

The case for angry women

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WHEN I "talk back" (bell hooks, 1989) at institutional and personal oppression I am labelled an angry woman. As if my anger is not just. Justified.

Here's the thing about anger—it can be channelled as a productive force to fight oppression. Anger is an act of resistance. Even if it is "too angry" for some. Usually those who are at the brunt of that anger. Usually those who trigger that anger by either directly oppressing others (e.g. women) or by partaking in a system that is oppressive without questioning it.

For example, the men who gaslight their intimate partners. The men who dismiss women's emotions as drama. The men who view spirited women as immature. The men whose response to being questioned (by a woman) is to delegitimise the question in the first place, framing it as women's inability to understand the complexity of their ideas. Or worse, a communication issue, without recognising that they could easily remedy the "miscommunication" by clarifying their position(s). But, men refuse to clarify and blame women for "misunderstanding" as a way to signal them to never question them again. They invoke women's inherent trauma (because let's face it, all women in the world today have experienced at least one form of subordination) and use it against them. They term women's hurt as weakness. They label them angry.



In doing so, they create self-doubt among women. Women's sense of reality becomes blurry. Women start to question their own perspectives. When this happens over and over again, it affects women's sense of self-worth.

But, anger is powerful. Anger allows women to see oppression when it occurs. It allows them to question it. It gives them agency. Sooner, or later.

Case in point: the girl who was raped by her step-father for eight years. It took eight years for her to go to the police, but she finally did it. Her mother apparently knew about the sexual violence but could do nothing to stop it. Meanwhile, he used regressive cultural norms to silence her, and probably her mother, too.

In an article on intimate partner violence

published on the Journal of Interpersonal Violence, my co-author Critelli and I had written: "societal and familial norms that support the use of violence against women are termed as cultural norms; this misappropriation of 'culture' allows the maintenance and acceptance of violence against women across tribal, religious, and class divides..."

This rape case is an excellent example of how the cultural norms that we speak of in our article maintain women's oppression.

This is why we need to de-stigmatise women's bodies. We need to de-stigmatise women's nudity. We need to stop judging women for being women, for having skin and flesh and breasts and legs. We need to stop being shocked by women's bodies. We need

to stop vilifying women for having bodies. The rapist used his step-daughter's pictures and video clips to silence her. It was possible because these cultural norms undermine women's position in society and at home. Such norms blame women for their own rapes, they blame their bodies for their experiences of sexual violence, render them voiceless.

But, anger protects women. Without anger women are complacent. Without anger women are not heard.

Anger is not a flash or a reaction; it initiates an introspection of auto-oppression.

So, even if anger is dismissed, even if women are termed pagol when they are angry, anger is needed to fuel the fight against everyday oppression that women experience in all spheres that they inhabit: at home, at work, on the streets, among friends, partners, family members.

There are many people that need to be fought against: men and women who have bought into patriarchy and the myth of protection. Men and women who dismiss angry women as naïve, or even desperate, because they benefit from a world in which economic, social, and personal oppression is maintained. Their fight involves maintaining the oppression.

Why? Because such oppression allows middle/upper class women to have domestic workers at home. It allows them to beat and abuse little girls who fail to make their lives better by cleaning their shoes and taking care of their children. A certain brand of bourgeois feminists even understands the plight of these middle/upper class women who are

apparently "harassed" by domestic workers. They argue that their domestic workers aspire to be their "masters" by sleeping with their husbands. Weirdly, there is no understanding of statutory rape, as Shabnam Nadiya points out in her response piece in reaction to Shupriti Dhar's problematic essay on this topic; there is no understanding of how girls living in a stranger's house as a domestic worker may not have the agency to protest her rape given that she needs money and the shelter, possibly at any cost.

It is important to understand that forces of production determine social relations, and that "like all ruling classes the bourgeoisie imagines that existing social relations are natural, rational, and permanent" (Phil Gasper, 2005).

At the same time, subscribing to patriarchal norms (for example, when women justify violence against women) make women, including middle/upper class women, vulnerable to experiencing intimate partner violence. Critelli and I found in our study. In other words, when women subscribe to cultural norms that oppress women they participate in their own oppression, too.

When women accept such oppression, they have no room for anger. Instead, they too become oppressors of other women, other marginalised populations.

Only angry women can save women.

Let us not demonise, marginalise, and dismiss them. They are the only bastions of hope left in the fight against the global war on women.

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Trade is key in ASEAN-India ties

INDIA'S Republic Day, celebrated on January 26, is the occasion that New Delhi picks to showcase itself to the world. With the country's love for pomp and ceremony, the parades tend to be dazzling spectacles. Massed bands, marching platoons of Gurkhas and Sikh soldiers, heavy armour and the latest missiles stream in a procession down the former King's Way, sharing space with floats from various Indian states.

Often, they carry a not-too-subtle message. A tableau from the eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh, a region claimed in its entirety by China, is a barely concealed signal to Beijing of who has control. Likewise, the chief guest is carefully chosen: In 1994, when India sought to build its Look East policy, it invited then Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong as guest of honour. Goh's pre-visit words of intending to "spark a mild India fever" resonated around the world and set the stage for what would eventually turn out to be a tight relationship.

Now, as its Look East policy morphs into what Prime Minister Narendra Modi calls an "Act East Policy", India is poised to make another hugely symbolic gesture—inviting the heads of state or government of all 10 ASEAN member states to the January event.

In typical Modi fashion, the gesture is a grand one. And filled with meaning, more so since it comes at a time of tense ties with China and New Delhi's steadily advancing strategic ties with Japan and Vietnam, both with formidable military strength.

