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The key lies in boosting domestic tourism
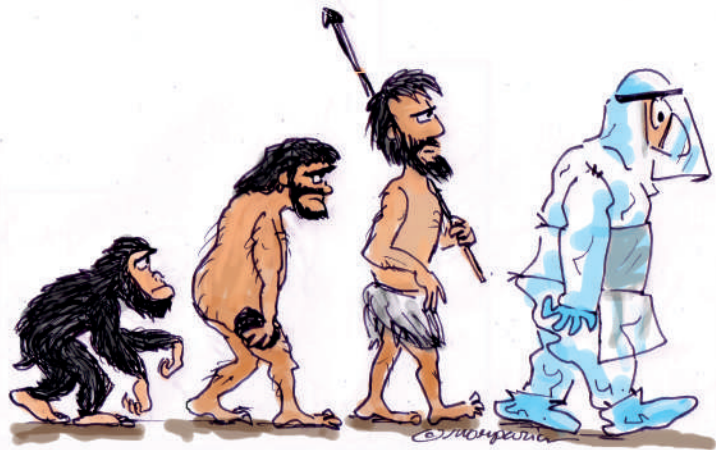**Homestays are here to stay**
Tourism-related trade feel the heat

FACE TO FACE
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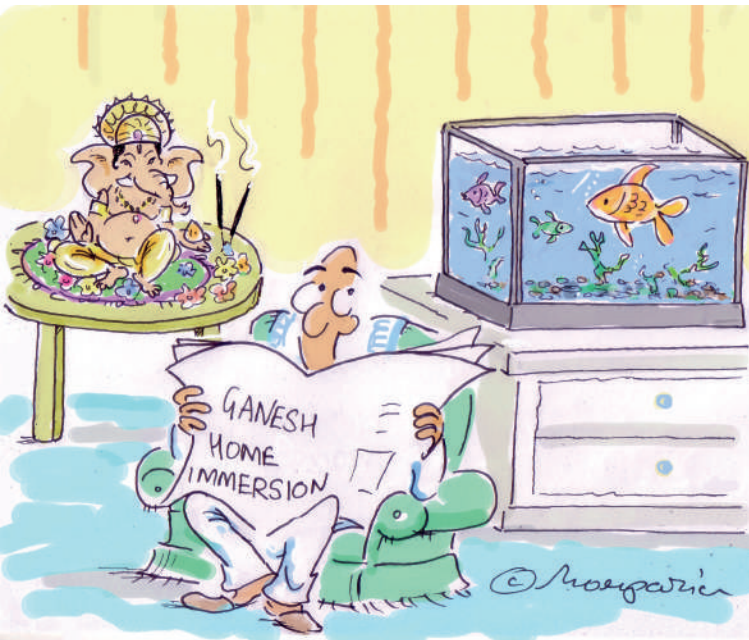
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THEME:
TRAVEL & HOSPITALITY

EBRAHIM ALKAZI   *SAROJ KHAN*   *MAJOR SANDEEP UNNIKRISHNAN*

India's tourism sector: A hope for revival

India`s tourism sector and its affiliated businesses are the hardest hit following the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. With no major relief measures coming from the government, the tourism industry is struggling for survival. Is there a hope for revival? asks **Manu Shrivastava***.*

Vaishno Devi temple opened its gates for devotees after being shut for five months

The number of COVID-19 cases is on the rise in countries around the world; this, irrespective of the political, social or economic status of the nations in question. Despite that, several governments, including India, have already started relaxing travel restrictions and requirements in the hope of reviving the 'hardest-hit' tourism industry.

In the third week of August, Vaishno Devi temple opened its gates for devotees and travellers after being shut for five months at a stretch. Several states have resumed tourist activities and others are getting ready to follow suit. The guidelines are in place as the stakeholders adapt and implement the 'new normal'. India's tourism industry is evolving and fast turning challenges into opportunities to grow.

In the first week of reopening, Vaishno Devi, one of the most visited temples in the country saw 2,000 pilgrim visits per day (as permitted by the authorities) which included 1,900 from Jammu and Kashmir itself and only 100 devotees from outside the state. All the pilgrims have to register themselves online, well in advance, in order to visit the temple. Special guidelines have been laid down for pilgrims from other states and red zones have to show a COVID-19 negative report. At all entry points, travellers will undergo automatic thermal screening. Additionally, vulnerable persons such as senior citizens, children below the age of ten, pregnant women and those with pre-existing co-morbidities have been advised not to visit Vaishno Devi. Before opening the gates, under an enormous sanitisation campaign, the zone was sanitised as well.

Mounting economic losses

According to the Ministry of Tourism's annual report 2019-20, over 87 million people were employed, directly and indirectly, in the tourism industry in 2018-19. The travel and tourism sector makes significant contributions to the country's economy, accounting for nearly 13 per cent of the total employment. One in every eight jobs in India is directly or indirectly linked to tourism. The tourism industry has taken a more severe hit than most others due to its intrinsic dependence on 'free' and 'smooth' movement of people.

The abrupt lull in physical movement caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in India and popular tourist destinations around the world, has led to colossal loss of economy and employment in the tourism sector. And, the future remains uncertain. A report by financial services and business advisory firm KPMG states that due to COVID-19 "the Indian tourism and hospitality industry is staring at a potential job loss of around 38 million which is 70 per cent

of the total workforce". World Travel and Tourism Council, a global forum for awareness, reports "as many as nine million jobs – six times the population of Goa – in the travel and tourism sector are at risk in India".

Affiliated businesses in deep waters

Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) estimates, "of the total losses, the organised sector in the industry i.e. branded hotels, tour operators, travel agencies which are the mainstay of the sector - may be hit the hardest with an estimated loss of around Rs 1.58 lakh crore". Branded hotel groups are set to lose as much as "Rs 1.10 lakh crore, online travel agencies Rs 4,312 crore, tour operators (inbound and domestic) Rs 25,000 crore, adventure tour operators Rs nearly 19,000 crore and cruise tourism Rs 419 crore".

