

# THE INK

OCTOBER 2020 | SIMC PUNE | 10 Pages | An Initiative by the Journalism Students of SIMC



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## Flouting Public Transport Rules Still Prevalent in the New Normal

Netra V & Sanjukta Mandal  
Assist - Atreya Raghavan & Saloni Dhumne

Months after the coronavirus-induced lockdown began in India, the Ministry of Home Affairs, on August 29, announced the relaxation of rules and regulations for inter-state and intra-state travel under Unlock 4.0. This detailed the resumption of public transportation, which included buses and metro services, from September 7, 2020. While buses were allowed to ply in full-capacity according to the state's discretion, metro services would be resumed in a phased manner only.

As the government opened up public transport services, multiple guidelines were laid down along with precautionary measures, keeping in mind the increasing frequency of COVID 19 cases. Initially, only the people involved in essential services, government, and municipal officials, and hospital staff were allowed to make use of the buses, but this facility has now gradually been extended to daily commuters as well. To ensure the safety of the commuters, social distancing has been made mandatory with just 18 passengers in a 60-foot-long bus and 12 on a 40-foot-long bus. Only one passenger is allowed per seat with no more than 5 standing passengers, standing only at demarcated spaces set six feet apart. Dedicated doors have been made for boarding as well as alighting with complete automation of fare collection. The stopping time at each bus stop has been increased for

the safe movement of passengers. Lastly, common areas are kept clean with limited access to the driver's cabin. Apart from the centre's guidelines, the states have scripted their regulations depending upon their respective coronavirus. The West Bengal government had proposed developing a system to issue an 'e-pass' for entering metro stations in Kolkata, as explained by the developer to the committee. The e-passes would be provided by the Metro Railways and the system would be introduced to keep the crowd in check. "While it is advised to maintain distances while on bus or train, but specifically in a city like Kolkata where population density is high, social distancing is a luxury term. Rules are seriously not maintained even if one wants, especially during the rush hour. But what to do? We have to travel daily to meet our lives. In Bengal, it is desirable at the moment if they increase the number of buses then the crowd might be divided," lamented Animesh Roy, a Staff Selection Commission Exam (SSC) aspirant who commutes daily from Baruipur to Kolkata to study.

The government of Maharashtra has decided not to resume the operations of the metro during September 2020 as Maharashtra is the worst hit due to the pandemic, with more than 7.6 million total cases. However, local train services have been reopened partially in Phase 5 of the

Unlock. Atharva Diwe, a resident of Mumbai and ILS Law College student, deems the usage of local trains in this situation hazardous but also states that trains are the fastest mode of transport in Mumbai. "Even though enough precautions have been put in to ensure the safety of the commuters, not everyone manages to follow. A limited amount of public transport has been opened due to unavoidable circumstances, but public transport has to be opened if attendance at workplaces is made mandatory. Currently, the number of passengers allowed per train is very less, not everyone follows social distancing in a hurry which makes contracting the virus very easy," he said.

Image Credits: TOI

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## Challenges Faced by ASHA Workers Amid Pandemic

Mallika Chugh, Pallavi Mehra & Shweta Jamsandekar  
Assist - Asmita Pant & Samrah Attar

Accredited Social Health Activists or the 'ASHA' workers are trained, female workers who contribute to government health schemes, including the current fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite working for long hours, these workers are not paid on time. Reportedly, they have not received their promised payments for months. Various reports suggest that 20 ASHAs have died during the outbreak as they were not provided with the proper protective gear, such as masks, sanitizers, and gloves. Amita, an ASHA worker from Mumbai, explained, "We go from one house to another to check on people's health. Especially in the times of Corona, we guide them the way they have to deal with the situation. During the present times, we teach people about social distancing, the correct way to use wearing a mask, and maintaining personal hygiene."

ASHA workers are honorary volunteers who are recruited by the Government of India under the National Rural Health Mission of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. In these times of crisis, this all-female health care army of India stood on the front lines, fighting the virus. They worked on the grass-root level, doing surveys and informing people how to stay safe and fight the virus. Yet, the government failed to provide them with protection from the virus or pay them what they deserve for their selfless work.

The helplessness of the situation that these ASHA

workers are in has led to protests across different parts of the country. Kusumlata Joshi from Ranikhet, Uttarakhand became an ASHA worker to follow her passion for helping people. She stated that she supports the protests and demands raised by ASHA workers across the country, yet she hasn't stopped doing her work. Even after being underpaid and not provided with safety equipment, she continues to do her job which she understands is very crucial in these times of crisis.

Bharti Shettar from Hubli, Karnataka, has been an ASHA worker for the last five years. She revealed that, before joining, she was told that she would only be required to work for one or two hours a day and would be paid on the basis of the work she did. Mrs. Shettar pointed out that their salary was raised after protests and at the same time, the workload was increased. She briefly spoke about the unity of the union and how she believed that their demands would be fulfilled. She also mentioned how people have sometimes closed doors on their faces and pelted stones at them when they tried to enter a building for surveys.

Image Credits: Deccan Herald

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## One in Five Indian Women Suffer from PCOS Understanding Urban Period Poverty

Manaswini Tripathy & Manya Saini  
Assist - Yagnoseni Das

One in five women in India suffers from Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS), according to the statistics released by the Ministry of Women and Child Development in September 2020, which is universally celebrated as PCOS awareness month. The World Health Organisation identifies the condition as a hormonal syndrome, not a disease affecting women of the reproductive age. While the causes remain largely unknown, symptoms include irregular menstruation, infertility, obesity, and unwanted male-pattern hair growth.

Menstruation, more commonly known as periods in India is a subject that has sparked social stigma across generations in the country. Commenting on the same, Dr. Stupa Banerjee, Director, Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Fortis Hospital, Vasant Kunj said, "It is deeply shameful that we as a society do not speak about menstruation beyond its obvious reproductive function. Conversations around PCOS, PCOD, and reproductive health are not only necessary but long overdue in India. It is not logical to assume the problem of stigma only affects rural women. I have seen in metro cities like Delhi and Mumbai, a blatant hesitance to address the topic publicly."

Period Poverty refers to inadequate access to menstrual hygiene care, education, and products. Scarcity in healthcare infrastructure is felt by a majority of Indian women, according to a report published by the Ministry of Health. It said that only 12% of women in the country have the resources to buy products and seek treatments for conditions like PCOS and PCOD. Apart from these, 88% of women are vulnerable to contracting uro-genital diseases like urinary tract infection (UTI), white and green discharge among others.

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Image Credits: Mid Day

## Virtual Rally Organized by Indian Anti-Maskers

Manaswini Tripathy & Manya Saini

Even as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to ravage the public healthcare system in India, measures to control the spread are now being equated with government infringement on the fundamental rights of citizens. A virtual rally contesting masks being mandatory in public places was recently organised by 'anti-mask activists' in Delhi's Hauz Khas area. Similar visuals emerged in October from Mumbai's Marine Drive, where hundreds of protestors gathered in person to raise their voice and questioned the mandatory mask and vaccination policy of the government.

"No doctor can vouch for masks, which mask is good? Which one is terrible? Which will make you the safest?" said Rohan Taneja, organiser, South Delhi Anti-Masking Initiative, and student activist told INK when asked about the source of the group's

contempt for masks and evidence to corroborate their claims. He further added, "A WHO representative during a press conference said masks aren't reducing risk by a measurable percentage." However, a fact check on the statement has found the claim to be false, as Maria Kerkhov, the doctor for the World Health Organisation later clarified her stance and said that both symptomatic and asymptomatic transmission of the virus could be prevented by wearing masks.

Even as the anti-masking movement has gathered steam in the country facilitated by fake news surrounding the pandemic on social media, there has been a crackdown on conspiracy theories by Facebook which also owns WhatsApp and Instagram. Owing to this, the group's account on Instagram was first restricted and later banned. Commenting on it, Taneja said, "Six-

teen thousand people joined our virtual rally, is not allowing them to do so fair? Is this not betraying freedom of expression given in the constitution?"

Lamenting the crackdown and clarifying the position of the group, Abhilasha Garg, an anti-masker from Mumbai said, "We are not saying don't wear a mask if you want to, just don't force it on us. India is a democratic country, everyone including us should have a choice." The statement, however, negates the risks of transmission and virus spread which could potentially reach vulnerable age groups with higher morbidity rates.

