

I have admired Meryl Streep all my life. It is not often that I find myself in the role of a fan or an avid admirer. I can neither swoon over a celebrity, nor fall at their feet. The advantage with Meryl Streep though is that I have not seen her in person. I have seen her acting and been left breathless by her talents, characterisations and histrionics. She has never failed to amaze me through her varied roles, from *Kramer versus Kramer* to *Devil Wears Prada*.

Even when she is giving an interview, I am all ears to hear what she has to say. In fact, it is easier to understand this person, Meryl Streep, through her interviews. I've been particularly impressed with an interview conducted by Evan Carmichael, which I have quoted in my writing here, where she Meryl discusses the rules of success for an actor.

Meryl suggests that one of the essential rules of success is hard work. However, her practical side tells us that luck, too, plays a role in the success of a person.

Could I be a Meryl Streep or even a small part of her little toe, even in my wildest dreams? But yes, I work hard. I have always worked hard. Over the last four decades, and in particular in the last three years, right before I turned 60, I decided to work even harder. The acting challenge came in my earlier years, and again in 2014, when I was being directed by Usha Ganguli, for Manto's dramatisation of *Shugandhi*. I was thrilled that in her interview Meryl Streep says something to the effect that she approaches each role with a blank slate. I start with a blank slate as well! But because I am not Meryl, people start to doubt if I can make it at the end. In the last four or five days of rehearsal, I finally reach the high point of the



Meryl Streep

character I am playing. Yes, as Streep suggests, I do work hard. But again the problem is that I end up working hard on so many projects at the same time that maybe at times I end up being "A jack of all trades", unlike her who seems to be "A queen of all she surveys!"

I love Meryl's sense of humour. It is amazing that she can laugh at the drop of a hat. When the interviewer asks her what she likes best about her role in the movie *Julie and Julia*, her answer is "to



THE QUEEN AND I

eat"! And she and the interviewer laugh and laugh until they almost roll over! Then in one of her award speeches, Streep jokes, "Sometimes I too think I am overrated". After the chuckles have subsided, she delivers her punch line "...but not today!" The nonchalant stance she takes is so natural and uncharacteristic of a star of her caliber. That is when I believe her when she says she has never imagined herself to be a star or thought in her wildest dreams that she would be one.

Streep goes on to elaborate that the actor's life is a Zen life: a life of constant change. As an actor, one lives the life of a

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character for a short period of time, which keeps changing from one project to the next. While acting, one passionately gets involved in an assignment. But when one comes out of the sets, and looks up at the sky, the balloon is no longer there. There are, in fact, no other balloons in the empty sky. So now the cereal bowl can be cleaned as soon as the cereal is eaten. Now there is all the time in the world to go about one's everyday routine. But in a Zen life,

while acting, one has to embrace change as a constant. I must say that is a hard life. I mean not for Meryl maybe. Because I am sure she has thousands of offers, and all she needs to do is choose the role she loves best and transition in and out of various roles. But look at me, I come out of my assignment, and I have to confront the world of business, my two adult children and family and a billion other issues I need to look after. Unlike Meryl, I cannot boldly say to the applauding audience, "Okay, I love my kids and would love to give them the time they need from me, but acting is my priority which sustains me and gives me life." That is the beauty of acting. It gives you life! The adrenaline rush; the drive one feels while doing it!

And that, according to Streep, is the third rule for success for an



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actor—discovering oneself and finding the passion and drive that lies within. Meryl cites her experience in college in her commencement speech at Barnard, to explain her journey to find that drive. First, she went to Law school (which was co-ed). She says whenever she disagreed with the boys in school, she showed her difference of opinion by lowering her eyes. The boys got it. Even though she was not at one with them, they still liked her. In her speech at Barnard, she admitted that lowering her eyes was "acting."

Then she went on to talk about Vassar, one of the Seven Sister (Ivy League) colleges in the US. In Vassar, Meryl could be herself – goofy, vehement, slovenly, and still, they accepted her. She did not wash her hair for three weeks once, but it was okay. That's when she came outside herself and discovered "the self", and made some lifelong friends. So when one finds him/herself, one also finds the drive that lies within. Streep jokingly says in her speech - since there were no boys as a source of distraction, her brain

woke up! I am glad she talked about this phase of her life. I believe one needs that space to discover oneself.

Though I (Sara) took the decision at an early age that I will stick to acting, particularly on stage, did I ever have time or space to discover who I was? No, I did not.

The skeptic might say, What space? What is that? There is no such thing in our culture! All these seem to be terms of the western culture, which we may have slowly begun to adopt only now! I believe it is important to find space to discover "the self" but as important is to have the opportunities coming.

Having empathy was fifth on Meryl's list of rules for success for an actor. She asks why women have these embarrassing "stifling choking wet obstruction" whenever we are faced with

INTERNATIONAL

During Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's India visit in April, the two countries inked 22 agreements and India extended a \$5 billion line of credit, out of which \$500 million was targeted towards the purchase of defence equipment from India. This is the biggest line of credit extended by India to any country till date. There was also a spotlight on the 1971 war. Claiming that the 1971 war

agreements that India badly needed, Modi ensured cross-cultural bonding by signing a MoU on the joint production of Xuanzang, a film underlining an instance of shared history between the countries.

