

Dinosaur

Emergencies

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*A feature on
work culture
in India*

It is 10 in the night. I have just finished my twenty minute dinner break to get back to work. I have been working since 10 in the morning, skipping my daily exercise routine because I would have been too anxious to do something that demands as much concentration as Pilates. Breakfast was some leftover brownies my cousin made for my nephew's birthday party last week, so was lunch (a desire for independence bleeds where it doesn't belong, and forbids me from asking my Ammi to prepare some food for me).

All the muscles I seem to have built in quarantine when I was trying to survive solely as a writer are gone, so are all the hopes of surviving solely as a writer. Now, I sport a nice brownie belly and backache as I sit in front of my computer for the twelfth hour designing a presentation. I freelance as a graphic designer to supplement the writing, and my turnaround time is usually less than how long it is taking to finish making this presentation look better, but I will only have time to dwell on the reason behind that once this assignment is done (plus the five days it will take for me to recuperate from the two days of three to four hours of sleep).

For all intents and purposes this might be the life of any graphic designer. Anyone with better skills and/or more experience than me (I have been designing only for four years now, out of which only one and a half have been full-time) will laugh at my plight as if I am some novice who doesn't know better. One client, who had emailed me edits at 11:30 in the morning had expected them to be finished by 5:30 in the afternoon without having blocked my day, thereby not taking into account that as a freelancer I might have work scheduled already. When she called me by 8:30 asking why I was not done yet (and I had specified that it was very short notice), she laughed and told me, "Well, with us the usual routine is that I give the designer a job and he's done the moment I am done elaborating edits." It might be an exaggeration, but I see what she means, and I am both envious of and angry at such design geniuses. Envious, because I would also like that turnaround time, and despite mastering all skills in design, with a degree and all the self-teaching that happens after that degree, I find it silly that I could be expected to finish a project in a day or two and maintain quality as if I am only putting text inside boxes. I would like eight hour workdays—workdays I know I will utilise fully, but workdays that end and not continue well into the night. Angry, on the other hand, because the minute I make this demand I believe someone will volunteer to do my job for less. It's not their fault too, we all belong to a country that needs money, a generation that needs disposable capital to feel the confidence of independence, and because we need it *now* we cannot pick and choose work. We don't have time to stop and think of the backache, or the precedent we're leaving behind. The community one seeks for freelance work is deeply exploited by demanding corporates who do not understand or maintain a work-life balance.

It is for this reason I do not expect my client to understand my work-life balance—how could she, when she has been exploited by the same? If I am up working for a client at 11:30PM trying to chase a deadline, my client too is up for their client chasing that deadline with me. The more people, the greater the isolation. The farther you are removed from the actual client, the less real you and your needs become.

This is not a problem that belongs to one industry—I can honestly say I have worked with a variety of corporates, from marketing to the development sector, and each of them has faced tight deadlines. My dear friend jokes that deadlines are very aptly named, for people act like they will die if the respective deadline is not met, but her cynicism (especially as a corporate employee of four years in India) is not lost on me. People do act like they will die if a deadline is not met. While common to corporates, I think this is also not the kind of generalisation I would apply a wholly Marxist excuse to. It would be foolish to say such is the capitalist life, for I also have friends in a very capitalist United States, and an equally work-intense Turkey, and they do not face the anxiety of deadlines every week. As a matter of fact, my friend who works at Google never works on the weekend, as opposed to one of my clients in an Indian corporate branch who barely gets two weekends off per month if he's lucky.

It is, of course, the Indian work culture. I know this because before me, my mother was here, and before her, someone else was probably here too. I have grown up seeing her spend 8 hours at her office—a school, where unless a kid fainted during the morning assembly or a bus driver drove the school-bus drunk, the word 'emergency' was not heard across corridors—and then, another two hours beyond, to supplement her income with tuitions, only to end up with a fraction of what she deserves to earn, even today. And she is no exception. Compared to the US, which offers a \$7.5/hr minimum wage (an average monthly income of \$1200), India offers barely \$2.8/hr, amounting to one third of the income of a US employee. My mother, working 8 hours a day officially and 2 hours unofficially (through phone calls, as she oversees the working of a group of institutions), earns a total \$537 per month, not even half the US monthly average—and she's one of the lucky ones. My clients, with all their negotiations and budgeting and cutting 3000 rupee

corners which could easily pay my month's groceries, and my mother, with all her haggling with autowalas and vegetable sellers, seem to echo an Indian philosophy consistent across board – that not only can we only accept the bare minimum in our lives, but that's also the most we can give.