The beginning of the anti-masking movement in India, which had already taken the United States and several other European countries by a storm, can be traced back to a viral video released on 15th August 2020. The wide-

ly circulated visuals show youngsters coming together on Independence Day to protest against "psychological control" and "fear psychosis" caused by the mandatory mask policy amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The video falsely claims that masks are ineffective against the virus, even as several credible studies, ICMR, and other medical bodies have presented documented evidence that proves otherwise. The voice-over of the video continues with, "Today it is a mandatory mask, tomorrow it's a mandatory vaccine, a digital ID and the list goes on! Do not give up your freedom and rights for the illusion of health and safety,"

The misleading viral chant of the video which was removed from both Facebook and Twitter, 'Mask se azaadi' continues to be a driving force in the protests against them in major Indian cities.

## Rural Workforce Struggles as Kerala Government Announces MGNREGA Layoffs

Saikerthi

Assist - Riya Ashok and Vishal U

The Kerala State Mission Director of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), Divya S Iyer announced in June that the state would be laying off all MGNREGA employees above the age of 60 amidst rising COVID-19 cases in the state. The age bar was later reformed to 65 and rendered about 4 lakh people without work. While the announcement was put forward without any prior notice, according to Nodal Officer, Dr Amar Fettle, the move was a long time coming as a part of the reverse quarantine protocol being followed in the state.

Kerala MGNREGA Joint Development Commissioner & Programme officer, C.P Joseph, stated that the move is only temporary. He stressed on the fact that while people above the age of 65 have been temporarily laid off, provisions have been made for other family members to pick up the work using their card. He states that this can help the family cope with the sudden loss of employment. Responding to the rising opposition to the move, he said, "We have received a lot of complaints and letters and while we have done our part in forwarding them to the State government, people need to understand that the decision has been set in place to give them sufficient protection during these challenging times." He also says that while the decision has been taken for people above the age of 65, not many people belonging to that age range are currently listed under the Act. The government has not provided these individuals with any subsidies but according to Mr Joseph, every single individual above the age of 60, employed under

the Act is susceptible to a pension from the government.

Sharadha, a 66-year-old former MGNREGA worker suddenly found herself at the cusp of unemployment during these challenging times. While the government did give her an option to pass on her work to another family member, she struggles with the fact that she would have to send her ailing son to work and also look after her daughter in law and their children. She decided to pick up odd jobs around her locality and work as a maid in the meantime. However, COVID-19 prevented people from hiring maidservants due to the fear of risking their health. She says, "I have sent in numerous letters to the NREGS office asking them to come up with a possible solution to my problem and all I have received from them in return is their silence. I now have to find work daily and go back home with the thought of finding yet another job tomorrow to make ends meet. I have an entire family depending on me and while my sick son has had to venture out to work during a pandemic, its heartbreaking that I am not able to provide for them like I used to." However, for some people, the move by the government has opened up new employment opportunities. Rajendran P, a 65-year-old former employee suddenly found himself in the same situation as Sharadha. He states that while there were many barriers to finding jobs in these tough times, he has managed to start working at a community centre that manufactures masks. While the threat of job security continues to loom, he finds the work satisfactory and sufficient to make ends meet at home.

The MGNREGA scheme in Kerala has over the years come under much scrutiny for not being able to provide the workers with sufficient and meaningful work. However, contrary to all odds, according to data from their official website, the mission is reaching new heights even amidst intense layoffs with the State even announcing an increase of 20.2% as compared to 2019-20 in its material expenditure. The state has also bagged an impressive amount of work under its asset creation including the construction of 15,013 village roads in a year as well as Anganwadi buildings, compound walls for schools and level grounds.

As the state government grapples with a possible shortage in its rural workforce, they are currently prioritising safety over responsibility while at the same time, workers are struggling to come to terms with its rising consequences.



Image Credits: Government of Kerala

**Do 'Immunity-Boosting' Products Really Protect You from COVID-19?**

Siddharth Ganguly & Alex Binoy  
Assist - Shreya Gautam

The coronavirus pandemic, for individuals, has created an atmosphere for fear and uncertainty. For brands, however, it has presented an ideal marketing opportunity, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the markets for immunological drugs and 'natural' health remedies.

A prime example of this can be found in Patanjali's product, 'Coronil'. Launched in June this year, Coronil was initially introduced to the public as a 'cure for COVID-19'. This unsubstantiated claim drew disciplinary action from the AYUSH ministry and the consumer goods company was forced to rebrand, joining a host of products, such as chyawanprash, honey, giloy, and camel's milk in making the vague claim that it 'boosts immunity'.

According to Dabur CEO Mohit Malhotra, speaking to 'Indian Express', the first quarter of 2020-21 fiscal saw the demand for chyawanprash grow by a multiple of seven and that of honey, by 60%. Patanjali claimed that Coronil was moving 10 lakh units per day. All these figures rest on the claim that these products boost immunity; a claim that consumers draw comfort from. But has anyone bothered to ask; what is immunity?

Dr. Himanshu Devan, Senior Consultant, Critical Care in QRG Health City, Faridabad, describes the body's immunity at three levels, the first being 'surface immunity' at the place where a virus comes in contact with the body. If the virus overwhelms the antibodies (proteins in the body meant to neutralise pathogens) here, the virus enters the body.

Inside the body, there is a degree of 'non-specific immunity' which activates antibodies to fight any kind of intruder. After being exposed to a pathogen, in a period of one week to 10 days, the body develops 'specific immunity' against that particular pathogen. Specific immunity against a particular pathogen, such as the Sars-Cov 2, the virus responsible for COVID-19, can-

not develop without the body being exposed to the virus.

The strength of a person's immune system, according to Dr. Devan, can be classified according to a 'baseline'. All those who meet that particular baseline are 'immunocompetent' and those who do not are 'immunocompromised.'

He explains that a number of factors determine a person's immunity, the foremost of which is genetics. Next is a person's environment. "People from lower economic strata or rural backgrounds, because they are exposed to infections day in and day out, tend to have very high baseline immunity and their response to such infections is much better than people who have been less exposed to infections on a regular basis." He says.



Image Credits: Patanjali

The next factor is nutrition, specifically the consumption of Vitamin C, D, and zinc among others, which are integral to maintaining a strong immune system. "Somebody who is taking a balanced diet doesn't need to really supplement anything," he explains, "but people nowadays with their modern lifestyles and eating patterns being very different, they need to supplement." He cautions that such supplementation should only be done after checking to see if the levels of these components really require supplementation.

When asked about the trend of Ayurvedic and 'natural' products claiming to defend against COVID-19, Dr. Devan drew a distinction between such products and medical products. "Medical products go through 'Randomised Control Trials' (RCT) to prove their efficacy and reputation." An RCT takes individuals from a uniform demographic and divides them into two groups; one group receives the treatment while the other does not in order to determine whether or not the treatment causes an actual improvement in a person's condition.

"Now, when it comes to typical ayurvedic or homeopathic products," he says, "they give you things which are rich in Vitamin C, zinc or other microelements which will boost your immunity anyhow." However, taking these products without having a deficiency can be dangerous. "You shouldn't keep on increasing the amount of intake because some of these products (contain) heavy metals which can be damaging to your body more than the virus itself."

"The exact constitution of these homeopathic and ayurvedic products gives you some plants or herbs, but they don't really tell you what are the elements in it. When people consume chyawanprash or ayurvedic products in very high amounts, we have seen that in months to years time, they develop damage to the nerves and other organs because of the heavy metal content of these products."

The disingenuous claims that brands have been making, using the pandemic as a marketing opportunity, can be very dangerous. The idea that consuming an ayurvedic product can provide protection from the Sars-Cov 2 virus may lead to lapses in rules meant to reduce the virus's transmission, such as mask-wearing and social distancing. Moreover, the actual consumption of these products in excess can cause serious, long term damage to individuals. Consumers need to be wary of these spurious claims and be informed in order to protect themselves in such crisis conditions.

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**PCOS & Period Poverty**

Debangana Baruah, Campaign Manager - Menstrupedia, ActionAid India told INK that it was necessary to understand conditions like PCOS in the context of period poverty to comprehend the potential health risk. She said, "Collaborating with Menstrupedia to shatter misinformation and myths around periods is our central goal. We want to create meaningful awareness so that if you or your loved one is suffering from PCOS or other menstrual conditions, you know how to seek help."

Talking about the short and long-term effects of PCOS, Sradhanjali Deb, who has been diagnosed with the condition for twelve years said that she suffered from both mood disorders and physical difficulties. She further added that to help other women, she has tried to discuss it candidly, saying, "Yes, I have educated as much as I could by my minuscule knowledge." The COVID-19 pandemic has created fresh challenges for women and other vulnerable groups amid the shift in healthcare budgets and campaigns. Campaigns during PCOS awareness month this year were also hindered by the outbreak and remained largely uncovered.



