

Sunday Herald: Stand up & be counted

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Are the voices against injustice and the support for causes based on factual and informed footing?



Shefali Tripathi Mehta,

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When an OLA cab user tweeted that he declined a cab ride because it was driven by a person from a different faith and called him a ‘terrorist’, there was an indignant condemnation of him on Twitter. OLA took a stand against the person and tweeted to not just distance itself from his views, but also to reaffirm its own secular credentials, saying they do not discriminate ‘driver partners or customers on the basis of their caste, religion, gender or creed’. Earlier in 2016, Aamir Khan, after being the face of the Incredible India tourism campaign for 10 years, was dropped because he expressed his concern over feeling unsafe in India with the growing ‘intolerance’ towards religious minorities. He was also dropped from another of the government’s campaign and as the brand ambassador of an online retailer.

So it begins

It is not just companies and brands that have to act responsibly and clarify their stand on social media platforms, individuals too are motivated and compelled to take a stand on social, moral and political issues. The fact that it is easy and fast may be the most important reason most people use this medium to stand up to be counted. Taking a stand on social media is easy as it may only involve the use of a hashtag or change of profile picture to show solidarity with a cause – no explanation required, no details divulged. Secondly, it is quick and immediate. Almost a decade ago, as we completed a marathon, and were watching the prize presentation, in the order that it was done –

women first, men second, women less, men more — a bunch of people with black handkerchiefs tied around their foreheads, and carrying placards opposing the disparity in the prize money for men and women, stood around shouting slogans. It is believed that the fastest man earned three times more than the fastest woman. But it took a long time for this to change, just about two years ago. Today, most runs and marathons offer the same prize money for both men and women. But things like this are expected to change faster in these times of social media-led protests because of how quickly people can be mobilised, and the extent of support is impossible to contain within geographical boundaries.

Social media fuels debates and spreads messages leading to action on the ground, offline, and more and more people are participating in these to reaffirm their faith in what they think is just and right. Lina Krishan, poet and artist, says, “I think much of the inequity we see comes about through habitual entitlement of some sort, such as being middle class, male, or from a majoritarian group. So basically, you ignore whatever’s going on as long as your own kind is not affected, and call it taking a ‘neutral’ position. As writers, as artists, most of all, as citizens, it’s hard to look away from such injustice. Speaking out or countering it through one’s work may or may not be effective, but hopefully, it goes some way in questioning the dominant narrative.” Another firebrand woman on the forefront of protest marches, Shailaja Dixit, domestic violence advocate, says, “Your participation in the stream of life is diminished significantly if you don’t take a stand. It matters personally because it impacts self-esteem, relationships, growth, and the feeling of being complete, whole and productive.”

For most people who take a stand, it is really something very compelling that they cannot not do. According to reports, the hashtag #metoo was used by more than 4.7 million people in 12 million posts during the first 24 hours. When in October 2017, Alyssa Milano encouraged the use of the hashtag to help reveal the extent of sexual harassment women face, she was borrowing it from Tarana Burke who had used ‘Me Too’ to create empathy and solidarity among young women who have been subjected to sexual assault. But the reason why Burke was compelled to do it was because she was haunted by her own inaction when, as an activist working with marginalised young people years ago, she had passed up listening to a young girl’s account of sexual harassment. She thought she was ‘not ready’ then, but in the years following the incident, she had wondered why she did not just say, ‘me too’ to the girl to show solidarity and offer some comfort. Watching the spread of her idea in recent times, she has reportedly said, “It made my heart swell to see women using this idea — one that we call ‘empowerment through empathy’,” she tweeted, “to not only show the world how widespread and pervasive sexual violence is, but also to let other survivors know they are not alone.”

While women in India used the #metoo, most of them were guarded and used it in the veiled way of a ‘forward’ that could be perceived primarily as a show of support. This may just be a sign of a society still in transition. But, does the feeling of ‘I’m not alone in this’, help? It does, said many who did not want to be named. Just a decade ago, we were not required to ‘out’ ourselves like this. When NDTV started the SMS campaign for the

reopening of the trail of the Jessica Lal Murder Case, people were asked to send out SMSes so that an appeal could be made to the president. The news channel received more than 2,00,000 text messages. This mass mobilisation led to marches and rallies, encouraging people to come out of their homes. Students held a candlelight vigil at the India Gate. What made the 'threat' real to everyone was that Jessica was one among them against the powerful. This could happen to anyone — parents feared for their children; children feared for their friends and siblings. It felt as if just about anyone could be killed and the killer could go unpunished if they were rich and powerful.

I ask Amandeep Sandhu, writer and novelist, who engages with and is followed by many on Facebook, how he decides which cause is just; which he must support. He tells me that while working on his current book on Punjab, he travelled, saw and experienced the real issues facing the farmers. While it devastated him, it also gave him a grounding in not just the farmer issues, but through this experience to chaff through the real and fake with regard to other social, religious and political issues. It reconfirmed his belief that there is power hegemony and that most often than not, the poor and the marginalised are on the side of truth. On when he stood at his street corner holding a poster in support of a young rape and murder victim, I asked if it matters who or how many are in it with him. Or why some are complacent and silent. His answer was an emphatic no, he does not look for support. Interestingly, he says he does not do anything expecting action or change, "Nothing changes – but resistance is important. Speaking up is a primary right." He believes that there can never be "true" reporting but, "Democracy is eternal vigilance. Even if it is flawed. And so, we shouldn't stop trying."

On second thoughts

Multitudes of people simply follow others because there is little accountability or responsibility attached to their action in taking a stand. Thinking for ourselves, making informed decisions, hasn't really been part of any syllabus. For most of the FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) generation, it may just be another high from being part of an event or occurrence in time. But there are issues that move most people. Most social media users deliberate little before taking a stand against the violation of basic human rights, discrimination of any sort, especially of the vulnerable sections of society. These are issues most have a clear stand on; that they have zero-tolerance on. Vasanthi Hariprakash, journalist and founder of Pickle Jar, says, "I have stuck my neck out when it is to do with a child who has been violated, or something in the civic or the heritage space." But she also cautions to the flip side of solidarity-showing in the age of online campaigns — people sometimes sign up without knowing what they are getting into.

A lot of people who carried the 'Je suis Charlie' signs, proclaiming solidarity with the movement on social media, for the freedom of expression, were later conflicted when they came to know of Charlie Hebdo's tasteless jokes on religious leaders, especially the one mocking the death of the Syrian refugee toddler, Aylan Kurdi. How important is it to understand the cause well? I point to the Charlie Hedbo campaign and Manasa Rao, a young journalist, says, "Charlie Hebdo was making distasteful content long before it was attacked. While I might find its content deplorable, I will still defend its right to exist and

operate as a media house. That was the key message. However, one can easily fall into that trap on social media where most of us get our news these days. We first see the reactions and then learn of the news. We either support or reject the news based on opinions as though fact is something we have a choice in. Now, more than ever, we need to be wary of fake news and check our biases and form informed opinions by sifting through the fluff.”

I ask Shailaja how she sets an example for her young children. She says, “We have to rear youth who understand, engage, and are not cynical. For this to happen, they must witness an older generation that walks the talk and shows them that taking a stand and working diligently and peacefully towards it is a norm and not an anomaly.” She sums it up with, “Think globally, respond humanly, and take a stand locally.” Standing up for what one believes in, standing up for others who cannot, is then, not just a moral responsibility but a democratic right of every citizen. But equally important is it to stay aware, read, learn and trust one’s own judgment, rely on one’s core values and beliefs, and then, as Oprah Winfrey says, be “defined by what you stand for”.