

Rules of Engagement

A worried man once approached a saint who lived near a stream. “My wife and I are having issues”, he said. “Each time we argue, we lose our temper and say things we don’t mean.” The saint gave the man an earthen pot and instructed him to get him some drinking water from the stream. When the man reached the stream, a bullock cart happened to cross it the same time. Since the water was dirty and muddy, the man returned without filling the pot. The saint told him to go back after an hour. This time, the man found the water settled and filled the pot with clean water. The man learnt his lesson and went back happy to share this insight with his wife.

Often, we lose our cool while trying to make a point during an argument. We say things that we regret later—sometimes our words leave permanent scars on the relationship. We need to remember that anger is akin to the murky water. All that one needs to do is wait and let the moment pass by. With time, the head cools down on its own and becomes calm.

After a few weeks, the man returned. This time, he seemed even more troubled. “O Saint, now my wife and I stop our discussions before they heat up. But, the distance between us has continued to grow.” The saint again told him to fetch water, this time handing him a darkened coal basket with holes in it. The man went to the stream, filled the water in the basket and started to walk back. The water drained out immediately. He tried again, ran fast, but the water still leaked out. After multiple attempts, he informed the saint about the futility of the exercise. The saint asked him to take a close look at the coal basket. The dirty basket was shining now since it was repeatedly rinsed with water. The man learnt his second lesson.

Often, we distance ourselves from an argument because it is a futile exercise, no different from the man who finds it pointless to keep filling water in the leaking basket. However, shying away from a dialog is not a solution—even if a consensus can’t be reached. When issues are left undiscussed, dirt continues to settle, and our hearts grow apart.

Social and professional relationships—whether it is with our spouse, colleague, or customer—are delicate. We can’t afford to lose temper, nor can we avoid or block

them. So, what's the solution? Perhaps, a cool head and a warm heart.