Image Credits: TOI

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**Challenges Faced by ASHA Workers Amid Pandemic**

Not being paid enough or on time as well as not being provided with gear to protect against COVID are common problems pan-India. The ASHA workers were told about thousands of incentives for their work in these times which many are yet to receive. This is what they get for serving others while risking their lives and the lives of their families. Mrs. Joshi mentioned that they were informed that they have been provided with health insurance of ₹50,000, though no official document has been given to them. They are demanding the most basic things that they deserve – a raise in salary and protective gear against the virus.

ASHA workers are an important part of the health care system in India. These workers form a bridge between the government and less urbanized remote areas. They have helped in strengthening primary health care. Their regular roles have been accompanying and visiting pregnant women and keeping track of vaccinations once the child is born. They also keep track of tuberculosis patients.

The ASHA workers are today hopeful that their struggle would get their demands fulfilled.



Image Credits: Deccan Herald

## Uncertainty Over Guidelines for Reopening Schools & Colleges

Avani Pai

The Ministry of Home Affairs released its guidelines for Unlock 5.0 on 30th September. Schools and colleges were given some clarity on reopening and the decision was left to the State/UT governments. Following the new guidelines, Punjab, Sikkim, and Uttar Pradesh reopened their schools for students of Class IX to XII outside containment zones and under strict COVID guidelines. Despite the Centre allowing schools to reopen post-October 15th, the majority of states have decided to wait and analyse the situation before giving out any circulars for reopening schools and colleges.

Since the government announced the first stage of the Unlock on 30th May, it has been a whirlpool of giving out guidelines and retracting them. This has affected the education sector, which has been on a halt for 7 months now. With each circular of Unlock, the government would make some new decisions and the schools would prepare accordingly, only to have those guidelines changed or cancelled. Following the norms given by the Centre on Unlock 4.0, the Karnataka government had earlier sent out notice allowing all schools to resume classes for 9th to 12th standard from 21st September. Oxford Universal Public School, a private school in Nagarbhavi, Bangalore, spent 90,000 on new thermal scanners and automatic sanitisers with sensors for every floor. The state government then further postponed the opening date, resulting in losses for the private school. "We got notice that schools might reopen from 21st September and made all the necessary preparations. But suddenly the state government retracted its statement and now the school has to bear the loss. This equipment might be necessary for the future when the school reopens, but now is just lying there with no use." Said DR. B.R. Supreeth, secretary of Oxford Public School. Many private schools have not been able to provide salaries to the teachers since the lockdown commenced.



Image Credits: Asma News Network

The government schools have equally been affected by this confusion over reopening the schools. The Karnataka government in the first week of August started an initiative called 'Vidyagama programme' under which schools were asked to divide their students based on their residence. A group of 15-20 students that reside in nearby localities was to be formed. Following which the teachers were required to go to those localities and teach students in open spaces like temples, anganwadis and community centers, keeping social distancing norms. On October 10th, the state government, following the orders of S. Suresh Kumar, state primary education minister, suspended the programme due to cases of students and teachers contracting COVID. Around 34 students in Belgavi district tested positive for Covid-19. As many as five teachers have succumbed to the disease in Mysuru alone with 124 testing positive for the virus since August.

"We had to first travel to the school to write our names in the registers before travelling to various localities allotted to us. We had to teach for over two hours in each locality amidst disturbances. Many parents would send their kids without masks despite repeated instructions. Two of my colleagues tested positive last month because of frequent travelling to such open spaces. Additionally, we were not compensated for the travel expenses we incurred in the last two months, and now that it is again postponed, there is an indefinite uncertainty." Said Nagendra Nayak, a teacher at Carmel High School in Udipi, a district in Karnataka.

This programme has now been suspended to analyse whether or not it is safe for the students and teachers. This cycle of releasing new guidelines and changing them has caused extreme difficulties to students as well as teachers, especially teachers of private schools who are finding it difficult to sustain themselves with their salaries cut down. Schools and colleges in the past few months have suffered because of uncertainty over guidelines and now with the majority of states deciding to open educational institutes post-Diwali, with no information other than the dates, this uncertainty pertains.

## Meet Harbhajan Kaur, the 94-year-old Entrepreneur Who Believes It's "better to wear out than to rust"

Drishti Kharbanda

Ninety-four-year-old Harbhajan Kaur from Chandigarh made national waves when renowned industrialist Anand Mahindra named her his 'entrepreneur of the year'. The nonagenarian's story of self-reliance has captured the national imagination as she gives a whole new meaning to India's national start-up mission.

'My mother encouraged her to start her own brand.' Says Kaur's granddaughter, Supriya. 'She loved the organic besan ki barfi grandma makes and, along with her sisters, sells them at the organic mandi in Chandigarh.'

The idea of creating her own brand started when Harbhajan expressed to her daughter that she felt dejected for not being able to make any money of her own all these years. It was then that Supriya's mother, along with her sisters, thought about coming up with a brand for her homemade besan ki barfi. They named the brand 'Harbhajan's' and gave it the tagline: "Bachpan yaad aajaega (you'll remember your childhood)".

"While Many think it's sometimes too late to start, or take challenges, she is an inspiration to all of us and a constant reminder that it's never too late." Supriya said.

Now, Kaur and her daughter run the enterprise, home delivering her sweets. They were overwhelmed when their brand received nation wide recognition. During the lockdown, unlike other enterprises, their sales skyrocketed after Harbhajan's story received national attention.

"Making sweets is my passion and I have spent years perfecting my craft." Kaur said. "You learn new things only when you try. Besan Barfi is my signature. My children love it and encouraged me to take orders. It's better to wear out than to rust."

Harbhajan Kaur is truly an inspiration and living proof that age should be no deterrent to one's dreams.



Image Credits: Harbhajan Kaur

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## Flouting Public Transport Rules Still Prevalent in the New Normal

According to the expected rules in Delhi for travelling in the metro, alternate seating arrangements will be made for the passengers. "Delhi Metro Railway Corporation (DMRC) ensures the safety of commuters with strict social distancing norms followed in the station. Thermal scanning and hand sanitisation are also ensured. People without masks are not allowed to enter, beyond a certain number, passengers are not allowed to travel, and an alternate seating pattern is followed," said Mudassar Nazar, a Delhi University student.

In Chennai, the metro services resumed from September 7. According to the guidelines, trains run at five-minute intervals during peak hours from 8.30 am to 10.30 am and 5 pm to 8 pm. Trains remain operational from 8 am to 8 pm, while buses are allowed to run in full capacity.

Having to travel via four forms of public transport to reach work, Narayani. M, a reporter for New Indian Express, Chennai, said, "Sanitisers are present, but are unused as they are broken. There are many cases of overcrowding but the conductors don't stop it. On rare occasions, conductors stop pas-

sengers from boarding the bus in case masks aren't worn properly. Considering the number of people who use MTC buses every day, allowing buses should've been the last option."

Meanwhile, all the state governments of the four metro cities urged passengers to follow the guidelines. There have been instances where the violators have been caught and fined for flouting the rules and regulations. In the National Capital, DMRC resumed its services after almost six months, on September 7, 2020. However, by September 12, up to 92 commuters had been caught by flying squads deployed by the Delhi Metro and fined, and another 150 issued advisories after flouting guidelines for travel in metro trains. In other parts of the country too, similar incidents were reported.

Evidently, with the country's current public transport infrastructure and population density, the demand for social distancing is difficult to meet. With the downfall of the economy, a prolonged lockdown is no more an option. The option of opening up gradually or developing an alternative commuting system must be sought out by the government to prevent overcrowding in public transport. With India being one of the table-toppers in the number of COVID-19 cases, the government must act fast to prevent violations and must seek out a method to ensure social distancing before it is too late.



Image Credits: CCMB

## Exposure to COVID-19 through Faecal Matter

Rujuta Thete, Snigdha Nalini Orey & Nikita Nikhil  
Assist - Disha Palkhiwala

A study conducted by the Centre for Cellular & Molecular Biology (CCMB), a premier research organization in frontier areas of modern biology, exhibited some drastic revelations about the spread of the novel coronavirus. The experiment suggested that at least 6 lakh people in the city of Hyderabad (about 6 per cent of its population) alone may have contracted the coronavirus through coming into contact with faecal discharge.