I do not possess much economic expertise to defend the rich, in India or elsewhere, as the function of economics seems to be. I simply wish to offer that as a worker I am as exhausted as my mother, who, even in her formal school job, does not get paid time off, medical insurance, or the freedom to turn off her work phone after 7PM (to echo Monica Geller's poignant thoughts on work phones, "Is it for dinosaur emergencies? Help! They're still extinct(?)"). In my informal freelance job, as I do believe I am offered no formal worker rights besides those I can pay a CA and a lawyer into making me understand and negotiate, I have to compete with people willing to do my job in half the time as me, and at half the price. In this free market, my work quality offers as much as a *dussehri aam*—only very niche clients are able to value it, and yet I cannot sell myself for more than an average market rate in good faith.

Where does this exhaustion begin—or end, one asks? When we think of a time when jobs were easier, more lax, what do we remember? I think of the time when we did not have a cellphone, or even a telephone at home. Amma would come home around 6, usually stay home and spend time teaching me. I think of her simple job as the secretary to the school head whose son she currently works under. My earliest memory of seeing something disturbing about the idea of always staying online, the assumption that one is always available, started with a striking report on mothers always having to be online for their school-going children with the advent of Whatsapp. It came at a time I was in college, and all my school projects were well off decomposed or recycled by whichever *kabadi* Amma must have sold them to (one hopes). When did mothers become full time employees of the school, I had wondered, only to take notice of all my aunts, now old with my ten, nine, even six year old cousins, discussing their kids' homework in some class group at 9PM. When did the occasional call about a missed school day turn into nightly discussions on projects? When did kids start getting taught Microsoft Word on their phone?

One may not know when things began, but one does know that there is no end in sight. Who dare live as an outcast in this world? I could have imagined doing my own thing, rose tinted glasses on, perhaps two years ago. Writing was easier then. Now, I spend my April trying to write a report for a client while my neighbours, two women living alone suffering under Covid, need me to run errands such as a medicine pickup, sometimes a home cooked meal delivery, communication with tiring cylinder suppliers (one of whom totally fooled us and now spends his time in jail, which is no respite from the 10,000 rupees we lost). I spend fifteen days from one report to the other, and it is the money from these fifteen days that allows me to be able to order food once in a while when I lack the energy to cook (and my excellent baker of a cousin is not around to rescue me—I live alone). Some days I think I might have to facilitate a private admission for them at a hospital, and worry if they ask for too much cash on hand. Other days I think of rent. If there is a moment of calm at my eleventh hour sitting on a chair, breaking my back into a degenerative spinal joint, I think of what would happen if I contracted Covid myself—*will I not get paid? Who will finish this report? If I cry to this client and tell them I absolutely cannot go on, will they understand?*

Corporate culture with its bean bags wants us to believe the client will, but when one is asked to do a seven day task in five, it is evident they won't. When one such as me places so much of themselves in work, deeply tying it to an identity of self, there is no hope of a client understanding. I turn off my Read Receipts and ignore my phone when it pings in hopes that the client won't see, won't assume that I am *online*. But there is no point because in a digital, covid-corporate world you are always online. The next day of my presentation redesign assignment the client Whatsapps me, "You did not send enough slides the first day. You only picked up pace the second day, there's always some problem with you." Who is he to know I spent the entire night working—a full 30 hours of screen exposure? You were truly dead to the world if the deadline is not met, that is the assumption. I am asked to apologise. I again mention that the short notice period for the quantity of work, further exacerbated by the stress of constant back and forth, did not help my turnaround time. It is too late, an apology is demanded. I do not get that paycheque.

I read a post on LinkedIn (everyone's least favourite social network) about work culture in the US—they don't work on weekends, that's the crux. They do not work beyond certain hours, this is also implied. When I work with international clients, no apology is given for delays nor demanded for them—clients seem to take extra time into account before starting. I am given 10 days for a 5 day job (and sometimes paid by that standard too!). Instead of attaching one's sense of self to work, work becomes an area of self-improvement. I am told things like "I do not know how to answer that question," as opposed to "I do not like embarrassing myself in front of clients." In a covid-world, where the message that followed this last one was "And it has happened because of you," where my workday starts the minute I wake up, and ends the minute I go to sleep, can space be allotted to freelancer rights—and thus, in turn, workplace rights? Why is decent work culture only sought through redressal, and not through top-down initiatives? We do not know where the problem begins, where the worth of an Indian worker became the zeroes on their paycheque, but we do know where to begin, organisationally, solving it. I hope we do.