Tourism industry is a big umbrella with innumerable entities mushrooming under its cover. So, a host of people have been affected due to the slump in tourism. These include: Tour operators, travel agents, travel consultants, hotel workers, home-stay owners, BnB providers, restaurant and cafeteria owners and workers, cab drivers, tourist vehicle drivers and transporters, tour guides, small traders, craftsmen, artisans, cultural performers and even hawkers. A range of service providers are also facing a bleak future. Tourism has deep linkages with other domestic sectors such as handloom, food, transport, agriculture, FMCG, telecom, etc. Employment is ripe in the affiliated sectors too.

High fixed costs, taxes, diminishing footfalls, uncertain future, limited government support, lack of alternatives due to the pandemic and limited financially viable options has wreaked havoc among those working in the tourism industry. Federation of Associations of Tourism and Hospitality industry (FAITH) estimates a loss of Rs 10 lakh crore for the industry due to COVID-19. The impact on the inflow of foreign tourists has been significant and has led to a drastic fall in foreign exchange earnings.

Government relief inadequate

India is yet to address the disruptions and the concerns in the tourism sector. The government had initiated several schemes and programmes to boost inclusive tourism in the last few years. However, in the recovery package announced by the government, no special efforts were listed to revive the Indian tourism industry.

Countries around the world that are heavily dependent on tourism have launched innovative and inclusive efforts to provide relief to workers and help boost tourism in the post COVID world. For instance:

• One of the worst-hit nations, Italy announced a four billion euro bailout package 'for tourism'. It will incentivise domestic tourists 'to holiday on home soil'.
• France too has announced an eighteen billion euros 'Marshall Plan for Tourism' bailout for tourism in the country.

• The EU has provided benefits in the form of liquidity support, fiscal relief and easing of state aid rules for tourism-related businesses. The union is also considering a tourism recovery plan.
• South Africa, another tourism-friendly nation has initiated a relief package of approximately 11 million dollars only for MSMEs in the hospitality and tourism sector.
• Indonesia announced a 725 million dollar stimulus package to revive its tourism and civil aviation industry. The country has also provided for additional tax waivers to hotels and restaurants.
• Several other nations like Singapore, USA and UK have initiated efforts to revive domestic and international tourism. Delhi-based travel consultant Suchitra Sen maintains, "There has been a sharp drop in the number of tourists including foreign tourists leading to loss of millions of jobs in the travel and hospitality industries. Several small businesses and owners are facing cash crunch. Even mid-size businesses are unsure of the future and gasping for government aid."

States taking initiatives to resume tourism

Several states in the country such as Kerala, Uttarakhand, Rajasthan, Goa, Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim and other north-eastern states have been highly dependent on tourism. The revenue generated from tourism and travel activities makes a significant contribution to the states' economies. State governments are racing to resume domestic tourism. Reviving international tourism to the states is a long-drawn battle given international travel restrictions by India and other countries. A major overhaul of tourism policies and regulations is needed.

It's also important to ensure safety of domestic and international travellers. Moreover, the onus of protecting and safeguarding native communities lies on the state governments where culture tourism and heritage tourism are in high demand.

It will need a collaborative effort and extensive use of technology to swim in the choppy future ahead. Google has taken the lead in the technology domain as it has been making things a little easier for travellers by adding useful new tools that can offer pandemic-related information for better planning. For instance, highlighting the number of local Covid-19 cases, including details of hotels that offer free cancellations, travel trends, flight operation details, etc. Evidently, it`s time to create sustainable COVID-ready destinations. And, it will have to be a complete package.

Manu Shrivastava is a media legal researcher with DraftCraft International, and co-convener of 'The Woman Survivor' initiative that documents abuse of women and children within families.

The key lies in boosting domestic tourism

A two-pronged strategy needs to be adopted for the immediate revival of the tourism industry. One, all stakeholders of the tourism industry, government agencies and regulatory authorities will have to work together to set a legal and operational framework for the road ahead and two, boost domestic tourism, writes **Vanshika Jain**.
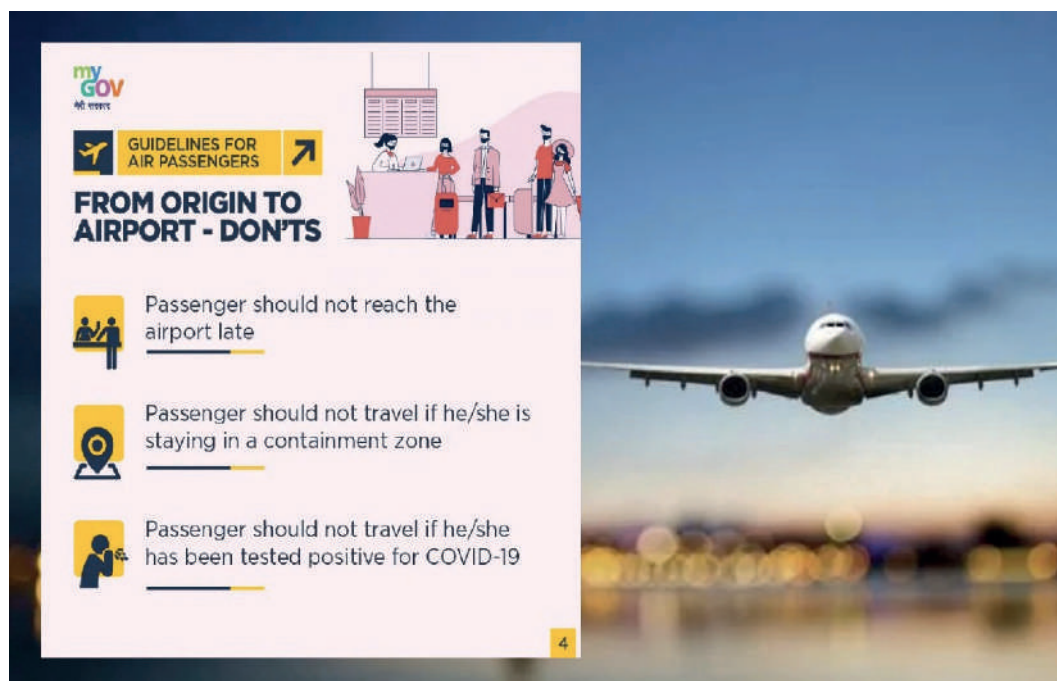
(FICCI) brought Tourism Ministers from six states on a digital platform along with the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India to discuss about the ways and means of re-starting tourism in the country. It was agreed to tap the domestic tourism market, State Tourism Departments will need to step forward, in cohesion and work with utmost synergy. But, travelling in the post-COVID world won't be without conditions.