An infected person not only sheds the virus through nose and throat but also their faeces for approximately 35 days. Because of this reason, the CCMB researched to examine the harvested sewage samples for the presence of the coronavirus. Done with collaboration between the CCMB, the Indian Institute of Chemical Technology (IICT) and the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), they acquired samples from eight water treatment plants and a gated community in the Telangana capital. The infected individuals excrete the pathogen which then travels through a community's sewage system to a treatment plant, where careful sampling can detect its existence. The sewage samples, however, are suitable for epidemiological studies as the SARS-CoV-2 in the samples is non-infectious. Since the infected person sheds viral material in faecal samples for almost 35

days, this study provided an overall estimate of this condition within a span of one month. Sewage samples from major sewage treatment plants (STPs) underwent procession for detecting the presence of SARS-CoV-2 viral RNA. While viral RNA was detectable in the inlet samples, the outlet (after treatment) samples of STP were largely clean (free from viral RNA which indicated efficient treatment practices at STP). The study roughly covered over 80% of the STPs in Hyderabad, suggesting that almost 2 lakh people were shedding viral materials. Not every sewage in the city reaches the STPs as only 40% of the sewage gets treated in plants, highlighting that approximately 6 lakhs people were potentially infected due to this exposure. Around 6% of the city's population has been infected, including symptomatic, asymptomatic and also recently recovered individuals. The concept of surveilling wastewater to detect a faecal-oral route of transmission is not new. The most notable example is searching for pathogens for the poliovirus. Scientists have noted how the COVID-19 virus behaves differently in an aqueous base. The study mentioned how the excretion of the virus via faeces makes it inactivated once it leaves the body. While it may not pose an immediate risk to the general public, it is harmful to the wastewater management worker.

The worker is exposed not only to COVID-19 virus but also to other infectious pathogens. A study by the University of Stirling conducted in May 2020 found how this risk can be amplified in those countries where open defecation is an issue. It can also pose a risk in countries where safe sanitation management systems are limited. Scientifically speaking, personal protective equipment (PPE) is the gold standard for protection against COVID-19 in wastewater. But the ground reality of sanitation workers in India is grim. These workers are not covered with insurance or any financial protection. While some NGOs have provided PPE kits and other safety equipment to the workers, many are still devoid of any personal protective gear. The maximum safety provided is a face mask. Harish Chandani, an official at a Patna based ST, said, "While the idea is novel, it is very expensive to implement." He further added how STPs operate on small budgets and an even smaller workforce during the present times and noted how in a country like India, not all sewage ends in treatment plants and most of it goes untreated. Open defecation is still prevalent in rural and even semi-urban pockets. The faecal-to-oral route of transmission of the virus is hypothesized and it requires more in-depth studies in different parts of

the country. Testing and treatment of sewage water facilities remain concentrated in major cities. The remainder is served by on-site sanitation mechanisms such as septic tanks. One major hindrance in the Indian wastewater management scenario is the manual cleaning of drains and sewers.

Chandani notes how wastewater based epidemiological study will only be fruitful for a small population. Adding to that the up-gradation of infrastructure and training costs will also make it expensive. It cannot happen in a short span. The World Health Organization has stated how wastewater based epidemiological studies can be used along with clinical measures to facilitate a comprehensive pandemic surveillance strategy. Western countries such as England, Netherlands, Spain and even Australia have taken wastewater surveillance as a supplemental tool to gauge the spread of the virus. Although it cannot pinpoint where the positive cases exist, it can be used to identify hotspots and study community transmission. They can aid in serving as an early warning mechanism. Chandani also adds that while STPs are aware of the studies being conducted in Hyderabad and Chennai, they can be best used in cities which have all the sewage coming to sewage treatment plants.

## Changing Lives and Livelihoods Amid COVID-19 Lockdown

Shreya Kachroo, Upasana Singh  
Assist - Rupesh Kumar

At seven in the morning, Hemant Patel shuffles around his shop, preparing for yet another day. Although the sign board at the front of the shop boasts a variety of stationary items that can be bought there, the presence of heaps of vegetables taking much of the space is quite a puzzling sight. Patel is one of those millions of people whose livelihood was in shambles once the pandemic-induced lockdown shut down the entire country.

As COVID plagues the world, Hemant Patel and his family, who have been running a stationery shop in the Thane district of Maharashtra for the last eight years, were at a crossroads regarding whether to leave for their hometown or wait for the situation to get better. "I could have gone home, but at this point in time, earning money is more important, so I decided to sell things that will bring in money." He said when asked about his decision to stay back in the city. Instead of waiting for things to get better, Patel revived and revamped his business by selling vegetables in a stationary shop. Instead of paper, pens and markers, Patel has started selling dhaniya, pudina and spinach. His stationary shop will always be his first priority, but in his own words, "In these trying times, it is better to adapt rather than resist." While Patel might be doing a lot better than what he went through during the initial days of the lockdown, he is neither the first nor the last person to have taken this drastic step of putting their original business on the backburner for the time being in order to sell the much more in-demand essential goods for the sake of the survival of their livelihood. Suresh Prasad, a SIM card retailer who also used to run his small mobile and DTH recharge business, found himself in

total shambles as soon as the pandemic tightened its hold over Ranchi. Suresh had been successfully running his small business since 2007, which was enough for him to sustain his life and fulfill the exigencies of his wife and two toddlers in a developing city like Ranchi. But all this came to a grinding halt as soon as the pandemic set in. The pandemic and the subsequent lockdown led to him slowly burning through his savings and finding it difficult to ensure proper nourishment for his two kids. "I was in total delirium. I had to relinquish my shop as I was not in a condition to pay the rent, and found myself under searing pressure, being the lone breadwinner of the family. I tried to look for possible job opportunities but wasn't able to find one due to the pandemic." Suresh said. But the dearth of job opportunities could not break his spirit and he quickly ascertained the high demand for fruits and vegetables amid the pandemic. "We were struggling even to make our ends meet and had also run into a small debt. I realized that only fruits and vegetable vendors can earn money during these trying times." Suresh added. Suresh has been bringing vegetables from his village located on the outskirts of the city and selling them ever since the lockdown was imposed.

Similar stories of adapting to the times can be found among the affluent sections of the country as well. In Delhi, a well-to-do Korean cafe and bakery shop called 'The For'est' had to completely change its strategy in order to stay afloat during the lockdown. Apart from the usual dishes in the menu that were available for takeaway orders, they started selling raw ingredients for the dishes and other grocery items such as meats, veg-

etables, and fermented foods. The site of a cafe selling cartons of soft drinks was quite bewildering. "We trust our loyal customers and so we are trying to do everything in our power to help them just like they are helping us by buying their groceries from the cafe." Said Ji-won Lee, the owner of 'The For'est'. Major corporations, such as Zomato, also included a separate section of "market" on their app for people to avail of necessary items more easily. This came in the lieu of food delivery being severely affected during the initial days of the lockdown.

Hemant Patel, Suresh Prasad, and Ji-won Lee represent the thousands of citizens of India who had to change their lives and livelihoods amidst a global healthcare emergency. If there is anything that this pandemic has taught us, it is that life really does go on. Thus, adapting to and evolving with change is the only true means of survival in the current times.



## Jharkhand Hospitals Employ 'COBOTs' to Aid COVID-19 Patients

Nishant Ranjan

The Coronavirus crisis has wreaked havoc on the world, killing millions of people and disrupting the 'normal'. Yet, it has also brought the world together to find unique solutions to curb the outbreak. One of such initiatives has been taken up by the Deputy Development Commissioner, IAS Aditya Ranjan, in the West Singhbhum district of Jharkhand. He has come up with multiple innovative designs, such as the 'Phone Booth COVID-19 Sample Collection Centre', the CoBot, Face Shield, I-Bed, and the Disinfection Chamber.

Chaibasa, a local organization of Singhbhum area has additionally stepped up to the plate of 'Meals on Wheels' (MoW) program to give meals to those abandoned in the lockdown. The thought for the Telephone Corner Test Assortment was roused by a video of test assortment in a medical clinic in South Korea. Along these lines, the plan eases the dread among individuals, while helping the PPE emergency. The covered glass sheet protects from any stone pelting that may happen and successfully decreases the workforce needed for test assortment.

It is a quicker technique, particularly for hotspots and outskirts checkpoints. The face shields that Ranjan alongside a group of more than 30 women from Women Self Help Groups (Sakhi Mandal) have planned and provided to the Indian Railways are now in hefty interest. The shields are extremely modest and forestall any liquid constriction that may spread the infection. These shields are to be worn with veils or other defensive apparatus. It is another activity that helps with the critical lack of defensive apparatus in the nation.



Image Credits: Deccan Herald

The I-Bed or Isolation Bed plans to keep the affected under control and limit the collaboration however much as could reasonably be expected, while additionally unhinging the repetitive and thorough pattern of disinfection. The beds guarantee that the contamination doesn't spread among the patients too as the patients vary in the degrees of gesture and a few patients, alongside the infection, could also have states of TB and other such ailments. It guarantees that the infection remains inside the isolation beds. A similar plastic which is utilized both in the Face Shield and I-Beds can undoubtedly be cleaned by washing, disinfecting, treating or they can be discarded and new ones can be utilized. Around 50 such beds are as of now being used in a clinic in the area, and over a 100 more are being made.