Modi's generous use of cultural diplomacy has a two-fold goal: to melt distrust or hostility of the other nation by appealing to the inherent similarities of the two nations and to sugarcoat the realpolitik decisions. Ultimately, soft

in yoga sessions on World Yoga Day, battling sub-zero temperatures. The message to the world was strong and clear—India is a peaceful nation and there was no need to be fearful of its recent military build-up. This branding strategy could be interpreted as the Indian version of China's "Peaceful Rise" projection.

The Modi administration has even formally weaved in soft power into its

case of Bangladesh, blending soft power with hard power has a strategic aim: containing Pakistan and China, two of India's biggest geopolitical concerns by smoothing the Indo-Bangladesh rapprochement process. In order to ostracise and alienate Pakistan, Modi praised Sheikh Hasina's crackdown on terror by contrasting India and Bangladesh's development-oriented outlook to that of an unnamed nation in South Asia and implicitly condemned Pakistan's leniency towards curbing terrorism. The discussion and new initiatives regarding the 1971 Liberation War also subtly shamed Pakistan for committing genocide and underscored the importance of India as an ally. From a psychological point of view, by making the 1971 War a focal point of the Indo-Bangladesh relationship, Modi undoubtedly exploited the gratitude of

SWAROOPA LAHIRI

sparked "ties that have been forged in blood", Modi promptly rolled out five-year, multiple entry visas for 10,000 Bangladesh Liberation War's freedom fighters, 10,000 scholarship spots for their children coupled with free medical treatment to 100 freedom fighters. He also announced the joint production of the Bangladesh Liberation War documentary which would be released in 2021 to mark the war's 50th anniversary. Other cultural highlights were launching the Hindi translation of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's incomplete autobiography together, naming a road after him in Delhi and deciding to jointly produce his biopic to grace the occasion of the Bangladeshi founding father's birth centenary. The visit concluded on a high note, with the joint statement characterising the Indo-Bangladesh ties as "fraternal friendship".

Interestingly enough, this meeting shared many of the trademark features of Modi's bilateral talks in Asia. He is one of the few Indian leaders to have placed an emphasis on cultural components during state level interactions to complement trade agreements, defence partnerships and economic assistance. Consequently, his 2015 Sri Lanka visit dealt with currency swaps, line of credit but also mentioned developing Sri Lanka's Ramayana trail as a tourist circuit and a visit to Colombo's Mahabodhi temple. Similarly, while Modi's main purpose in South Korea was to sell the concept of "Make in India" and seek collaboration in building smart cities, he set aside a slot for planting a Bodhi sapling he had sent earlier. The Indian Prime Minister whipped out the Buddhism card once again during his much publicised China trip. According to Aneja (2015), Modi skillfully decided to visit the Wild Goose Pagoda in Xian, a symbol of Xuanzang's epic journey to India, before the capital city to signal the cultural connect between the two Asian giants. Needless to state, he didn't leave Xian before presenting a Bodhi sapling to the city's government. Along with trade



PM Narendra Modi celebrates International Yoga Day at Rajpath in New Delhi.

PHOTO: NDTV

power as Joseph Nye explains is "the ability to alter the behaviour of others to get what you want" through attraction. According to him, a country has three main sources of soft power: "its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority). To create an attractive culture worth emulating, Modi draws inspiration from ancient ideals of India's role as a "vishvaguru" (teacher of the world) and "vasudhai vakutumbkam" (the whole world is a big family). A case in point is yoga. His administration pushed for an International day of Yoga and he declared that yoga was India's gift to the world which enabled you to "discover the sense of oneness with yourself, the world and the nature" (Mohan 2014). In addition, he adeptly utilised yoga as an image building exercise through the participation of the Indian Armed Forces

foreign policy doctrine *Panchamrit*. The latter is a departure from the Nehruvian foreign policy canon *Panchsheel* which comprised principles of "mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and cooperation for mutual benefit and peaceful co-existence". Modi's *Panchamrit* is more assertive than pacifist and leaves behind India's longstanding stance of neutrality and non-involvement. *Panchamrit*'s five pillars are "dignity, dialogue, shared prosperity, regional and global security and cultural and civilisational links" (*The Telegraph*, April 4, 2015). The current foreign policy ideology indicates that India has finally achieved superpower status and is now a major confident force to be reckoned with on the global platform.

"Cultural and civilisation links" denote the soft power components of India's foreign policy under Modi. In the

its eastern neighbour by repeatedly evoking kinship ties and memories of Bangladesh's independence struggle. With a wary eye on China, these tactics may have helped India coax Bangladesh to accept the \$500 million line of credit for defence purchases from India. This move is a small and most probably ineffective attempt to reduce the country's defence equipment reliance on China.

However, despite flaunting cultural diplomacy extensively, its effectiveness remains uncertain. In the case of China, for example, pulling off cultural stunts failed to yield any beneficial results for India on the strategic front. Similarly, only time will tell whether underlining historical and cultural ties will succeed in upgrading the Indo-Bangladesh relationship to a mutually fulfilling one, free of hostility and distrust.

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