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QUIET QUITTING AND THE LAW: DO INDIAN EMPLOYEES HAVE A RIGHT TO DISENGAGE?

~Abhaya

INTRODUCTION

Picture this you show up to work every single day, complete every task in your job description, meet every deadline, and clock out exactly when your shift ends. You don't answer emails at midnight. You don't volunteer for extra projects. You don't go above and beyond. You simply do your job nothing more, nothing less. Sounds reasonable, right? Well, apparently not everyone agrees. Welcome to the world of quiet quitting the workplace trend that has sparked a global debate about what employers can demand from their employees, and more importantly, what the law has to say about it.

WHAT IS QUIET QUITTING?

Despite the dramatic name, quiet quitting has nothing to do with actually quitting your job. The term gained massive popularity in 2022 when it went viral on TikTok, racking up over 300 million views. At its core, quiet quitting means doing only what your employment contract requires no more, no less. It is about mentally disengaging from the hustle culture expectation of constantly going above and beyond and instead setting firm boundaries between work and personal life.

The trend exploded in the aftermath of the COVID19 pandemic, which fundamentally changed how people thought about work. Remote work blurred the lines between professional and personal time. Burnout skyrocketed. Employees began questioning why they were working extra hours without recognition or compensation. According to a Gallup survey, quiet quitters make up nearly half of the global workforce. In India specifically, the numbers are alarming Gallup's workplace report found that nearly 90% of Indian employees suffer from work related stress, while a Microsoft India survey found that 57% feel overworked. It is no surprise then that quiet quitting found fertile ground here too.

THE INDIAN WORKPLACE CONTEXT

India's corporate culture has long glorified the idea of going above and beyond. Long hours are celebrated. Saying no extra work is frowned upon. The concept of "hustle culture" is deeply embedded in workplaces across the country, from startups in Bengaluru to corporate offices in Mumbai. But this culture has a dark side. India's corporate burnout rate stands at 78%, far exceeding global averages according to studies by Deloitte and WHO. The tragic death of a 26yearold Ernst & Young employee in 2024, allegedly due to work related stress, triggered national outrage and reignited conversations about whether India's workplace culture is simply unsustainable.

Against this backdrop, quiet quitting is not just a trend it is a survival mechanism for many Indian employees. But the question that nobody seems to be asking loudly enough is this: is quiet quitting legal under Indian law? And do employers have the right to penalize employees for doing exactly what they were hired to do?

WHAT DOES INDIAN LAW SAY?

Here is where things get legally interesting. Indian labor law does not explicitly mention quiet quitting the concept is too new for that. However, existing statutes and judicial precedents give us a clear picture of where employees stand.

The primary legislation governing employment disputes in India is the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947. Under this Act, the concept most relevant to quiet quitting is "go slow" in a tactic where employees deliberately reduce their work output below the expected standard. Courts in India have consistently held that go slow constitutes misconduct under the Act.

However, this is a crucial distinction; quiet quitting is fundamentally different from going slow. Quiet quitting means doing exactly what your contract requires. Go slow means doing less than what your contract requires. The Karnataka High Court's ruling in Management of Bata India Limited v. Workmen of Bata India Limited, upheld by the Supreme Court in 2023, makes this distinction clear. In that case, workmen were found guilty of misconduct because they reduced production by 50% below the minimum contractual target. The court found this to be going slow, not legitimate work to rule. Quiet quitting, by contrast, involves meeting the minimum contractual requirement which the same court acknowledged is perfectly within an employee's rights.

Simply put if you are doing everything your contract says you should do; Indian law cannot punish you for it.

THE CONTRACT IS KING

This brings us to the most important legal principle in this debate the sanctity of the employment contract. In India, the terms of employment are primarily governed by the contract between employer and employee, along with applicable statutes. If an employee fulfils all contractual obligations, there is no legal basis for disciplinary action.

The Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act, 1946 requires employers to clearly define the terms and conditions of employment, including duties and working hours. If those terms are met, the employer cannot unilaterally demand more without offering corresponding compensation or amending the contract. To do otherwise would expose the employer to claims of unfair labor practices.

There is also the question of constructive dismissal a concept increasingly relevant in India's modern workplaces. If an employer retaliates against a quietly quitting employee through demotions, salary cuts, or unreasonable workload increases, that employee may have grounds to approach a labor court under Section 2A of the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947, arguing that the employer's conduct effectively forced them out.

THE RIGHT TO DISCONNECT INDIA'S MISSING PIECE

One of the biggest drivers of quiet quitting globally is the expectation that employees must remain available outside of working hours answering emails at 11 PM, attending calls on weekends, and being perpetually "on." Several countries have addressed this with Right to Disconnect laws France pioneered it in 2017, followed by Belgium, Spain, and Australia.

India has been slower to act. A Right to Disconnect Bill has been discussed but not yet passed. In 2025, proposals for such legislation emphasized that employees should be able to disengage from work communications outside official hours without facing adverse consequences, grounding this right in Article 21 of the Constitution the right to life, which courts have interpreted broadly to include the right to livelihood and dignity. Until such legislation passes, Indian employees technically have no statutory protection against being penalized for not responding to afterhours messages a gap that urgently needs addressing.

CONCLUSION

Quiet quitting is not laziness. It is not disloyalty. It is employees doing precisely what they agreed to do and nothing more. Under Indian law, an employee who fulfils their contractual obligations is on solid legal ground. Employers who punish such employees at risk violating the Industrial Disputes Act and principles of fair employment. But the law alone is not enough. India urgently needs clearer statutory protections including a Right to Disconnect law that acknowledge the reality of modern work culture and protect employees from the unreasonable demands of an always on workplace. Until then, quietly quitting might just be the most legally sound career decision you ever make.

CITATIONS

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4. Gallup Workplace Report 2022
5. Deloitte India Survey 2022
6. Right to Disconnect Bill 2025 proposals