After weeks of being locked down, when the central and state governments started 'reopening' businesses and activities, the biggest fear facing authorities and citizens was what if the phase-wise 'unlock' fails and the outbreak soars to even higher proportions?

Thankfully, the reopening or 'Unlock' 1.0 and then 2.0 is being implemented across states in a controlled manner with strict supervision and has garnered positive results. Tourism activities have still to see approval and similar relaxations. Even for the states that have resumed tourist activities, the uncertainties remain high. And that's the 'new normal' the world's bracing for.

Travel conditions including mandatory COVID-19 test, seven days' hotel booking, social distancing, etc., no longer surprise travellers. That's the least of the 'new travel requirements' in the post-COVID world. Countries around the world are taking cues from each other, keeping a close watch on initiatives, success stories to be able to make decisions for themselves. The Tourism E-Conclave by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry

States step up to revive tourism

Additional Director General, Ministry of Tourism, Government of India Rupinder Brar said, "While we are going through extremely challenging times for tourism and hospitality, it has given us an opportunity to dive deep and delve in Incredible India, which earlier focused a lot on the inbound market…It is now a huge opportunity and a challenge on how to pitch the products of India to Indians. The whole narrative that the Prime Minister has built about 'Atma Nirbharta' can be seen at various levels. This is not an inward-looking view, but we should also develop our own domestic tourism."

Uttarakhand was one of the first states in the country to remove travel restrictions and open the state for tourism and related activities. The state opened its borders in July 2020 for inter-state and inter-district travel for tourism-related activities. Travellers and bagpackers have welcomed the new-found freedom and 'smooth' travel

option. "Now, tourists who wish to visit Uttarakhand will be able to move around freely in the state. But certain conditions apply, the most important being they need to produce a COVID-19 negative test result," says Nainital-based tour guide Surinder Bisht.

State Tourism Minister Satpal Maharaj says, "Those working in the tourism sector will get employment once again. Any kind of infection in the state will be prohibited." The state has taken several initiatives to encourage tourist arrival including planning to make a 'Ramayana circuit featuring the holy places connected with the Ramayana'.

Also, tourist hubs like Mussoorie, one of the most-visited and famous hill stations in Uttarakhand, have laid down clear instructions for travellers. For instance, tourists visiting Mussoorie will be allowed entry 'only after showing the proof of booking for seven days under Unlock 2.0'. No entry will be allowed after 10 pm and before 7 am. These tourists must have a negative COVID-19 report issued in the last 72 hours, in the absence of which the person will be quarantined for seven days. The Uttarakhand residents, however, can move freely without any restrictions.

Pilgrimage resumes, with conditions

"We have been informed that only residents of the state have been allowed to undertake the Char Dham yatra and enter the temple premises, for now," says temple priest Madan Sharma. The yatra is all set for a low-key opening this year with no pilgrims allowed to visit Gangotri, Yamunotri and Kedarnath when they reopen after the six-month winter closure.

According to the minister, "In compliance with social distancing norms, we cannot allow pilgrims as of now to visit the temples…Our priority at the moment is opening the portals of the temples in accordance with religious beliefs and traditions associated with them. The rest of the decisions will be taken as per the Centre's directives."

The state government is contemplating a series of initiatives to offset the economic impact of the mandatory 'social distancing' condition during the yatra. "One such step may be to shift focus to 'Dhyan Kendras' and meditation caves near the temples where social distancing can happen automatically."

International travel in an 'air bubble'

When the lockdown was announced, India had suspended international travel completely. In the phase-wise unlock, India has now relaxed visa restrictions for travel to select countries. India's Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has eased visa and travel restrictions to and from countries with which the Indian Ministry of Civil Aviation (MoCA) has entered into an Air Bubble i.e., bilateral air travel arrangement during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The MHA is also permitting entry into India to OCI cardholders (Overseas Indian Citizen) who belong to countries with which the Air Bubble agreement has been finalised. These countries include USA, UK, France, Germany, Canada, UAW, Kuwait. The Air Bubble allows travel depending upon the terms and conditions of the agreement between the two nations.

MHA spokesperson took to Twitter and said, "Foreigners from these countries have also been allowed to avail Indian visa facility for business, medical and employment purposes. Indian citizens have also been allowed to travel to such countries on any type of visa." India and the UAE are working on an Air Bubble scheme that will supersede the special travel corridor set up to operate repatriation flights between both the countries till 31 August 2020.

Setting the new normal

Travel agencies, tour operators, airlines, transporters and most importantly government bodies and regulatory authorities have a colossal task ahead to set the framework - legal and operational - for the tourism industry. The new set of rules, terms and conditions will be flexible considering the 'uncertain nature' of the variables.

International borders for many countries may stay shut in the near future putting to standstill the movement of travellers. Some countries such as Italy, China, Spain and the US that registered record number of COVID-related deaths may not feature in the top travel destinations for a considerable time. Business travel has already reduced drastically.

Conferences, seminars, business meets may not happen for sometime. Most organisations are facilitating and encouraging a work from home culture and Zoom, Google Meet, etc., have already become the norm. Most multinational firms, international organisations are avoiding travel for their employees.

Several global trade and sports events have already been cancelled or postponed reducing travel drastically. Also, the number of students leaving the country to study overseas have reduced in number. With most educational institutes switching to online mode of lectures, the student visa requirements will have to be revisited.

Entities are working overtime to set the new rules for booking, cancelling, rescheduling for travel and for lodging and boarding. The uncertainty that has gripped the world caused by the unpredictable nature of the COVID-19 pandemic will be a major factor in deciding the new normal.

Vanshika Jain is a researcher with The History and Heritage Project – A DraftCraft International Initiative to document details, analyse facts and plug lacunae generated by oversight or to further national or foreign agenda in History and Heritage Across India and Beyond Borders.

