

# A new definition of work for 21st century

Former RBI Governor Y.V. Reddy's compilation of essays reflects on the generational divide in attitudes towards work

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**T**he word "work" has become loaded with meanings, is weighed down by multiple connotations and teems with social divisions. But what is work? Some view it as a four-letter word signifying a quotidian preoccupation, the root of a hum-drum existence but an unavoidable necessity. Others see it through the lens of privilege and entitlement, a ticket to material achievement and status. Many find it an opportunity to do something different, make a difference to society. Philosophically, work is viewed as the converse of not-work, which can be play or leisure, thereby investing both work and not-work with certain value sets.

In the *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, lexicographers have dedicated close to two pages to defining "work". The opening definition is instructive: "A thing done, an act, a deed, a proceeding; *spec.* (specifically) one involving toil or strenuous effort." Interestingly, this definition is not about an occupation, employment or even a profession. This is in complete contrast with what work has come to signify in modern times, both as a principle and as an activity, something that is automatically assumed to be a lifelong vocation.

*Work, Wisdom, Legacy*, a collection of essays compiled by former governor of the Reserve Bank of India Y.V. Reddy, seeks to find some meaning of the activity known as work by asking two simple questions. One, why should one work? Two, how would the generation that worked in the second half of the previous century explain work to youngsters born in this century?

This inter-generational question acquires some primacy when viewed against the recent statements of two industry leaders from the private sector. One implored youngsters to work 70 hours a week as their contribution to improving the country's overall productivity. The other was quoted as ridiculing his colleagues for seeking a life outside office, with their families, when they should instead be pledging their weekends to the organisation. Predictably, both statements kicked off a maelstrom. Youngsters of this century question the axiomatic nature of the suggestion that more hours automatically translates to greater productivity. They were also perturbed by the thought that industry seniors could be so uncaring of the effect long hours away from friends and family has on mental health and employees' capacity for meaningful work. Most of all, young people felt these statements reflected Corporate India's stark inequalities and misplaced entitlement, unheeded of the growing gap between top management pay and entry-level salaries.

Interestingly, this reviewer does not recall anybody responding with Article 24 from the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working



hours and periodic holidays with pay."

Truth be told, one can go on slicing and dicing the meaning of work. It is an unending endeavour and has always exercised philosophers and sociologists. Traditionally, labour—or toil and strenuous effort—was expended for sustenance or subsistence, through the act of hunting and gathering, and later through agricultural activity. Human beings sweated only to satiate hunger. As mankind formed communities, tribes and society, labour acquired layers and dimensions. As property, and acquisition of property, gained salience, society started witnessing division of labour, the dawn of the first distinctions between labour and work, and the beginnings of class hierarchies.

Work, as a distinctive activity, acquired a historical characteristic and began to be viewed differently in different eras. This has been a long trajectory: moving from an Aristotelian definition to the Marxian labour theory of value, all the way to a postmodern critique of how society uses the instrumentality of work to exercise greater control over populations. And it's not done yet. The 19th International Conference of Labour Statisticians (under the aegis of the International Labour Organisation) redefined work in 2013: "any activity performed by persons of any sex and age to produce goods or to provide services for use by others or for own use." This has further complicated matters.

There has been some pushback to the industrial concept of work, personified by Charlie Chaplin's dehumanised assembly line worker in *Modern Times*.

In a 1932 essay for *Harper's Magazine*, aptly titled "In Praise of Idleness", philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote, "I think that there is far too much work done in the world, that immense harm is caused by the belief that work is virtuous, and that what needs to be preached in modern industrial countries is quite different from what always has been preached."

In that sense, the collection of 31 essays in *Work, Wisdom, Legacy* belong to a different universe. They seem rooted in a work ethos that is

deeply imbued in the post-Independence spirit of nation-building, and an unquestioning devotion to the immediate task at hand. The essays in the collection that stand out—somewhat expectedly—have been authored by public servants. Apart from ministers and bureaucrats, valuable perspectives have been shared by those crafting public policies for the country. The insights are truly remarkable in outlining the opportunities, the challenges and steely grit with which tasks were approached and accomplished. This goes some distance in answering the question of why work.

Arun Shourie's piece remains distinctive in the way he adopts the Buddhist philosophical approach to work, "right livelihood", which is steeped in the ethical dimensions of one's chosen undertaking. Yashwant Sinha describes the travails of a young, upright IAS officer standing up to bullying politicians while determinedly

trying to deliver public services to rural India. N.K. Singh and Shankar Acharya describe their initiation into public life and the early lessons learnt that shaped their outlook to policy architecture and public service. There is a thread of scrupulousness and rectitude that runs through all these essays, providing them a special flavour.

