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Editorial

Not Guilty of Doing Nothing

the Editor

"The trouble with the rat race is that even if you win, you're still a rat." Lily Tomlin

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, you have heard all the evidence the attorney for the prosecution could muster in his diatribe against my client, Shree Fleg Matick of Bangalore, wrongly accused of three counts of felonious inactivity under India's new law requiring every man, woman and child to work 15 hours a day to earn and thenceforth to maintain the one thing all men covet: Middle Class status. The prosecution just gave you an eloquent dissertation on the work ethic, affirming its value to society, indeed its necessity if we are to relieve the human condition, improve our lot, evolve into something better and increase exports to enable us to buy more cool things from America. You heard him mutter Robert Graves' words with mantric intensity as though that could sway your decree: "If men do nothing, they aren't good men."

My opponent has based his case on the specious notion that work is inherently better than the alternative. Such a principle might condemn the defendant on Wall Street or at an Olympic Games training camp, but here in Bharat where inertia is has been gaining momentum for ten millennia? Never!

It is essential in your deliberations to distinguish between doing really nothing and really Doing Nothing. The first is personal impassiveness, and that is what the prosecution has focused on to the exclusion of the second, which is, we submit, a

spiritual imperative. The yogi has perfected Doing Nothing, and if asked why he doesn't get a job snaps, "Nothing doing." Even when quite active, he has no sense of anything's happening. It seems to him to be God's work flowing through him. He is fond of that state of mind. To him, it is not laziness. Quite the opposite. His poised sense of Nothing's Happening requires concentration.

Can we convict the accused for sitting under a tree in his village, pondering the Divine? In the old days we would have admired such a man, praised his detachment, sought his darshan. "Look, there is a yogi!" we would have told our children. "He has no wants. He slaves for no one but God. He is free. Let us earn some small merit by offering him a fruit." No more. Now we disdain detachment and offer up all praise to the most ambitious among us, "Jai to the ladder climbers and the over-achievers." Have we not, without noticing, adopted the Western work ethos and dismissed India's easygoing ways?

The defense concedes that work has curative properties, especially in the temporary relief of boredom. But work, like so many other foreign fashions foisted upon us by Colonial sahibs, is strong medicine that must be taken in moderate doses. In fact, a prescription should be required for any salaried labor exceeding eight hours a day.

The prosecution has told you that work is valued everywhere for different reasons: in England because effort is painful and must therefore grant some spiritual benefit; in America so you can have someone to "do lunch" with; in Mauritius just to get out of the house for a few hours. But we are in India where there isn't all that much to be gained even by energetic effort, however well-meaning. That's why the Vedic rishis preferred being. They saw the foolishness in intemperate toil. By modern standards they were laid-back philosophers, like Bertrand Russell who knew exertion's epistemology: "Work is of two kinds: first, altering the position of matter at or near the earth's surface relative to other matter; second, telling other people to do so. The first is unpleasant and ill-paid; the second is pleasant and highly paid."

All doing causes problems. People do and do and do, then overdo, redo and undo until they end up in deep doo doo. Oblivious of the lesson, they do more to get out of trouble, to get dollars duplicitously, to dominate dupes, to dodge duty or doom due them, to avoid doordarshan or to duplicate durable doohickeys. Enough of dubious doings.

Plumb your own hearts to see when you have been happiest, most fulfilled. Was it while toiling at the office or in OR-3? Or was it when you were done with the day's paid chores, your mind wandering among natural beauties about you, pondering the Way of Things behind a pillar after puja or sitting with your grandchildren doing nothing much? I suggest we are most human when we are doing Nothing. Then can we, in good conscience, condemn my client? Should we not, instead, pass laws that make it a crime to do too much, the same way we punish driver's who speed on our roads?

Tell the world we in India do not choose, as so many in the West have, to live a life of stress, frazzled by our own driving ambitions, too busy to have a leisurely conversation, too tired to enjoy one another. I urge you to send out a clear message by finding this tranquil soul, who is your very self, not guilty of doing nothing. I rest my case.