Air travel limps back to normalcy

The COVID-19 pandemic has badly impacted the Civil Aviation sector, which was already spiraling into losses. However, with easing of restrictions and by adopting smarter strategies, the sector is gearing up to take flight again, says **Gauravi Patel***.*

Air travel showing safety rules beign followed

The Civil Aviation sector in India continues its struggle to stay afloat in the post-COVID scenario. The lockdown and the restrictions on air travel affected the sector badly, not just in India but globally. The COVID-linked pessimism and potential health risks involved with air travel have led to the drastic reduction of air passenger traffic in India. However, with tuned-down restrictions and smarter strategies, the sector is gearing up to take flight in the post-COVID world.

In the second week of August, the shares of Interglobe Aviation Ltd., that runs IndiGo gained over nine per cent against its previous close on the Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE). The jump was seen after reports emerged that IndiGo is in the process of leasing back 12 of its aircrafts. The rise also brought relief to the floundering aviation sector especially after IndiGo, India's largest domestic airline, reported the company's highest ever net loss of Rs 2,842 crore in the first-quarter earnings.

Changing air travel scenarios

To combat the coronavirus outbreak, all passenger flights were suspended with the announcement of lockdown on 25 March 2020. After two months, on 25 May, the government resumed scheduled domestic air travel and had allowed airlines to operate at a maximum 33 per cent capacity. In June, the carrying limit was raised to 45 per cent of their pre-COVID domestic flights by the Ministry of Civil Aviation.

IndiGo's journey is synonymous with most domestic aircraft carriers that witnessed huge losses in revenue during the COVID-19 pandemic. Owing to travel restrictions, IndiGo and several other domestic airlines undertook several cost-cutting measures to stay afloat. These included laying off ten per cent of the workforce, pay cuts, leave without pay and even selling shares to manage cash during the COVID-19 crisis. IndiGo maintained its position as India's largest domestic carrier by market share.

Plummeting footfalls, decreasing revenue

The recently-released figures by the civil aviation regulator Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) are indicative of how badly the pandemic impacted the sector. According to DGCA, a total of 21.07 lakh people travelled by domestic flights in July 2020 – 82.3 per cent lower than the corresponding period last year. Additionally, the 'occupancy rate or load factor for five out of six major Indian airlines was between 50 and 60 per cent in June 2020'.

The Airlines' passenger load factor - a key measure of profitability for carriers – witnessed a sharp dip in July 2020 owing to limited operations. The domestic airlines carried a total of 372.85 lakh passengers in the first seven months of 2020 (January-July), registering a decline of 54.84 per cent compared to the corresponding period last year.

In May, India's domestic air passenger traffic reduced by more than 43 per cent on a year-on-year basis, according to the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA). In June, the fall reached 50 per cent despite relaxation of restrictions on domestic travel.

In terms of on-time performance (OTP) – determined by considering activity in Bengaluru, Delhi, Hyderabad, Mumbai - Air Asia stayed ahead with an OTP of 98.1 per cent, followed by IndiGo at 97.6 per cent. Air Asia MD and CEO Sunil Bhaskaran says, "Despite the challenging environment, we are excited to again take the No. 1 spot and set a new record for OTP among domestic airlines in India. This reflects our ability to evolve and leverage technology to drive efficiencies in the new norms of flying."

Travellers worry for safety

Moving ahead, it's not just the airlines but also the passengers that are adjusting to the new normal. The pandemic wreaked havoc in the lives of regular travellers who, in face of the stepped-up safety measures and mandatory requirements, dread the uncertainty and the risks involved in air travel now.

"I'm a compulsive traveller…so almost every month I was exploring new destinations. Before the lockdown, I'd take off on whim to the most obscure destinations. But now I am not sure if it'll ever be the same again," feels Bengaluru-based software professional Mantra Joshi.

"It's not even about the mandatory tests and the paperwork involved. The risks are just too high. How will you even know if the person sitting next to you is not a carrier?" says Mantra's sister and travel companion Vedika. "I have been following the news closely since the outbreak. Every day, I hear of a new symptom manifested by the COVID-19 infection. It's simply crazy!" she maintains.

Safety guidelines for domestic travel

When domestic travel was partially reopened in May, the Indian government left it to states to decide quarantine guidelines for passengers landing at their airports. However, certain regulations were made mandatory for air travel. These include: Use of Aarogya Setu aap to help contact tracing; thermal screenings at airport entrance; no manual check-in counters and only web check-ins; limited number of bags for each traveller; safety kit for passengers including face mask, sanitiser and face shield; no in-flight meals; no in-flight newspapers, magazines, etc.; minimum use of lavatory.

On 1 August 2020, the Airport Authority of India (AAI) issued the latest state-wise quarantine regulations for domestic passengers (as of July 30, 2020) to address concerns regarding quarantine norms in different states. According to the regulations, thermal screening is mandatory for all passengers on arrival by all the states. Similarly, all domestic passengers must install the Aarogya Setu app mandatorily on their phones.

With each passing day, the government and the associated agencies are learning and issuing revised guidelines to ensure safe and risk-free air travel.

International travel in COVID times

For international travel, the regulations require all international passengers to undergo seven days of institutional quarantine at their own cost followed by home quarantine for one week. However, certain categories of passengers are exempted from the mandatory institutional quarantine but they have to self-impose home quarantine of 14 days. These include: pregnant women, those who suffered death in the family, those suffering from a serious illness, parents travelling with children below 10 years.

The Ministry of Civil Aviation and the Maharashtra government on 13 August 2020 further relaxed quarantine norms. The latest move was to alleviate the stress of arriving at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport (CSMIA) and reduce the time taken by the passengers to leave the airport. According to the revised guidelines by CSMIA, "Concessions on quarantine regulations have been made for international passengers travelling because of an emergency and those who have undertaken an RT-PCR test within 96 hours of their journey. The initiative enables arriving passengers to fill the self-declaration form online at least 72 hours before their scheduled travel to be exempt from institutional quarantine."

Repatriation flights bring back stranded Indians

Presently, only special flights to repatriate Indian citizens stranded abroad are being allowed under the Vande Bharat Mission.