Indeed, those in South-East Asia who are in the habit of peering at crystal balls may ponder whether the Indian army's recent action in Bhutan—when it went to the aid of the Royal Bhutanese Army to block Chinese soldiers from building a service road in territory claimed by Thimphu—is worth extrapolating in a future context involving the region. India's southernmost point is in the Nicobar Islands of the Andaman Sea, so close to Indonesia's Banda Aceh on Sumatra Island that India is virtually a South-East Asian state as well.

What's more, India has latterly embarked upon a policy of beefing up its strategic presence in the Andamans, and in a first for itself, indicated it is open to allowing in a foreign presence on the islands by discussing a small power project with Japan, which had control of the area during World War II.

The Indian Navy is also to start continuous patrolling of the area, indicative of the heightened security sensitivities about the region. In an earlier era, plans for the Indian Air Force to station a squadron of Jaguar fighter bombers on the islands were shelved so as not to alarm South-East Asian states. Things have clearly changed since China changed the status quo with its assertive policy in the South China Sea.

If evidence were needed about India's ability to project power in South-East Asia, it came available more than a decade ago when the Indian Air Force and Navy organised a prompt and massive rendering of humanitarian aid to Indonesia, Sri Lanka and the Maldives in the wake of the tsunami that struck these parts in 2004.

"ASEAN has a natural interest in the growing ties between India and Japan," Indian Foreign Secretary S Jaishankar said in Singapore this week. "Gradually and steadily, Japan has emerged as a special strategic partner with whom India increasingly shares a global agenda."

Dr Jaishankar also specifically mentioned Vietnam, another ASEAN state that has a difficult relationship with China, with which India's strategic ties are growing "ever stronger".

Clearly, ties between India and ASEAN have come a long way since 1992, the year the grouping accepted the South Asian giant as a sectoral dialogue partner.

Four years later, this was upgraded to full dialogue partnership status, and in 2012, to a "strategic" partnership. Currently, there are 30 dialogue mechanisms between India and ASEAN, including an annual summit and seven ministerial dialogues.

Ties with individual ASEAN states are also deepening by the day. Meanwhile, issues beyond—China and the United States being two—are also taking on salience in the relationship.

It is important that India and the ASEAN have honest conversations on the big issues of the day," Dr Jaishankar said, sketching out areas that need focused deliberation. These, he said, cover connectivity, maritime security, terrorism, economic globalisation and a security architecture based on shared values.

India's top foreign ministry official is not wrong, of course. And he is talking from his nation's viewpoint. From an ASEAN viewpoint, though, he ought to take his cue from the recent speech his foreign minister gave at the 9th Delhi Dialogue with ASEAN.

Sushma Swaraj described the future focus of India-ASEAN cooperation in terms of three Cs—Commerce, Connectivity and Culture. In prioritising commerce, Swaraj hit the right



button.

For much of South-East Asia, trade is the lifeline. A crimping of export markets hurts heavily—see how quickly the Philippines came to Beijing's heel after China leaned on its fruit shipments—because it hurts ordinary people's lives. More than all the warships that could potentially be sailed into the South China Sea or the foreign direct investments into mines and factories, access to markets is what touches the ground most.

Yet, on openness to trade, India's record is less than stellar. While there has been an upturn in the ASEAN-India trade relationship in the past year, this comes on the back of two years of trade regression. At USD 70 billion, two-way trade is not only way short of potential it is also dismally short of the USD 100 billion target for 2015 India had itself set with ASEAN.

What's worse is that India has been taking a singularly unhelpful attitude when it comes to negotiating the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), an ASEAN-driven initiative to build a regional trading bloc between ASEAN and the six nations with which it has existing free trade agreements.

Its negotiators change too frequently and when they sit down for talks, voice reluctance to give equal market access to all RCEP members. When prolonged negotiations lead to an agreement to consider a unified structure for all, they seek to add a clause of "with minimal deviation" for some economies such as China, New Zealand and Australia. Behind the scenes, some ASEAN states suspect it of lobbying large economies such as Indonesia to agree only to 80 per cent or so goods coverage for tariff reductions, whereas many ASEAN states seek a higher threshold.

Indian negotiators also press the point that their economy's strengths and competitive

advantage lie in the services sector. Consequently, they demand freer access for its professionals and services companies to enter partners' markets.

While that is not an unreasonable demand, India should know that even in the World Trade Organisation, trade in goods and services are separate issues and not negotiated in tandem. Besides, unlike trade, almost every service you can think of—the medical, legal and accountancy professions to name just three—tend to have individual regulators, making this a far more onerous task than a simple goods agreement.

This is where New Delhi needs to take a strategic view. Unequivocal endorsement of a high-quality RCEP is as much a political statement as an economic one. It will signal a level of Indian confidence in its own destiny and ability to compete that few other gestures can match. New Delhi should be aware that it is not the only country to have a trade deficit with China.

Every ASEAN country is in the same situation but their instinct is not to build walls around them.

Already, there are murmurs in some quarters of seeking a "Minus One" solution if Indian recalcitrance persists—essentially seeking to proceed without India, and giving it the option of joining RCEP at a future date. That would be a pity.

The next round of RCEP talks is to be held later this month in the southern Indian city of Hyderabad. It is a good occasion for New Delhi to take the necessary steps to make speedier economic integration a tangible good for the more than 600 million that call South-East Asia home. It would also make the ASEAN heads of state travelling for India's Republic Day feel a lot more welcome.

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