The Disinfectant Chamber is an exceptionally reduced unit fitted with 9 spout fog showers that would splash disinfectant through PVC lines going through the chamber. The whole cycle takes 30 seconds to completely clean the body and diminishes the water and disinfectant

utilization up to multiple times when contrasted with customary splash frameworks. The Co-Bots planned are bots to convey food, meds, and water to the influenced patients and also gather their arranged things. This plan largely limits human contact and diminishes the danger of constriction essentially. The Bots have a conveying limit of 30 kg and an availability scope of 200-300 ft. They are distantly worked utilizing the establishments on them, for example, a WiFi camera and a 2-way mic. The MoW activity currently has 7 vans and has given food to more than 70,000 underprivileged individuals who have been struck hardest by the lockdown.

This activity additionally guarantees the spread of mindfulness concerning social separating and standard washing of hands, and other Coronavirus related defensive measures. All of these plans and innovations are financially savvy and help the emergency circumstance of PPE, gloves, covers, and testing units all through the nation. The planning is simple, takes less time, and decreases the quantity of wellbeing staff required.

## Aviation Industry In The 'New Order'

Varuni Trivedi

Assist - Ashish Chandra & Rhea Varghese

The aviation industry underwent major turbulence due to the devastating impact of COVID-19 and almost came to a standstill. The fall in air travel demand was driven largely by public policy, fear of the virus and comparatively high travel fares. Amid the pandemic, many governments globally chose to preserve public health and ban the entry of non-residents. While some nations like India, Malaysia and South Africa stopped issuing visitor visas, others like Australia and New Zealand halted visa-free travel. Now, as things get back to normal, it is expected that the aviation sector will see some major changes to ensure a safe travelling experience for flyers as well as employees.

### High Sanitation and Safety Standards

Airlines and airport management have been extremely cautious about travel safety and social distancing norms. Passengers in masks and PPE kits are the new normal. Priyanka Bisht, a flight attendant at Indigo Airlines talks about the high cleanliness standards followed by airlines. "After every landing and before passengers' boarding, cabins are thoroughly sanitised. The entire cabin, which includes seats, trays, tray tables and lavatories, is disinfected." "We have been wearing PPE kits throughout the flight, including a face shield, facemask and gloves," she added. All airlines have ensured a policy of minimal touch, thus they have discontinued onboard service like the sale of pre-cooked meals and other items, keeping in mind the safety measures.

Periodic fumigation of the aircraft happens regularly to ensure further sanitation and strict social distancing is maintained at all points, right from check-in to exit. Airports are taking immense care to minimise person-to-person interaction in the premises as well as onboard aircrafts during the flight. Airport authorities are urging passengers to check-in online from their homes and to make use of contactless payment methods at airport restaurants or retail stores. Imprinted floor markings have been put in place to keep social distancing in check while at the airport and all common surfaces like elevator buttons, escalator handrails and security check trays are being constantly disinfected. Furthermore, temperature checks of passengers as well as the staff are being done to identify any symptomatic passengers at the airport and ensure smooth functionality. Chennai airport

has deployed 'touchless measures' at screening and stamping points to further cut down any person-to-person contact.

### What the new normal looks like

Uncertainty still lingers around air travel as few people are travelling due to quarantine laws and fear of getting infected. Shalabh Sharma, the national sales head of Spice mobiles, says that before the pandemic he had to travel all over the country all through the year. Travelling for him has drastically changed. "Earlier I used to take at least three trips by air every month. Now almost everything is being done online. Zoom calls have replaced corporate meetings." While the fear regarding social distancing stands as a major issue for flyers, capped airfares is another major reason for a smaller number of flyers. As compared to last year, the passenger load from June to August of 2020 was around 15-20%, which was a dramatically low figure. This is despite some airlines, such as Indigo and Vistara, having come forward to ease distancing fears by offering a 'double seat' option that allows passengers to book a seat next to theirs at a reduced cost.

Pratiksha Das who travelled from Indira Gandhi International Airport, Delhi to John F. Kennedy International Airport, New York, USA via the 'Vande Bharat Mission' started by the Government of India, talks about the fear of travelling that still affects passengers. "I was asked to show up at the airport five hours prior to departure. I had to complete a web check-in from the machines placed outside the airport. There I got my ticket. I showed my ticket and Aarogya Setu app status to the CISF personnel after which I got my entry. I took my own water bottle, food, sanitiser etc. to avoid touching or buying anything." Das said. IGI Airport in New Delhi ensured minimal contact and had strict social distancing norms in place. The security staff had to wear PPE kits, masks and gloves. Checking of passengers and security measures have changed as metal detectors are attached to long rods to scan the body while maintaining social distance. Pratiksha further said, "While boarding from India, the procedures were detailed and social distancing was strictly followed. However, when I landed in New York at the JFK Airport, there was no corona test conducted on any passengers. Not even a temperature check was done, most of the people were not even wearing masks at the airport."

### Future of Air Travel

The aviation sector contributes around \$200 billion to the Indian economy and employs over 40 million people. Social distancing norms, various national and international governments' bans on travel, worldwide lockdowns and fear of contracting the virus contributed to the fall of travel and the hit to the aviation sector. However, insiders are optimistic and believe that things will get back to normal as the fear subsides and cases go down. Priyanka Bisht says, "Due to the pandemic, there is a vast change in the aviation industry. However, in the new normal, there will be more precautionary measures and safety ensured for passengers."

More and more airports and airlines are turning towards futuristic, technology-driven, biometric solutions to enable contactless entry at the airport and facilitate a smooth and safe flying experience for travellers. Many airports have already installed web check-in counters and are urging passengers to use those and comply with contactless payment modes. On the other hand, cutting edge, tech-solutions like an amalgamation of face recognition and biometric technology, are being used to identify travellers with preloaded data at the Bengaluru Airport. With the aim of ensuring physical distancing and passenger safety, airports and airlines are moving forward to adapt to the new normal.



Image Credits: Pixabay

# STATE

An Initiative by the Journalism Students of SIMC

## The COVID-19 Lockdown and the Plight of Mumbai's Dabbawalas

Aayush Kataria & Rhea Binoy

Mumbai's Dabbawalas, the men dressed in white with the traditional 'Gandhi Topi', have delivered home-cooked food daily to the offices of over 2 lakh Mumbaikars for more than a century. It won't be wrong to say that they are the lifeline of India's financial capital.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected a lot of people from every sector, and the Dabbawalas are among those who have suffered. Ulhas Shantaram Muke, President of the Nutan Mumbai Tiffin Box Suppliers Charity Trust tells Team INK, "The business has been affected since COVID-19 lockdown was imposed in March, and has been continuing."

Recently, the Maharashtra Government has allowed Mumbai's Dabbawallas to use local trains, the stopping of which posed a huge problem in restarting their deliveries. However, Muke claims the decision has not come as a source of major relief since essential workers need to show QR codes. "A lot of our members don't even have a smartphone and don't know how to procure these QR codes." He adds, "We don't even know how this is supposed to work."

Hence, the Mumbai Dabbawala Association has asked the authorities to allow them to travel with their original ID cards instead. If that doesn't happen, the Association's President Subhash Talekar is supposed to visit the authorities to understand the procurement of the QR codes.



Image Credit- India Today

Resuming service will depend on how much the customer shows faith in the members providing the service. The Association has pleaded with its customers to show faith in them during such times since a lot of housing societies aren't allowing outsiders to enter their premises, fearing the virus.

With people working from home and educational institutes closed, they have lost a lot of customers in the period. Muke explains, "The number of deliveries has come down to four-to-five tiffins a day. Before the lockdown, we used to deliver ten-to-twenty tiffins a day."

Due to the reduction in customers by half, the salaries of the Dabbawalas have been reduced. Their monthly salary pre- COVID-19 was Rs 15,000, which has now come down to Rs 4,000. "How are we supposed to manage with such low income?" Muke added.

The association had asked for monetary help from the Maharashtra government, mainly in the form of Rs 5000 as financial aid. They had also approached the Human Rights Commission and MNS chief, Raj Thackeray. Their pleas, however, seem to have fallen on deaf ears.

When asked whether the Mumbai Dabbawala Association has received any help from the Maharashtra Government, Muke gave a telling one-word response, "No."