The Air India Express plane that crashed on 7 August 2020 at Kozhikode airport killing the pilot, co-pilot and 16 passengers was a Vande Bharat repatriation flight from Dubai carrying 190 people. After the accident, the state-run airlines stated, "Due to crash landing of the flight, it may affect the network but Vande Bharat Mission continues." However, even amid the rescue operation workers, the fear of contracting the infection loomed large.

Government caps fare to protect travellers

The Indian government has been proactive in ensuring the airlines industry provides safe, economical air travel to domestic passengers. On 25 May when the domestic aviation sector was reopened after the lockdown, the government capped the airfares for different routes.

"Everyone feared that whenever the air travel will resume, the airlines will increase ticket fares to justify the increased operational cost to ensure safety against COVID-19. The government initiative has helped a lot of passengers who were travelling for personal needs and emergencies. And now, even if the limit is removed, the competition will ensure prices won't shoot up," says Delhi-based travel agency owner Rashid Khan.

The airlines industry must innovate to survive in the post-COVID world. The silver lining is that most industry experts believe as surveys too indicate that despite the pandemic, most travellers will prefer flights over other modes of long-distance travel.

Gauravi Patel is a researcher with The Inclusive Tourism Project – A DraftCraft International Initiative to document tourism, state needs and interests of stake-holders and industry players, balance issues objectively with local needs while ensuring inclusion as laid down in law and in spirit.

Hotels gear up to restore trust

The impact of pandemic on the hotel industry has been drastic with mounting revenue losses each passing day. **Kavitha Subramanian** *tells us how the industry is in the process of tweaking its procedures, protocols, activities and strategising itself to bounce back into business.*

A luxury hotel reception checking in the guests

The Indian hospitality industry has been hit badly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The restrictions on movement of vehicles and people and the consequential disruptions in the hospitality business have been drastic to say the least. After the months-long lull, the industry is now gearing up and strategising to get back into the business.

According to some estimates, the hospitality industry is likely to face a potential revenue loss of ten billion dollars and job loss of up to five to seven million dollars. The hotel industry is back on the drawing board rethinking and innovating 'hospitality' to survive the COVID-19 crisis. "It's very important to restore the confidence of customers in the industry. The COVID pandemic has spooked one and all and even the most daring of traveller is now hesitant to travel. We are working very hard to get our customers back in the post-COVID world," says Hyderabad-based hotel owner Suresh Reddy.

Hotels face huge revenue loss

Many hotels across the country, including big hotel chains, shut down completely after the lockdown was announced. A few, however, remained open to cater to the emergency services personnel such as medical professionals and civic health care workers who were staying close to the workplace during the lockdown. The other category comprised 'unfortunate' and stranded travellers who were stuck and could not travel to their destination with all travel options shut during the lockdown.

The loss of revenue meant reducing operations and cost cutting that led to laying off staff, delay in paying salary or no payment of salary during the lockdown. The industry is battered and struggling to cope with the aftermath of the pandemic.

Mixed feelings for the future

A survey performed by Jones Lang LaSalle (JLL) with key hotel operators to gauge the impact of the pandemic on the hospitality sector in India revealed the following:
• Sixty per cent of the operators surveyed believe that it will take 13 to 24 months for their portfolio to bounce back to 2019 RevPAR levels
• Fifty-three per cent of the total leading hotel operators have shut down more than eighty per cent of their inventory during the nation-wide lockdown period
• Over sixty per cent of respondents have up to ten per cent of their total hotels serving as quarantine facilities predominantly in key markets, with some of these hotels providing rooms for the 'Vande Bharat Mission'

• Fifty-three per cent of the respondents believe that key business cities are likely to witness an early pick-up in room nights demand

Additionally, the survey also revealed the 'optimism' of the industry to get back on track as follows: Fifty-three per cent of the participants believe the hotel openings will defer to six months. Thirteen per cent believe the openings may take up to three months. Another thirteen per cent feel it may take as long as 18-24 months for hotels to open again.

Seven per cent of the respondents said the deferring of opening may extend to nine months, another seven per cent believe the situation depends on the lifting of the lockdown and the final seven per cent feel that each hotel is to be evaluated on a case-to-case basis.

Adopting the new normal

The crippled hospitality industry is striving hard to survive in the post-COVID world. "No one knows for sure how long it'll take before life restores to normalcy. So, as managers even we're not sure what to expect in the near future. We can only prepare ourselves, customise the place to minimise personal interaction, sanitise the surroundings and wait!" says a sceptical Kutch-based hotel manager Umesh Desai.

Federation of Hotel and Restaurant Associations of India Vice President Gurbaxish Singh Kohli maintains, "We are re-calibrating and localising supply chains, which will change the way we operate. Every fixed cost is being reviewed afresh. Each hotel will have its own review geared towards greater efficiency and making operations lighter." Ensuring social distancing a must

The biggest hurdle plaguing hotel owners and the management is to maintain social distancing among the staff and with the guests. Most hotels are in the process of tweaking their procedures, protocols, activities to ensure safety of the guests and the staff.

"Implementing protocols laid down by the government are top priority for us. So, we are trying to minimise human interaction. We are also training the front-desk staff, cooks, cleaners, waiters, etc., to help them understand the disease and how it spreads. The training is important just so they take initiative in protecting themselves and the guests," feels Delhi-based hotel manager Kavita Singh.

Bigger hotel chains are going a step further in maintaining protocols and implementing improvised procedures to tackle their operations. According to a spokesperson for Indian Hotels Company, a Tata Group subsidiary that manages properties of brands such as Taj, Vivanta, and Ginger, "Check-in and check-out formalities will be processed digitally. We have altered the designs of our lobbies, restaurants, and banquets making fewer tables available and also suspended the self-serving buffets wher-

ever possible." The group has also mandated and laid down procedures to conduct thermal screening of guests and employees.

Training the hotel staff

Three-star budget hotel group FabHotels sanitises all its properties every two hours. Founder and CEO of FabHotels Vaibhav Aggarwal says, "We have installed signs on the floors to signify the importance of social distancing. Informational Covid-19 posters have also been put around the properties to encourage people to follow the new norms."

OYO is training its partner entities on 'how to maintain sanitisation and hygiene' and how to keep a smart inventory considering the importance of protective equipment in dealing with guests. The company is also ensuring audit checks of the partner venues for strict implementation of the guidelines. The company is preparing training programmes in the coming days.