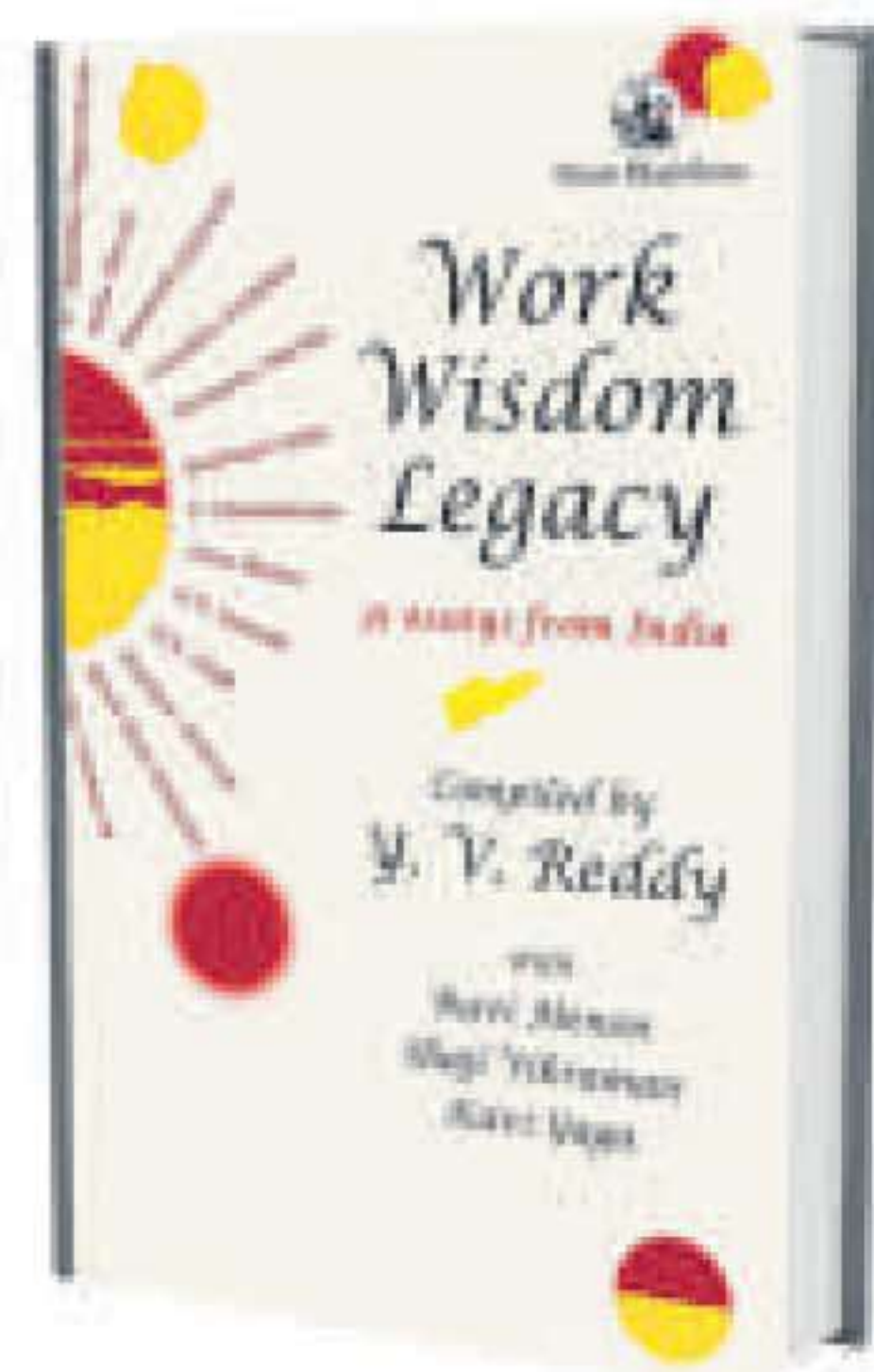
Two essays from the private sector seem interesting for the perspective they offer on their approach to work. Foreign exchange consultant Jamal Mecklai learnt early in life the disarming effects of a smile and how to take all adversities on the chin before moving on. Joydeep Mukherjee from Standard and Poor's credit rating agency discovered enrichment in human interactions and extracted contentment from work through a process of gradual self-understanding.

It is in tackling the second question that the book may wobble a bit. There is little in it that may address some of the work-related dilemmas that Gen-Z faces today. It is not that they are averse to hard work; what they abhor is slaving for long hours in an office, earning subsistence wages.

The 2020 pandemic brought home some harsh realities. It has taught Gen-Z to value personal relationships above many other things, and to invest personal time in building and nurturing those ties. They need me-time to foster a healthy mind and body. It is no use comparing their priorities with what prevailed in the past century; the times are different and so are the pressures. We do not know yet whether this is a passing phase or an enduring trend; it is what it is and needs to be recognised as such.

This is not to say that the book has nothing to offer. There are lessons to be learnt, but one has to navigate lots of gratuitous, self-righteous and hackneyed copy to get to the real stuff. For some readers, the treasure at the end of the hunt could indeed be valuable.

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**Work, Wisdom, Legacy: 31 Essays From India**—compiled by Y.V. Reddy (with Navin Menon, Shaji Vikraman & Kavi Yaga), Orient BlackSwan, 316 pages, ₹850.