## Pune Milk Industry Becomes An Ailing Entity Due to Lockdown and Protests

Shraddha Tiwari & Nabodita Ganguly  
Assist- Sneha Mothey

Recently, Pune residents have been witnessing a shortage in the supply of milk. The procurement of milk was acutely affected due to the Sakal Maratha Samaj, a Maharashtra-based Maratha organisation's protests disrupting the commodity's supply chain in the city earlier this month. The protests took place after the Supreme Court put a stay on the implementation of Maratha reservation in the state. Similarly, another series of protests claiming to raise the issue of milk prices were organised by Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Swabhimani Shetkari Sanghatana leaders as well in the city.

While the organisation has carried out agitations in the past, demanding mandatory Maratha reservation was dispensed by protesting against regional milk suppliers such as Gokul in Maharashtra and stopping supply from other parts of the states such as Kolhapur to Pune. Although the incidence did cause damage to both suppliers and buyers, the situation has been grim since March, 24 with the onset of lockdown restrictions. "We had milk packs stocked on a regular basis but majority of it did not get sold due to lockdown," expressed Mr. M.Kutty, a local dairy shop-owner in Khadki, Pune.

Regional milk suppliers too experienced the unpreparedness on part of the government regulations. "Our farmers, who we procure milk from and our local shop-owners, who we sell milk packs to, both were adversely impacted by the sudden lockdown announcement," said Mr. Nikhil Chitale, Partner, Chitale Bandhu, a popular-dairy company based in Pune while speaking to INK.

Additionally, stringent rules against movement also affected the demand of milk in the city. While milk came under the 'essential commodities' list, most of the buyers showed dismissal for either manually buying milk or continuing their delivery services via a seller, he added. Further, milk suppliers had to go through several procedures of bureaucratic measures to maintain delivery. For instance, Kutty and several milk suppliers in Khadki region had to operate their shop on alternate days in a week with specified closing timings as per prior permission of local authorities. Such prior permits were to be availed individually before opening shops in the city.



Image Credits- IANS

"There had been almost a 95 percent reduction in the demand of milk. Moreover, there are a lot of other dairy products such as yogurt, ghee and butter which are dependent on milk. These derivative products were not allowed to be sold as well," expressed Chitale. However, dairy farmers in the city were agitated due to the severe drop in pricing which put their livelihood in jeopardy.

To tackle this mismatch of demand and supply, most milk suppliers had no choice but to convert the procured milk to skimmed milk powder. Conversely, most dairy farmers and companies began the conversion process in the wake of surplus amounts of unsold milk. Furthermore, many in the farming sector believe this trend will have a negative effect on the distribution chain and suggest a standardized policy action for dealing with the crisis. "With increase in imports of skimmed milk powder, there should be government intervention to control import of skimmed milk powder for at least the next few months, which will help in equitable distribution of skimmed milk powder within the country," said Chitale. With tremendous surplus in the market, he added that the government should also step in to increase India's export of milk. When asked about the surplus and skimmed milk powder management and pricing, representatives from the BJP declined to comment on the issue.

## Global Climate Strike 2020

### Citizens Urge World Leaders to Take Timely Climate Action

Kashish Arora and Krishna Kakani

“The Global Climate Strike takes place with an aim to disrupt completely the standard norm, with a huge number of educators, budding professionals, students and laborers expected to take an interest and participate with great enthusiasm. This leaves out a reasonable message that individuals request a quick progress away from products and services that have been very harmful for the environment of our nation. A recharged need to keep moving and aspiration is important to catch the eye of the administrators who do not intend to make a move and neither do they accept the cause until it's put across in a big way,” said human rights activist Kamayini Bali Mahabal, talking to INK correspondents about the Global Climate Strike's annual event held on Friday, 25th September.

Fridays for Future's Pune chapter participated in the Global Climate Strike, 2020, staging demonstrations outside the Maharashtra Pollution Control Board's (MPCB) office. In what was one of the last few protests by environmentalists to not be interrupted by the authorities, climate activists gathered, taking COVID-19 restrictions in their stride, to call on world governments, leaders and corporations to take responsible climate action.

Large-scale gatherings were highly restricted by Covid-19 control measures globally, yet concerned citizens carried out strikes at nearly 3,500 locations around the world. 20 socially-distanced activists assembled in Pune to draw the attention of mass-

es and leaders towards the climate crises. Under normal circumstances, the attendance would have been well over a thousand. However, most residents participated in the cause through online strikes which featured pictures of their shoes accompanying the reason why they stood with tens of thousands of other protesters around the world, using the hashtag #GCSPune.

Sudeep Gogate, a local environmental activist and physicist, in conversation with INK, spoke about the issues addressed by FFF. Quoting Swedish climate activist and the face of the Fridays for Future movement, Greta Thunberg, Gogate said, “The science is out there. It's the right and efficient implementation of the same that is going to seal the fate of the city and the world alike.”

FFF Pune also drafted a letter to MPCB highlighting the key issues to be addressed by the city administration in order to mitigate the climate crisis. “The experts at MPCB,” Sudeep said, “have all the necessary proficiency in the related subjects and a much deep-

er understanding than any of the students about how we can undo this environmental mess via a feasible course of action. Building on the same, through the letter we stressed on stringent implementation of the environmental norms and a much more responsible approach towards the climate crisis we are in.”

More than 1.8 million people and as many as 500 scientists and academicians sent their objections to the draft EIA, 2020, to the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change earlier this year. Ironically, 2020 is the year when India, like all other countries in the Paris Agreement, raised its nationally determined ambitions for climate action.



Image Credits- Fridays for Future

## Navi Mumbai Community Turns Barren Land into an Agro Garden

Aishwarya Varma and Rujuta Thete

Upon realising that the barren land adjoining their complex was being encroached upon in the 90s, a small group of twenty people in Sector 9 of Belapur, Navi Mumbai had decided to create something beautiful out of it. They considered saving that acre of barren land by turning it into layers of green instead and stopping the City and Industrial Development Corporation (CIDCO) from handing over the land under a high-tension wire and making it a dump yard.

CIDCO handed over this plot to the residents and that's how the AGRO society came into being. It is devoted towards conservation and has set up many environment-friendly projects since, but the most cherished one is turning that acre of land into the CBD Resident's Agro Garden.

This Agro Garden which was started by only 20 people is now maintained by almost 100 permanent members who are the residents of Sector 9, Belapur, along with other volunteers. The garden has a vegetable farm, Nana-Nani Park for senior citizens, children's playground and its high-

light, botanical garden along with a tiny butterfly park with a nature trail. The Botanical Garden & Butterfly Park (BG&BFP) was established in the second phase of the development on the extended land to save it from being encroached by the adjoining colony for car parking.

The botanical garden has a separate section for aromatic flowering plants, medicinal plants, underground plants and herbs. The vegetable farm aims to grow crops throughout the year and sell its fresh organic produce to the residents as well as neighbouring areas. This encourages the society to hold its vegetable sale twice a week and is managed through online groups where they take orders as well as do deliveries. The vegetable gardener, affectionately called 'Tatya', planted chilli and tomato seedlings in late September. “The cherry tomato seedlings will sprout in around 8-10 days and will be ready by mid-to-late December.”



Image Credits- Instagram @agrocdb

During the COVID-19 lockdown, the residents maintained a constant supply of vegetables and fruits. They helped the nearby societies by selling organic fruits. The funding from selling all the homegrown products goes towards further developing the garden.

Owing to the lack of footfall during the pandemic, the society hosts virtual musical tours of the park, playing Marathi songs corresponding to the names of the plants in the tour. Dr. Bhagwat, a member of the Agro society spoke about the various medicinal plants that grow in the garden,

including basil, neem and turmeric. “The Tulsi (basil) plant is so important that it is called Tulsi because there is no tulana (comparison) to it,” he said, adding that the plain-looking plant is helpful for everyday illnesses and has long term benefits as well.

The garden is home to around 250 varieties of trees, attracts almost 30 types of birds along with 40 varieties of butterflies. The society often holds workshops and walking tours to educate visitors about the importance of conservation. Visitors get a chance to relax in nature while enjoying the view of the lotus pond. The members also often organise flower shows, plantation drives, thematic events like 'Basant Utsav' and 'Flutter by Sunday' - an awareness program about the importance of butterflies.

Today, the residents of the Agro society are proud of their work which has the pure intention of protecting nature, supporting educational activities and also providing organic produce to the people.



# LIFESTYLE

An Initiative by the Journalism Students of SIMC

## The Publishing Industry Adapting to the 'New Normal'

Rhea Binoy  
Assist- Anand Singha

The coronavirus pandemic has ensured that the lives of people come to a halt, with a direct impact on the economy and many sectors facing the heat. One such sector is publishing. The publishing sector had been on a downswing before the pandemic, and now it is imperative that they come up with various strategies to stay in the game.