Technology a big advantage

"We are fortunate that we live in a technologically-advanced country. In the coming days, technology will play a significant role in giving guests a safe and secure and stress-free staying experience," maintains Mumbai-based advertising professional Shruti Sinha also an avid traveller. Many hotel chains are already using technology to prepare their venues for guests for the near future. The hospitality industry is labour intensive and it's not easy to incorporate technology without training the staff. Many hotels are taking initiatives and introducing steps such as 'opening of guest rooms using smartphones'. All hotels, however, cannot afford to invest in technology and are customising their venues accordingly. Cities such as Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru, Kolkata and Chennai are already getting ready to adopt and implement technology-driven initiatives.

The post-COVID world is a tricky place to live and work. Not only are people scared to step out, those who have to are scared to deal with 'humans'. An industry like hospitality that is 'service' centric and relies heavily on personal interaction the challenges are far too many. With government support and innovative steps taken by hotel chains they may soon see footfalls trickling in. Challenges remain in ensuring small and mid-size hotels are brought back on track.

While most industry experts are hopeful things will change for good, and soon, only time will decide the fate of the billion-dollar industry.

Kavitha Subramanian is an amateur documentary film-maker working with The Inclusive Tourism Project – A DraftCraft International Initiative to document tourism, state needs and interests of stake-holders and industry players, balance issues objectively with local needs while ensuring inclusion as laid down in law and in spirit

Homestays are here to stay

During the recent lockdown, homestays across India came to the rescue of stranded travellers by opening their doors to them, and living up to the motto 'Atithi Devo Bhava'. In the post-COVID world, the smaller, less crowded and local lodging options will present a tough competition to brand and chain hotels, feels **Nikita Shastri***.*

A beautiful homestay in South India

For a moment, life stood still for Carolina D'Sa when she heard about the lockdown being imposed across the nation. A first of its kind, she didn't know what to expect in the coming days. Worse still, she was 'stranded' at a homestay in Nainital, Uttarakhand, far away from her home in Pondicherry, where she was vacationing with her friend Neville.

Like Carolina, there were thousands of travellers and tourists, some alone others with families, that got stuck at far off 'exotic' locations, miles away from their homes. "Had it not been for the generous host who let us stay in their abode during the lockdown, we would really have no place to go," reminisces documentary film-maker Carolina. With most hotels shutting down after the imposition of the lockdown, most travellers like Carolina found refuge in the local, independent businesses such as Homestays, Bed & Breakfast, Guest Houses, unbranded Budget Hotels, even Hostels. Homestays 'rescued' stranded travellers

"We were fortunate that we were already 'living' with a family at the Homestay the family started a couple of years ago. Staying with a local family made the lockdown period tolerable and affordable for Carolina and me," says Neville. The duo was travelling through Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh undertaking a preliminary research for their upcoming documentary series. "We know so many of our friends and colleagues who were left stranded as the big hotels they were staying in shut down during the lockdown," says Carolina.

"Tourism is a significant variable in the Indian economy. The industry contributes 10 per cent to the country's GDP and has taken a huge hit due to the COVID-19 situations," says Chennai-based market analyst T Vijayan. According to travel vlogger Sushmita Bose, "During the pandemic I read about and heard of several instances where Homestays, B&B opened their doors for stranded travellers and tourists."

Low-end hospitality a formidable option

In India, the chain and luxury standalone hotels constitute only five per cent (1.4 lakh rooms) of the total rooms available. The remaining 95 per cent comprise unbranded budget hotels, Guest Houses, Bed & Breakfast and Homestays. Business Line estimates the hotel industry is staring at a loss of Rs 620 crore due to the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown.

The Deki family who offer their home for tourists in Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh also hosted a few bagpackers during the lockdown. "How could we just tell them to leave? It's not right. In times like these, we have to help each other. The least we could do was provide a place to live. The fear of

contracting the virus from a tourist persisted and some of our neighbours objected too but we managed somehow," recalls owner Sonam Deki.

And, not just in Arunachal Pradesh, the fear psychosis permeated the nation especially in COVID hotspots like Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, etc. The tourists and the residents were equally scared in trying to figure out ways to deal with the situation. It was only when the government lifted restrictions on inter-state travel and resumed limited operations of the domestic flights, during the phase-wise 'unlock' – were the stranded tourists able to return to their homes.

Informal stays take a beating

The COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc in the 'informal' hospitality sector and the damage is here to stay. Guesthouses and homestays in Kullu and Manali are still awaiting guests, post the lifting of the lockdown. This, after the Himachal government allowed the hotel industry to operate starting first week of July. In Manali alone, there are 1,200 hotels and 800 homestays, guesthouses and cottages. "The businesses that shut down in March have not seen any activity yet. We're not sure what to expect in the near future. With each passing day, it's becoming more difficult to sustain ourselves," says Manali-based guesthouse manager Krishna Negi.

The few places that did resume operations after the 'unlock' are unable to meet even operational expenses due to the colossal reduction in the tourist footfall. "In some zones, the village panchayats have prohibited entry of any outsider fearing COVID. How will those businesses survive?" questions a worried Krishna Negi.

Workations may help recover tourism

There is a slice of hope for the budget stay providers as the tourism industry is witnessing a new 'breed' of vacationers, the workation-seekers. With most companies and organisations encouraging work-from-home operations, many people are now opting to set up base in 'exotic' locations. "Today, even in the remotest corner of the country, where WiFi is available. All you need is a laptop and a smartphone," says Hyderabad-based IT consultant Dinesh Raheja. Dinesh was "itching to leave Hyderabad" and took the first opportunity to leave the city "to set up base at Coorg." "I am a nomad… I cannot stay in one place for more than a month. So, the lockdown really took a toll on me. As soon as the government relaxed the restrictions, I took off to my most-favourite holiday destination. I have been working from Coorg for almost a month now," explains Dinesh. Delhi-based travel consultant Shalini Raj feels, "Travelling post-COVID may not be the same. Homestays are becoming more popular amongst people who are planning a staycation."

