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UNPLUGGING THE 24/7 WORKPLACE : RIGHT TO DISCONNECT IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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ABSTRACT

The digital workplace has dissolved the once-clear boundary between employment and personal life, transforming connectivity into an expectation of perpetual availability. This paper explores the Right to Disconnect as a necessary legal and human safeguard against this “24/7 workplace,” where notifications, emails, and after-hours demands silently erode rest, privacy, dignity, and mental well-being. It examines the right through constitutional and labour-law principles, particularly dignity and personal liberty under Article 21, while recognising legitimate exceptions for emergencies and essential services. Ultimately, the paper argues that disconnecting is not an escape from work, but a reaffirmation that productivity must serve humanity—not replace it.

“L’homme est né libre, et partout il est dans les fers.”

Translates to ‘A Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.’ Was said by Jean-Jacques Rousseau as if he had already imagined the toxic environment of today that a man has to work in. In the digital age, those chains are often imperceptible like continuous notifications, endless emails, and the expectation of perpetual availability.

In a generation where the phone on a bedside table can become a string to official anxiety, the right to disconnect is not a luxury but a moral and legal plea for mortal boundaries.

It asks a simple but profound question: when does a worker stop being an employee and begin being a human again?

A human who has a whole different life other than his work and office. A normal man with a family, a random evening with children, a late dinner outing with loved ones, and some solace

in the presence of his being which to him must not be considered as luxury moments. An employee or a worker should not be forced to choose between his work and his peace.

The right to disconnect is the freedom to step away from labor after working hours without guilt, pressure, or punishment. It is the legal and human right to let one's mind rest, one's phone fall silent, and one's life belong to something beyond the office. It is the right to let evening be evening again. It must be noted that this is not a demand for laziness. It is a demand for dignity. It is the recognition that a mortal being is not a machine programmed for 24/7 availability. People need rest, family time, sleep, silence, and mental space to remain healthy and effective. Without these, the modern worker may appear connected, but inside, they are slowly exhausted. And, keeping in mind the long-term goals of any work environment, its members must not be exhausted to deliver better results back to the company. The right to disconnect, therefore, is about restoring balance. It protects the simple but powerful concept that rest is not a reward for productivity; it is a condition for it. A well-rested worker thinks better, works better, and lives better. In that sense, the right to disconnect is not anti-work. It is pro-life, pro-health, and pro-dignity.

The rise of digital communication has made this crisis more critical than ever. Earlier, an employee could leave the workplace and mentally leave the job behind. Now, the boundary between personal life and professional obligation has virtually vanished. Remote work, hybrid schedules, and instant messaging have made communication easier, but they have also created a culture where "urgent" is often used too loosely. A message marked urgent at 10:30 p.m. may not truly be urgent at all, yet the employee feels compelled to respond immediately. Over time, this continuous availability becomes a form of silent strain.

The emotional cost of this pressure is often underestimated. A person who is always "on" rarely gets to be entirely present anywhere. At home, they are distracted by work. At work, they are diverted by the fear of missing family life. They begin to live in a condition of divided attention, where neither rest nor labor feels complete. This is not just an efficiency problem; it is a human problem. Burnout, anxiety, sleep loss, and emotional fatigue are real consequences of a culture that refuses to stop asking for more.

The right to disconnect is important from a legal perspective as it reconfirms the fact that even in the digital era, employment relations are still to be regulated by constitutional guarantees and protection under labour law. It stops the erosion of statutory limits on working hours by

ensuring employers cannot extend digital availability beyond what is contractually agreed. The right gives practical meaning to labour rights of rest, leave and decent conditions of work, while reaffirming the constitutional values of dignity, privacy, personal liberty and mental well-being. It also promotes accountability by requiring clear workplace policies, safeguarding against retaliation for employees who decline non-urgent after-hours communication, and providing an enforceable framework that balances legitimate business interests with workers' fundamental rights. The need to legally affirm the right to disconnect as a dimension of Article 21¹ is crucially important in the present situation. A Private Bill has been introduced in the parliament in 2025² related to this right.

Still, the right must be conceived carefully. Not every profession can follow the identical schedule. Emergency services, health care, and certain global operations may need exceptions. But exceptions should remain exceptions. The answer is not to renounce the idea, but to shape it wisely. A fair policy can defend workers while still allowing genuine emergencies to be addressed properly.

At its heart, the right to disconnect is a simple act of tenderness made into a legal principle. It reminds us that a message sent after hours may seem small, but its effect can be heavy. One late-night email can steal a family dinner, a child's smile, or a moment of peace that can never be recovered. The law cannot pay back every lost evening, but it can help deter the next one from being taken away.

In the end, the right to disconnect is about drawing a line in a world that keeps erasing them. It is the right to close the laptop, to ignore the ping, to breathe without apology, and to remember that a life is larger than a job. That may be the most humane right of all. Similarly, it proves that a human being is bound by different chains at all times and these chains must also show how strong each one of them is.

¹ INDIA CONST. art. 21

² . Supriya Sule, The Right to Disconnect Bill, 2025, Bill No. 51 of 2025, 16th Lok Sabha.

