

## Relaxation, anyone?

### - What eminent scholars do when they are not working

FIRST PERSON SINGULAR/ A.M.



In our kind of society, the starkest reality is the huge load of unemployment. Yet, some people do get absorbed in a profession either by choice or by happenstance. They may realize after a while that they are misfits. They perform the usual chores in the jobs assigned to them, but derive little satisfaction from what they are doing. For the vast majority of them, though, it is no longer possible to walk out and join another 'calling', which they are convinced will be more to their liking. They get reconciled, therefore, to the profession they are in, trying to make the best of it. With age, a kind of mute contentment with their now familiar environment sets in. They retire and disappear into anonymity.

It is a different proposition, altogether, with a small, very small, set wedded to the profession that becomes a mission with it. In case the profession involves, for instance, teaching and is a vehicle for widening the horizon of intellectual pursuits, the members of this set passionately continue to make contributions to the stock of knowledge. New academic heights continue to be conquered one after another. Such academic distinctions over the long run bring in remarkable material gains as well, but when this rare species of individuals started their scholarly explorations, the prospect of such gains had no place in their thought. A parallel group of people, who feel equally passionate over the same profession, dream, right from the beginning, of making rapid strides in areas where the artefacts of the profession have practical applications. They work tirelessly and with zeal, thereby achieving both the formal recognition and material rewards. Both species work with single-mindedness and determination even though their goals are different.

An inquisitive outsider, who does not take things for granted, and has firm faith in the adage, "all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy", will pop up with the naive sounding question: do not these eminences ever feel the need to relax? Surely, even geniuses who keep piling high thinking upon high thinking or innovating path-breaking technological *tours de force* must occasionally feel the urge to stretch themselves, get away from their study, studio, laboratory, computer or boardroom and do something silly in the manner of ordinary people, such as going to the cinema, watching cricket or football on the telly, or just gossiping with family or friends. Perhaps they do, but the news does not leak out. Many of these celebrities are intensely jealous of their privacy; there are one or two exceptions though.

I, for one, had neither the merit nor the equipment to stay long in the profession I accidentally found myself in, in my early life. It was therefore smart on my part to quit at the earliest opportunity. Many of my friends, however, have stuck with the profession notwithstanding the reservations they might have felt concerning the worthwhileness of what they were doing. At the same time, quite a few had no such reservations; they were steadfast in the pursuit of fresh revelations of knowledge through their thinking and research activities, or in attaining increasingly more important achievements in their profession. Some of them have received global recognition and there is so much demand for advice and counsel from them that frequent international travels rudely interrupt their academic or professional commitments.

Their schedule is so crowded that there is hardly any space left for relaxation. But the eminences in my circle of acquaintances are seemingly unconcerned; the international travels they undertake are, in fact, one of their ways of relaxing. That apart, one or two of them go for long treks in hills and mountains either alone or in the company of friends. A few spend occasional weekends in fishing or going for long swims. Some others read thrillers or crime fiction and then throw them away.

I still feel a lingering sadness for some of them. My very close friend in the earlier days, the late I.G. Patel (picture), had an acuity of mind I have rarely come across in any others. He had broken all previous records while doing his economics tripos in Cambridge. IG, however, chose to forsake academic economics and use his talent for the advancement of the quality of economic administration at both national and international levels. His prose sparkled and at the same time was the last word in lucidity. I consider it a great tragedy that this prose got wasted in notes and briefings in official files in New Delhi, Washington D.C., New York, Mumbai and elsewhere. At the beginning of his career, IG had spent some years on the research staff of the International Monetary Fund and had written a number of original pieces on aspects of monetary policy in different countries. But the great potential for creative writing that he possessed remained locked up for ever. After persistent requests, IG would perhaps take time off from his busy schedule to write a memorial note on a departed soul or contribute a reminiscence of his days in childhood and early youth in Baroda. These, I dare to say, were literary gems. If only he had more time to 'relax', we could have enjoyed some more lovely literature.