Bed and Breakfast adopt new guidelines

The B&B segment of the 'informal' hospitality industry is also bracing for the new normal. "We are following the norms laid down by the government in the accommodation units and in the B&B facilities…mainly ensuring contactless room service," says Goa-based B&B manager Joel Fernandes. The new protocols include prohibition of entry of visitors in guests' rooms, frequent disinfection of common areas and frequently-used touch points, frequent sanitisation of furniture and toilets, wearing face masks and face shields by the staff and tourists at all times, sanitising rooms after every departure, non-allotment of room for 24 hours after the previous departure, functional CCTV cameras covering all areas of the facility, in case of transportation use of isolators to separate drivers from passengers, etc.

"It's a difficult task to maintain all protocols and follow guidelines at all times but not impossible. We counsel our staff every day to ensure all rules are followed. It's important to maintain safety of the guests," maintains Joel.

Enhanced protocols for local hosts

In July 2020, Airbnb announced the launch of 'Enhanced Cleaning Protocol for its local hosts in the country' to support a systematic recovery of the industry. The initiative comprises a set of standardised protocols for 'cleaning and sanitization for homestays in the country and is aimed at providing guidance to hosts offering small-scale accommodations'.

The guidelines include a 'step-by-step cleaning handbook designed for everyday hosts.' Hosts who attest to follow the programme will 'receive a special badge' on their listing, making it easy for guests 'to identify and book listings' that follow the homestay industry's most robust set of cleaning standards.

Airbnb senior executive Amanpreet Bajaj says, "With the health and safety of our guests and hosts in India top of mind, these Enhanced Cleaning Protocols are the need of the hour in the sector. These measures are aimed at restoring traveller confidence and towards driving the systematic recovery of communities through the economic impact of tourism and travel. We are working to bring our hosts` global best practices backed by expert counsel and medical guidance from professionals who are at the forefront of the industry. We strongly believe that this can form an industry-wide standard."

In the post-COVID world, the smaller, less crowded and local lodging options will present a tough competition to branded and chain hotels. The homestays and BnBs are here to stay!

Nikita Shastri is a researcher with The History and Heritage Project – A DraftCraft International Initiative to document details, analyse facts and plug lacunae generated by oversight or to further national or foreign agenda in History and Heritage Across India and Beyond Borders)

Trasporters struggle to get back on track

India`s transportation sector that relies heavily on tourism finds itself in a piquant situation due to lockdown that stretched over five months. Transport owners, service providers and cab aggregators will have to improvise and find new ways to minimise losses and ensure business sustainability, writes **Ankita Sharma**.

Tourism creates job opportunities to locals, tour operators, guides and others

n mid-August, the Indian Federation of App-Based Transport Workers (IFAT) and the Telangana State Taxi and Drivers Joint Action Committee wrote to the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) asking for a moratorium on loans to be extended to 31 December 2020, citing losses suffered by the transport sector due to the lockdown. Among the various segments, it's the app-based transportation that has been affected the most.

The travel restrictions brought in by the lockdown and the mandate to maintain social distancing, led to closure of all private and public transportation during the lockdown. The only exceptions were the transportation facilities availed by and provided for the essential services providers. Most transport, especially app-based transportation, came to a screeching halt overnight depriving many of their only source of income. According to IFAT, while operations have resumed now, partially, the operators are just breaking even. Both tourism and hospitality industries are closely associated with road transport that is highly distressed in India presently.

Risking life to transport essential workers

The lockdown impacted over 20 crore people directly or indirectly dependent on the transport sector. The limited services were plied to ferry essential service providers and making crucial deliveries. IFAT maintains, despite the significant role of the sector during the lockdown, the government did not provide any fiscal benefit to the stakeholders.

Mumbai-based tourist taxi driver Suresh Gupta says, "I risked my life, throughout the lockdown, to transport doctors ... at a time when everyone stayed in the safe confines of their homes. I am unable to make the monthly EMI payments towards the loan I procured to buy my taxi. The moratorium isn't helping much because if tourism doesn't resume soon, I'll default on my payments soon."

Immediately before the lockdown, Suresh was planning to buy another tourist vehicle to "expand his business" and increase earnings. "It was a lucky escape. If I had procured the second loan then today I would be debt-ridden and penniless." Suresh's brother Manoj came from their village in Hardoi, Uttar Pradesh to Mumbai in February to help his brother. "My brother has big plans. He wants to own a fleet of tourist vehicles and provide services across India. The lockdown foiled his plans and now we're not even sure when things will return to normalcy," says Manoj.

Cab aggregators lose revenue, workforce

Cab aggregators Ola and Uber have been badly affected with the sudden breakdown of operations during the lockdown. Indian ridesharing company Ola Cabs has been offering services that include vehicles for hire and food delivery.

Uber is also a ride-hailing company whose revenue declined drastically, similar to its counterpart Ola. In April and May, Ola's revenue fell by almost 95 per cent. Co-founder and CEO Bhavish Aggarwal had to lay off 1,400 employees, 25 per cent of the workforce globally, as the company wanted "to conserve as much cash as possible due to the impact of the pandemic" which dried up its revenue.

In May, just over a month into the lockdown, Uber India laid off 600 full-time employees. Uber reduced its global workforce by 'nearly 6,700 people amid Covid-19' i.e. 25 per cent of its global workforce and decided 'to cut investment in non-core projects' globally. The lockdown impacted Uber severely and the cab aggregator reportedly decided to shut 45 offices globally, including one in Mumbai.

On 5 June 2020, cab aggregator apps Uber and Ola resumed their services in Mumbai after more than two months of inactivity. Both said 'riders will be able to access the services as per the rules laid down by the Government of Maharashtra for essential travel and that adequate safety precautions are being taken'. Before the lockdown, both Ola and Uber were registering a minimum 14 million rides a week each, in India.

Service providers ensure rider safety

Transport service providers, particularly cab services like Uber and Ola, implemented a slew of safety measures to prevent the spread of coronavirus. These include:
Travellers must wear a mask at all times during their travel in the cab; Cab users must, mandatorily, occupy only the back seat of the cab during trips; No one except the user/traveller is allowed to touch the luggage of the user/traveller to ensure minimum handling of luggage and prevent transmission of any infection; Users must carry a sanitiser and use it to sanitise their hands before entering the cab; It's recommended that users sanitise their hands while leaving the cab too; Users are recommended to not touch anything inside the vehicle; Social Distancing is maintained by a plastic shield/screen between the driver and the passenger.

