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Use time as a tool, not as a crutch



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WHILE TRAVELLING on the underground train in Kyoto, Japan, my wife drew my attention to an advertisement which appeared on the walls of some stations. She had seen it before and had found it interesting enough to bring it to my notice. Unlike most ads that, being worded in the local lingo, were beyond our comprehension, this one contained not English, but Devanagari script. Feeling curious, we got down at one of these stations on our return journey and had a detailed look at the poster and its writing. It was a verse in Sanskrit and we noted it down. With our knowledge of school-level Sanskrit we were able to translate it. An approximate meaning of the verse was: "Every moment is a treasure that needs to be put to good use: if you waste it, it cannot be restored again".

The saying, apparently from Buddhist literature of India makes a very important point. The time is a precious commodity. If lost, it cannot be regained. If we lose money, we can eventually earn it back; but time once lost cannot be recovered. This fact impresses on us how important time is. The punctuality seen in day-to-day life in Japan suggests that the above saying has been well appreciated in that country. Unfortunately, in India where the saying originated, we are far from implementing its teaching.

Take for example, "bandhs" or strikes that cause immense losses of human hours, to say nothing of the damage to public and private property.

Fast transport saves time; but our road traffic is notorious for jams. Even the Pune-Mumbai Expressway turns into a "crawlway" because overnight truck traffic occupies all its three lanes. The Japanese Shinkansen bullet train travels at speeds up to 300 km per hour and arrives at its destination at the stipulated time. So far as our trains are concerned, we call them "superfast" if they maintain an average speed no more than one-fifth of the above value. And we consider them as having arrived "on time" if they are no more than half-an-hour late.

I once had the privilege of giving the Friday Evening Discourses at the prestigious Royal Institution. The famous scientist Michael Faraday had instituted this public lecture series back in the 1820s. The protocol followed is worth narrating. The speaker is given an excellent dinner and then is locked in a room with whiskey to sustain him, until time comes for him to be conducted to the auditorium. Locking is felt necessary because once the speaker ran away being too nervous to speak within the prescribed time constraints and Faraday had to substitute as the impromptu speaker. The time constraint starts when at the stroke of nine the speaker is conducted by the director of the institution into the lecture hall. No time is spent on introducing him. He is supposed to start his talk right away and, more importantly, conclude at the stroke of 10. No vote of thanks follows after the audience applause and the speaker exits accompanied by the director. He returns to the foyer shortly to mix with the audience.

Now contrast this with a public lecture in India. The dais will have apart from the speaker, a chairperson, a member of the institution to tell the audience the context in which the lecture was arranged and a dignitary to introduce the speaker. Additionally some local bigwig may also be invited to the dais to express his views, and in the end, after the chairperson's remarks, someone will propose a vote of thanks. All these secondary speeches drag out to test the patience of the audience so that it starts drifting out even while the vote of thanks is going on.

But perhaps the most time-consuming of all is correspondence with a government office. If you write a letter to a bureaucrat with some enquiry, you may have to wait a long time to get an answer if you get one at all. The delay can be enormous, and may depend on several factors like who and what you are, to whom you are writing, how sensitive is your query, whether there are important holidays at the time, etc. If you get no reply and wish to follow up the matter in person, it is advisable to take a xerox copy of your original letter with you. For, the bureaucrat will otherwise reply that your original letter is untraceable. Chances are that the letter is sitting well filed somewhere in the mountain of paperwork but he does not want to make the effort of looking for it.

I came across an excellent example of time management on one of the websites. A teacher brought to the class a bucket with stones of various sizes, some sand and water. He filled the bucket with big stones till he could put in no more. "Is the bucket full?" he asked. "Yes" said the class. "You are wrong!" said the teacher as he proceeded to put in smaller stones which went into the gaps between the big ones. He then repeated the question but the class now replied "No". "Correct", commented the teacher as he proceeded to fill the bucket with sand and then water. "What is the moral of this experiment?" he asked and the class replied: "We will always find time to do our smaller jobs in the time gaps between our major ones". But that was not all, as the teacher repeated the experiment in the reverse order. First filling the bucket with sand and small stones, he found that there was no room for any big stones. The moral: "If you do small jobs all the time, you will not have any time for the major ones".

A useful way of time management for the head of the institution is to delegate responsibility to senior colleagues. This makes time available to the head for other useful occupations. I encountered a reverse example of this maxim. A head so mistrusted his colleagues that he undertook to take every administrative action himself. Naturally he found his desk overcrowded and had to use weekends also for clearing files.

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