Publishing houses believe that the COVID-19 pandemic has not affected the way they publish; it has not halted production but has only delayed it. Naveen Kishore of Seagull Books, Kolkata, said, "The pandemic has not affected our production model. The entire book chain over the world remains fractured for now. We have lost a season already. Our Spring 2020 titles are only beginning to be published now, and the Autumn list will be shifted to Spring 2021. Since we always publish the print edition and ebook editions, COVID-19 or no COVID-19, this carries on."

Rupanjali Baruah, the founder of Wordsmith Publishers, situated in Guwahati showed concern, stating, "We had six titles in the pipeline, only three have been published in the pandemic."

Since the pandemic and the virus scare has made people apprehensive to buy books, many publishers are going on and launching the books online. Neelam Saxena, an independent publisher and writer from Pune, saw an advantage with the release of ebooks. "The pandemic has pushed the people to read ebooks rather than printed copies. This is good since it saves the precious paper." The spare time that people had on their hands during the lockdown and the non-availability of delivery services drew them to reading. "People had ample spare time and they wanted to read, hence Kindle or ebooks saw a surge in sales." Neelam added.

Looking at the economic aspect for readers, they also preferred to buy ebooks over printed copies. "Since the paperback has a different production cost than the ebook, the latter is

much cheaper and people have preferred to buy them." Said the founder of Blue Rose Publishers, Syed Arshad, who is situated in Delhi.

As times change, small publishers are adapting. Rupanjali Baruah of Wordsmith Publishers pointed out how they are embracing technology. "Ebooks are in our plan base. We are still figuring with our technicians and the people concerned with the setup of the payment gateway," she said.

The bookstores remain in a state of worry since people are not keen on buying books from the store due to the virus scare. According to a survey done by Nielsen India, it was found that 6% of people had already visited bookstores after the COVID-19 lockdown was eased, while the two-thirds of those interviewed said that they were still hesitant but would go to the bookstores within three months after lockdown. The Nielsen Book India report read, "Six out of 10 respondents expect to buy books through physical stores and seven out of 10 through an online bookshop after the lockdown is lifted, with the proportion higher than before lockdown in each case, but more so for online than in-store."

Hence, bookstores are adapting in various ways to curb the problem. While some are 'quarantining' books touched by people, others are sticking to the basic rule of wearing a mask while entering the store, placing hand sanitizers across the stores and limiting the number of people in the store at once.

The pandemic has hit the publishing sector in a harsh way, wherein it has directly and indirectly affected a lot of people, from consumers to the bookstores themselves. While things are opening up slowly and people are adapting to the 'new normal', one can only wish the publishing sector gets back to business as usual once again.

## The Plight of Workers Behind the First 'Lockdown Durgotsav'

Aparupa Mazumder, Bornika Das & Snigdha Nalini Orey

COVID-19 has wreaked havoc on all our lives. While people are trying to make sense of the 'new normal', public gatherings have been restricted. With the onset of the festive season, people are looking for new ways to celebrate rather than being disappointed. This remains true for Durga Puja as well.

While devotees fear that the festival might come to a halt due to the pandemic, new guidelines for different festival locations across the city have changed the whole annual practice. The cultural extravaganza which binds all sections of the society together will take place this year in keeping with guidelines issued by the West Bengal government. The Calcutta High Court on Monday announced that no entry within 30 feet of the pandal premises will be allowed, along with other guidelines such as masks and sanitizers being made mandatory, no cultural programmes or carnivals, and no distribution of 'bhog' to name a few.

As the festival is not going to happen in full swing, the hands which go behind making this 10-day spectacle a major success have been on the receiving end of the pandemic distress. With toned-down celebrations, a major chunk of idol artisans, commercial artists, decorators, technicians, etc. have been facing economic hardships due to extremely limited funds and working options. Just like other sectors, the entire livelihoods of people directly involved in this industry have been jeopardised this year due to the pandemic.



Kumortuli, the place where all the idol makers of Kolkata work and which used to be abuzz with hundreds of amateur photographers and curious tourists, has seen a complete reversal. The idol makers note that there has been a severe drop in orders when compared to previous years. The artists in Kumortuli serve idols not only to Kolkata, but also to other parts of the country and abroad. Adding to their woes, most of their workers, who hailed from different parts of West Bengal, have not returned since lockdown was enforced since they are apprehensive about coming back.

Apart from a decline in demand for the idols, buyers are not willing to pay the same amount they used to before. With new government guidelines in place, the idol makers are slowly getting orders from organizing clubs and household committees in Kolkata. But they lament the fact that they were not provided with any government aid. Ashit Pal, a Kumortuli idol maker, said, "Our whole year's livelihood depends on Durga Puja and we only end up earning Rs 25,000 to Rs 30,000 with which we manage the whole year. But this year, we couldn't make ends meet because the total income wasn't even half of what we earned last year."

Contd. Pg 10

## The Cultural Divide

### Small Time Performing Artists and their Hardships

Aparupa Mazumder & Ritaban Misra  
Assist- Anuran Sadhu & Nishit Navin

Right after the nationwide lockdown was imposed by the Government of India in March in light of the growing COVID-19 pandemic, it was an immediate matter of concern for the artists who used to do live shows and whose livelihoods depended upon mass gatherings and crowd funds. While some have managed to cling on to their work of passion, many others have had to call it a day with a heavy heart. Performing artists who have already made it big in their careers had to witness a dent in their pockets, albeit a dent only.

The small-time music industry in different parts of the country has been hit hard by the pandemic with live performance revenue being the biggest casualty. Alo, a multi-lingual rock band from Kolkata also had to bear the brunt. After a jam-packed show at IIM Amritsar back in January, the band has hit a barren run of almost ten months. The situation doesn't seem to be improving either as their event manager fails to bring in contracts for new shows. How has the pandemic affected the growth of small bands and their live performances? Swarnabha Gupta, guitarist of ShredXx, a Kolkata-based rock band, sounded a bit disappointed. "We aren't bigshots who've made their names in the industry yet so expecting people to attend our gigs on online forums is pretty useless. Hardly anyone agrees to spend a penny on watching our Facebook Lives," said the guitarist. "Our biggest saviors are the live stream/OTT platforms such as Spotify, Apple Music, etc. who let us see the audience engagement stats at the end of the month," he added.

The situation with theatres hasn't been optimistic either. Biprajit Bhattacharjee of Antar-Ranga, a small group of theatre artists, said, "Basically, most of us are amateurs and theatre isn't the only source of income. But the ones who are solely dependent on theatre, it is a tragedy for them, of course. I know people who had to switch themselves to different fields to earn a livelihood. Some have started working as vegetable sellers and construction workers. So, the situation is really grim out there." Bhattacharjee also welcomed the fact that the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, has given green signals to open theatres with 50% occupancy. "It is indeed a good move by the government and also, they have announced packages for almost 150 groups. And, I believe, when the pandemic gradually comes under control, people will flock back to theatre as theatre is something which people experience live and people won't compromise on that." Bhattacharjee concluded, with a ray of hope.

Naturally, online platforms like Facebook had to be adopted by Alo. "Although apps like Steam have been used to tackle the recurring problem of lags in live streams, the latency issue is almost unsolvable in a country where it's extremely difficult to find a stable internet connection," said Arityra Sadhu, keyboardist of Alo, thus, eliminating the part of synchronized music from the live sessions itself. The online programmes have become more like talk shows with the lead singer oc-

asionally singing some of the popular tracks. Unfortunately Alo, like most other bands, hasn't received any payment since the pandemic hit the country.

Melroy Furtado, who has worked as a music producer for several Kannada and Tulu movies, stressed on how private parties were important for them. "My audience was predominantly those of private parties and pubs and bars. Although I am confident that eventually bookings for parties and functions will be back on track, I cannot predict anything about bars and restaurants." He said. "I have realized the fragility of the live local scene and as long as my music production side goes well, I don't look forward to performing live too much".

Contd. Pg 10



Image Credits: Stage for Change

## COVID-19 Pushes Kathakali Artists into Agony

Ashitha S. Prasad  
Assist- Suramya Sunilraj

God's Own Country has an abundance of cultural treats to offer and one among the many is the beautiful art form of Kathakali. The wholesome picture of Kerala is incomplete without its very own dance form – Kathakali. Kathakali involves narrating tales from Hindu mythology through the medium of classical dance. Historically, Kathakali was performed solely in temples and during religious festivities. Today, Kathakali is an art form that has gained appreciation across the globe and is showcased during dance shows, tourism events, houseboats, hotels and even in advertisements.

The COVID-19 pandemic has temporarily put a stop on cultural events, temple gatherings and outdoor celebration of festivities. Artists across the globe are at a loss of exhibiting their art and Kathakali artists are one of the many who are gravely affected by the pandemic.