Let me cross over to another major reason underlying my lamentation. My much younger friend, Prabhat Patnaik, is beyond question one of the most distinguished economists this generation has seen. Prabhat's ideological position is, of course, poles apart from IG's. Prabhat has not deviated from teaching and research, and has made original contributions of the very highest quality in such disparate areas as growth economics at one end and the value of money at the other. He has never allowed to slip off from his mind the core truth that model-mongering is no economics, and rendering the greatest good to the greatest number is and must always be the mission in life of anyone who dares to claim credentials as an economist. Prabhat has to travel constantly across the globe as he cannot refuse the implorings of academic colleagues all over the world to visit them and speak on his latest academic contribution. When and how does Prabhat relax, I have often wondered. The answer lies in the fact that he swears by a firm political ideology and has a formal affiliation with a political party. His conscience guided him to set aside time from his profound intellectual involvements with rarefied circles to write and speak in a language that the working class would comprehend. Prabhat's efforts to address non-academic people on grave issues concerning life and living in a format that will be easily accessible to his listeners is a challenging exercise. That, I assume, is to him enough relaxation although the mental exertion is hardly any less.

My sadness does not go away though. I have come across some exquisitely beautiful snippets Prabhat has written on men and women he has known and admired as well as about occasions he had been present at or about places he had visited. These, too, were exceedingly high-quality literature, the language was overwhelmingly charming. But, it is Prabhat's destiny to be one of the world's front-rank economists and political ideologues. He will have to keep away from the world of literature; the resulting loss in my judgement is incalculable.

The one genuine answer to my prayer has been provided by my again much younger friend, the Bangladeshi economist, Azizur Rahman Khan. He has taught long years at the University of California, Riverside, and at New York's Columbia University and, retired now, is continuing his intense research on the problems of the world, producing thoughtful new academic tracts regularly. But his relaxation lies in writing literary criticism. I have seen some of them; they are scintillating stuff.

A real surprise, though, was waiting for me in the wings. All of a sudden another younger economist friend of much eminence I have great affection

for, Deepak Nayyar, turned up in my Calcutta cubbyhole. Destiny has ordained for him a furiously peripatetic existence. He keeps travelling across the world all the while on academic work and associated assignments. He has taught for many years at the University of Sussex at Brighton and even longer at New Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University. In addition to producing, at regular intervals, deeply-researched tracts on trends and problems in global growth and global trade, he has also been vice chancellor of the University of Delhi. He continues to teach at a university in New York for one or two terms and has to keep commitments with the various agencies of the United Nations. The same question rears its head: where does he find the time to relax and what does he do when the time fortuitously becomes available? He has responded to my silent query magnificently. Recently, one morning, he turned up and handed over to me a beautifully produced book of pictures and only pictures, *Faces and Places*. It is a selection from the hundreds of photographs he has taken, over the decades, of people and locations he has visited in different countries in different continents. The camera has been his passion since his school days; he initiated with a box camera and now reached the age of the digital marvel. The quality of the photographs he has chosen for the book is outstanding, illustrating as much the depth of imaginativeness of the person who has taken them and his ability to capture the exact moment when the persons or groups of persons whose images are being snapped have reached the emotional peak as well as the grandeur or misery or any other historical significance of the spots and places photographed. The people are from different strata, and the places include palaces, tombs, mosques and temples or even an ancient motor-car or bicycle. The places that have come within the frame of Deepak's camera even include the entrance of the history-laden English bookshop in Paris, Shakespeare and Company. The particular picture reproduced in the cover of a sage gentleman, with the brim of his top hat kissing the wobbling pages of the London Times covering completely the gentleman's face is superb. However, given my ideological inclinations, my pick is the picture adorning the frontispiece: it is the entrance of the headquarters of the Communist Party in Mexico City with blazing red flags proudly flanking portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin. I could not thank Deepak enough for this wonderful gift.

A research associate from one of the top universities in England came to see me last week. I showed him Deepak's *Faces and Places* with a bit of a flourish. He was not overly impressed. The upper strata of British academia, he informed me with some solemnity, had no need for the digital camera. When they feel like lazing, they steal one another's wife or husband. This is dangerous territory, I better stop.

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