

THIRD EYE EDITION

All work..



Let us get started with this little teaser – Do you think the world is going to end if you don't deal with the memo waiting on your office desk? "Of course!" I can hear many of you retort. If your answer is yes, then welcome to cuckoo-land, my friend, and you are rapidly heading for that nervous breakdown that you thought only happened to others. One of the maladies of modern times is that we take our work way too seriously. We arrive early at office, stay in late, carry home files, keep ourselves awake with coffee, strategise, prioritise, network, brainstorm, delegate and do all the other things that make us feel we are actually running the universe. And while we are at it, day after day, the seasons pass away gently, tides rise and fall, the moon waxes and wanes. The earth moves in its silent rhythm and time rolls inexorably, a giant wheel on a uncharted route.

These thoughts have come to me for a reason. Recently, I took a month's break from work and it had a very salutary effect on my ego, as I realised that far from being indispensable, my part of the work was ably executed by colleagues. It is said that the best chronicle of any human event is that which is written after a suitable time has lapsed since its occurrence, by which a sort of balanced perspective is achieved. Distancing ensures detachment and a certain level of objectivity is possible. In the case of your job, waiting for retirement so that

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you gain insight into it will obviously do you little good. But, now and then, you ought to do a bit of enforced idleness to respect and understand what is it you do. I say enforced because holidays today are even more hectic than working. Perfectly sane people get into this manic mode and glide, parasail, snorkel, dive, trek, camp, ski, surf as if to make up for all the days spent shackled to their work station

Work is a four letter word we use all the time. If you work you are busy, if you are busy it means you are important. And if you are important, you can justify your continued existence on this third rock from the sun. "I live and breathe my work", said Lady Gaga recently. Perhaps this remark will be made by anybody who loves his/her work. Work is the most meaningful part of a person's life. When I say this, I remember the instance of a school teacher who had a heart attack on the day of her retirement. Work is a person's livelihood, daily occupation. Traditionally, work is something you gird your loins and toil at, but the ability to blur the line between work and play is being considered a great accomplishment. Steve Jobs is one example of it. Richard Branson, maverick British entrepreneur, has pulled off stunts like being afloat on a hot air balloon even as everything he touched turned to gold.

What images come to your mind when you hear the word work? A chair, a desk, a PC, memo pad, a pen stand, an exacting boss behind the frosted glass? But we are not talking white collar jobs here. The word also evokes miners going deep down into the bowels of the earth, farmers tilling their fields in vast open spaces, truck drivers on lonely highways, policemen in hot pursuit of offenders, a surgeon delicately splicing open a chest, chefs creating a perfect dish – all this every day, in every country. Alain de Botton, a philosopher, says work is important because it imposes some kind of order. Human beings work because it seems to have a purpose and a symmetry, as opposed to the chaos and randomness of Nature. Chaos unnerves them, makes them feel rudderless, unable to stay on top of things. Work also helps to distract us. As we stay focused on the small things – the invoice, the head office meet, the gossip by the cooler, we forget the big things like death and eternity. As we achieve order and symmetry in our daily work, many of us are probably better adjusted, more charming and efficient human beings at the work place than at home. At home we are out of our depth, time stretches meaninglessly and the children don't even follow orders.

It is very rare to see great people at work. We have not seen Michelangelo painting the Sistine Chapel or Einstein working on his theory of relativity. But in countless photographs and live footage we have seen Mahatma Gandhi spinning on his *charkha*. It is like a prayer wheel, embodying too his credo of the dignity of labour and his belief that India lives in its villages. That simple act has had a profound impact on our psyche. Bapu opined that wealth without work is the first of the deadly sins. In this age of mega-scams his words are prophetic.

Every job comes with some inbuilt tedium, unless you are a Formula One driver or the zoo attendant, who puts his head between the crocodile's head for applause. But all around the world, people are holding down bizarre jobs that make you laugh out loud. There is a

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fantasy broker who makes dreams come true. He helps a businessman drive a freight train across a Western state and a man date twenty girls from twenty countries. The ant-catcher digs up live ants for use in farms. There are egg breakers, wrinkle dealers, pillow case turners, pet food tasters, dung archaeologists and men who spend time on rocking chairs, moving them back and forth to test them for durability. Whole families have survived, thanks to the labour of men whose sole job is to remove chewing gum from furniture. I have also read about men who look after pandas wearing panda suits smeared with panda urine so that when these furry creatures are released from captivity, they do not crave for human companionship.

Long before I myself started working, I have envied certain jobs and considered those people the luckiest on the planet. One was the tubby, moustached *halwai* of Shillong's legendary sweet shop Delhi Mistan Bhandar. There he would be, sitting cross-legged before a roaring fire, with a big cauldron of oil bubbling on top, clad in just a white vest and *dhoti* in freezing December. In his hands would be a pouch of gooey *maida*. Poised over the waiting oil, he, with a flick of his wrist, would create patterns when squeezing the pouch. Round, intricately patterned *jalebies* would form before our eyes, pale, sinking below the surface of the oil and then they would rise up, a fiery golden yellow, and he would turn them over and lift them up with a strainer, before dropping them into another vessel filled with sweet syrup. People in coats, hats and mufflers, shivering in the cold, little puffs of mist escaping from their mouths, would surge into the sweet shop and the *halwai* worked at top speed in front of the roaring fire, his brow lined with sweat. For a long time I envied his job, until I realised that the poor man evidently had no time to eat his own *jalebies*. Guess there is no such thing as a perfect job, after all.