“The COVID-19 situation put locks on temples which was the biggest blow to the Kathakali artists as the absence of temple gatherings left no stage for Kathakali,” said Kottakkal Rajmohan, Head Faculty of Kathakali at Kottakkal Arya Vaidya Sala's P.S.V. Nathya Sangham and an artist with more than 35 years of experience. Mr Rajmohan stated that due to the decrease in work-flow the institute was forced to cut down the

working days of full-time artists to 2 weeks per month to be able to allot duties for all the 4000 employees and manage to pay a minimum amount of salary to everyone. This step does mean a 10% - 15% cut in salaries but manages to keep every-one employed.

“My pension backs me up during COVID-19 but there are Kathakali artists out there who currently have no means of income. Many have started looking for alternative job opportunities to earn a livelihood,” narrated Kalamandalam Gopakumar, Retired Faculty, Academic Coordinator, HOD Kerala Kalamandalam. He elaborated on how Kathakali artists mainly perform during local festivities and peak foreign tourist visits which are both seasonal; the artists have lost out on these seasons due to the pandemic. There are artists whose bread and butter is training students to perform Kathakali in ‘Kalol-savams’ (university level competitions) and shutting down of educational institutions has left them unemployed.

When questioned about the scope of teaching Kathakali in a virtual mode, Mr Rajmohan and Mr Gopakumar both said the chances were none. Kathakali is not a one-man show. It involves dance, make-up, costume, instruments and music.



Image Credits - Kottakkal Rajmohan

Mr Rajmohan happily spoke about a Kathakali performance narrating the tale of Kuchela (also known as Sudhama), who was Lord Krishna's dear friend with his students in front of a small audience of 50 people that took place a few weeks ago. It was performed on a small stage and executed by following all the precautionary measures. He sighed in satisfaction as he expressed his and his student's joy of performing after 6 months.

The story of Kathakali artists has no happy ending until a vaccine is found for the virus. Kathakali has always awed the audience and everyone is keen to watch them perform on shows and get featured in advertisements. Their current situation is disheartening but the scenario can slightly shine bright only if the audience and agencies that once loved them dearly work toward their cause involving innovative methods.

### Ready to Join?

Sukanya Mohanty & Shivani Pathak  
Assist- Meenakshi Maidas

The year 2020 gave students what they always wished for in closed group conversations - online classes, attending from the bed in the comforts of their homes. But no sooner did this start, everyone realised the joy was short-lived and what they imagined would be a boon became something everyone dreaded more than pulling early mornings. Covid - 19 isn't the only contagious thing in the air. Zoom fatigue is another. It is a new term coined for the exhaustion felt by those who spend large amounts of time on video calls. It involves a regular feeling of exhaustion after one participates in an online video call, usually leading to individuals feeling dread before the next one.

Human beings are social animals and they pick up as much or even more from non-verbal cues than they do from a verbal conversation. However now, with video calls in the picture, the natural process of communication is hampered. An individual now has to spend more time and attention interpreting the words spoken. The use of a gallery view where all meeting participants appear on one screen challenges the brain's central vision which then forces it to decode so many messages from various people at once, which ends up meaning that no one comes through meaningfully, not even the speaker. Even though this doesn't really seem stressful, in reality, it is and puts a lot of pressure on the brain which also contributes to fatigue at the end of the day.

There are other small stressors when an individual participates in an online class. A lot of students who are shy and introverted get a small window of preparation while in an actual class because they can follow the teacher's eyes and comprehend if a question will be directed at them; this window is taken away in an online class which can make them feel exposed and overwhelmed. Added to this is the fear of constantly being under speculation, which makes one hyper-aware of his/her actions and expressions. This then hampers their ability to fully participate in the ongoing conversation. Another factor is the nagging feeling that someone might walk in and cause a distraction.

Students are not only required to attend classes online but also have to engage in other academic activities such as assignments and research papers which also require spending a lot of time on screen researching material and typing it out. So if one was to actually examine, a student tends to spend at least 8-10 hours straight in front of a screen day after day, in the middle of a pandemic, while being confined to their homes. This certainly does not make for a good combination. “It is such a task to sit in front of the laptop now. Eyes glued to the screen, so much stress with deadlines looming and constant research and typing. It has gotten extremely overwhelming for me. I feel like I have no time to do things that would help me relax or even get a breather between two weeks” says VJ, a postgraduate student who has been attending online classes for about four months now.

In a conversation with, Jisha Skariah, Counselling Psychologist Ernakulam Medical Centre about the increase in social anxiety she said, “Well if you ask that, young adults and teenagers were already on their electronic gadgets even before the pandemic, but yes, this situation has increased now. In the future, they might find it difficult to have a live conversation with people after constant chats and video calls, but I would not go ahead and call it social anxiety. For the people who already have such traits, the case is different.” There are ways to reduce this online fatigue that all of us should consciously make a part of our daily lives. We should reduce the number of video calls per day, switching to alternative mediums like a traditional phone call.

Jisha Skariah went on to say, “We are living through a time where we cannot obviously get away from screens for a long time. Especially for children, since they cannot miss their online classes. So, they have to cope up with it. Make sure that after their stipulated class hours, they do not engage in more screen time, whether it is TV or games on mobile phones or anything else.” Another suggestion she gives all her clients is an ample amount of family time. Spending time with your family and playing board games is something that can help one battle the emotional drain caused by zoom fatigue. We should remember to have sufficient time off various screens to rest our eyes and minds as well. Although Zoom is here to stay, we can keep ourselves in check and reduce its negative side effects.

### Contd Pg 9: The Plight of Workers Behind the First ‘Lockdown Durgotsav’

The commercial artists who design the themes of pandals and decorators who provide the materials are wary of putting up elaborate decorations and have similar complaints to the idol makers. They fear their efforts will be in vain because directives from the court will restrict people from witnessing the grandeur. Most of the organisers and societal committees have chalked out plans for exhibiting theme pandals. Since the government has allowed virtual pandal hopping this year, committees have been more concerned about working on ideas to facilitate virtual visits to pandals in the form of Facebook Live events and Instagram Live rather than investing in elaborate pandal structures. The decorators and artists are excited about the idea of virtual darshan but have also complained about a lack of jobs. Arup Mazumder, an independent commercial artist noted, “This year, work for people like us has been minimal to nil. Most of the organizing committees have decided to drop the idea of theme pandals - the most exciting part of Durga Puja in Kolkata. There are a lot of workers, but no work.” The artist also mentioned how he has been working in this industry for the last

25 years and this is one of the very few years wherein he didn't work because of the sheer lack of opportunities.

The coronavirus backed Durga Pujo has impacted various sectors directly involved in the making of this grand festival in West Bengal. The guidelines have strictly prohibited all cultural programmes inside or near the puja pandals. Similarly, all carnivals and fairs have been prohibited too. This will have a major impact on hawkers, food stalls, small-scale ventures, etc.

Various Durga puja committees have cut down on budgets not just due to the pandemic, but also because most of the monetary funds went towards the Amphan cyclone relief which ransacked the state five months ago. With the remaining budget, they are carrying out adequate sanitation measures, making their pandals spacious, and ensuring social distancing is carried out. The government has, however, provided a few benefits to the puja committees. These include fire brigade services, concessions on electricity for puja organisers, and tax concessions too.

### Contd Pg 9: The Cultural Divide Small Time Performing Artists and their Hardships due to the Pandemic

Priyasha Maitra of Stage for Change, a non-profit organization based in Kolkata, commented on several other aspects of Broadway groups which have gotten hampered due to COVID-19. She said, “Our dance group doesn't just put up shows and use the funds raised for personal affairs. We have pledged to do something for the society and have been failing to keep our promise ever since 2020.” Stage for Change is a non-profitable organisation of female dancers, half of whose profits go directly to charitable associations across the city. But in 2020, due to lack of shows and events throughout the year, they haven't been able to contribute to any NGOs so far. Nonetheless, the team still tries to thrive on the little revenue which they get from views on YouTube videos produced solely by them.

advance bookings was one of the biggest headaches that prevailed for the artists. Lavita Rolita D'Souza, a Konkani singer, faced this during the lockdown as a number of her shows got cancelled. When asked how challenging it would be to bring back audiences to shows again, D'Souza mentioned, “Even when things return to normal, I plan to continue streaming because it could be the coming trend in local music performances and also because it has been a dependable medium for regular stable earnings.” As an epiphany to local artists, the pandemic has exposed the fragility of their condition, enabling them to be generational rather than reactionary. It is to be remembered that music, dance and theatre have always embraced new technologies, and this digitalization of the live practice of culture will act as an added asset when people can finally return to ‘traditional’ live shows.

The problem of cancellation and refunds for

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