and dignity, the yearly mega event has been subjected to severe criticism. The controversy surrounding it has focused more on its form than substance, diverting attention from the core message whose understanding is so central to reshape our society.

This controversy is natural, for the forces of the status quo are not likely to take the resistance lightly and are only expected to use all means at their command to make the movement controversial. In their criticism, what they actually aim at is to discredit the movement for women’s rights.

Such criticism and controversies are employed with a dual purpose: they seek to expend and waste energies in wrangling over appearances so that the core message governing the movement may remain hidden from the public eye, and second, they seek to drive a wedge between the various classes of women in an effort to stop the movement from becoming a national one, owned and subscribed to by women across all ages, regions, castes and classes.

Little wonder then that the accusations that the Aurat March is a figment of the ‘Westernised’ mind fly here and there and are employed with boundless energy with the sole aim to delegitimise the entire struggle in the eyes of the people.

The polarisation that has emerged as a besetting sin of our times has also affected our women’s fight for their rights. Sporadic events reflecting resolve have their own importance but cannot be a substitute for a movement at the grassroots.

More often than not, rights campaigners have operated in their respective domains, contributing their bit to the advancement of overall objectives. There has, however, been a discernible lack of dialogue. Reaching out to women living away from major cities and enlisting their support will inject a mass appeal into the struggle and make it even more broad-based.

At the same time, structured dialogues need to be pursued over time with different segments and actors of society such as teachers, media, lawyers, students, workers’ bodies and even religious scholars, explaining to them the rationale of why women’s rights matter for the building of a fair and just society and addressing any concerns they may have. Such dialogues will bear more fruit if they are held in a spirit of accommodation and understanding.

Equally important is a dialogue with the political parties. Almost all of them, including the religious parties, include their versions of women’s empowerment as a necessary item in their manifestos. Such a dialogue will not only give political ownership to the whole enterprise but also lead to the framing of more workable pro-women policies by creating a consensus.

For the amplification of any message, the role of social media cannot be discounted. It has empowered citizens by giving them the means to express their opinions away from the confines of the mainstream media. This ‘independence’ has come at a cost though. Social media suffers from many defects, with ‘confirmation bias’ being more pronounced, where opinions get trashed or accepted depending upon how they accord with a majority view or otherwise.

Social media platforms have been optimally used to discredit the women’s rights movement. How women’s rights bodies engage with social media will not only be the key to finding a wide traction for their counternarrative but also exposing the reality of trolls, propagandists and vested interests who are focused on maligning their campaigns.

Undoubtedly, it is an arduous and unequal fight that has multiple prongs and requires time. More importantly, it requires a leader that can marshal disparate efforts into a compact organisation which, in turn, is capable of offering leadership as well as the vision to turbo-charge the movement with an inclusive agenda.

Only democratic leadership can undertake the onerous task of opening a dialogue with various segments of society and craft a consensus around the core agenda. There will still be opposition, which may become even worse, but it is the fight worth fighting for.

A society which treats its women as equal members will have the convincing claims of marching towards the 21st century and finding its rightful place in the league of nations. This is the least we can bequeath to our succeeding generations.

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