The drivers of these cab services are at high risk of getting infected due to the nature of their job. They are also potential high-risk transmitters and ample precautions have to be taken to contain the spread of any infection through the drivers. According to the guidelines:
Both Uber and Ola discontinued their pooling services As part of the mandatory protocol, the cab driver must disinfect the cab after each ride; The driver must maintain hygiene within the vehicle; As per rules issued by the government, the driver must ensure no more than two passengers are seated at a time in the cab and both the riders must occupy the back seat of the cab; etc.

Mandatory checklist as part of protocol

Uber issued a set of instructions to ensure safety of customers during the travel. These reflect on the cab aggregator's app as well:
• Online Checklist has been added to the app that checks that the driver and the passenger take necessary precautions before taking or booking a ride.
Please use bullet points
• Mask verification is being done and Uber is also urging the drivers to take a selfie with the mask before accepting any trips.
• 'Feel free to cancel a trip' feature has been added. The company has updated its policies for cancellation, which now allows the user to cancel a trip if they feel the necessary precautions are not being taken by the driver. Similarly, the driver can also cancel the ride if the passenger does not abide by the guidelines.

Similar checklists and enhanced protocols have been adopted and implemented by transporters who have resumed services in the phase-wise 'unlock' in India.

The consumer behaviour has changed drastically during the pandemic and that poses a real challenge to business models and growth plans of transport service providers and owners.

"A decrease in consumerism, a reduction in travel and an increase in work from home will lead to a decreased demand for ride-hailing. I don't see Uber or Ola getting back to their pre-COVID-19 numbers anytime soon, at least for the next year or two. Their valuations will have to see a recheck," says New York University Stern School of Business professor Anindya Ghose.

It will be a while before tourism gets back on track fully. Businesses, transport owners, transport service providers and cab aggregators must, in the meantime, improvise to minimise losses and ensure business sustainability. Uber already launched its delivery business during the lockdown and its grocery delivery business has garnered good reviews. The demand is high given people are avoiding stepping out and groceries are 'essential goods'. Ola is looking to venture into electric mobility sector globally. For now, the transporters are exploring new ways to save time, minimise losses and stay safe.

Ankita Sharma is a trainee with The Inclusive Tourism Project – A DraftCraft International Initiative to document tourism, state needs and interests of stake-holders and industry players, balance issues objectively with local needs while ensuring inclusion as laid down in law and in spirit

Tourism-related trade feel the heat

Various entities affiliated to the tourism industry are facing existential crisis due to worldwide travel restrictions. The trickle-down effect is drastic with serious implications on lives and livelihoods of lakhs of people. Unless these businesses receive adequate help from the government and tourist footfalls revert to pre-COVID times, they will not survive cautions **Shalini Sood***.*

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to standstill various appendages of the tourism industry. Of these, the travel agencies, tourism operators, transporters, holidays planners are the worst affected. These entities are facing existential crisis due to the nationwide and international COVID-induced travel restrictions. The general fear and inhibition among people to venture out of their homes is causing significant damage as well. Government intervention and financial packages may bring some relief but till the COVID-19 scare prevails, these agencies will continue to struggle.

The cascading effect on the industry is evident from the loss of jobs and the unrest among the stakeholders. The enormous number of cancellation of trains, flights and hotel bookings have disrupted the micro-economy severely. The trickle-down effect on the travel agents, taxi operators, tour guides, tour operators, trip organisers, etc. has been drastic with serious implications on lives and livelihoods.

Travel agencies in financial fix

Travel agencies, in particular, have been facing the wrath of the pandemic as their existence is dependent on 'travel' only. In Chandigarh, travel agencies are particularly affected due to the lockdown and the ensuing restrictions. Travel Agency Association of India Chairman H S Sidhu says, "Big travel agencies are somehow managing but those in Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities are in trouble." Just like in Chandigarh, 'hopeful' travel agencies in India were getting ready to start operations in July. However, the uncertainty surrounding the crisis and the fast-changing guidelines in India and globally have affected the revenues and dampened all hopes of a quick recovery.

"In the month of July only we had realised that sales would be affected in the coming months so we followed up the airlines to give a refund to the people who had made prior bookings. Air India's refund is still due. The flow of money has stopped as of now and we can't even force our customers to pay us right now. We are paying with whatever money we have saved," says Sidhu.

The authorities had told airlines to refund passengers for the tickets booked during the lockdown.

KEDARKHAND

The crescent of legends

At an altitude of about 12,000 ft. above sea level, Tungnath is the loftiest of the Panch Kedars and is often regarded as the highest stone Shiva temple in the world. On a cold winter morning, Akul Tripathi treks to this hill temple set amongst lazy clouds and snowy peaks to experience its sacred aura and is rewarded by a panaroma that is as ethereal as the pilgrimage itself.

Text & Photographs : Akul Tripathi

The Ganga flowing at Rishikesh

n retrospect, it was nothing but the blessing of Mahadev; who, just before the pandemic that brought the world to a complete standstill, summoned me to His abode. If a chance to straddle the mighty Himalayas isn't reason enough to do so with the intent of visiting one of the highest (perhaps the highest) stone Shiva temple in the world what was this chance one may ask? Total, unbridled wanderlust.

The Garhwal Himalayas are the mythical abode of Lord Shiva, and the trek to Tungnath one of the most scenic journeys that one can undertake. For the pious, it is a wonderful excuse for travelling through amazing vistas; for the atheist, it provides a million more alternatives than the 'traditional God' and for the agnostic, if this journey does not spark an inspiration there there isn't much on this planet that will.

Several roads snake up the many hills of the Garhwals from Rishikesh. For the modern day traveller, they make it possible to visit more places in one lifetime, or even one visit, than any previous generation. Yet, the real highway of these hills are the panch-prayaag - five confluences that have served as the backbone, and milestones to generations of travellers, saints, mystics; and if legends are to be believed, even Gods.

The antiquity of this region predates all modern day notions of history. Even legends are too young a cipher to preserve all the events, and miracles that unfolded along this route; witnessed by the playful Ganga, before it dons its more serene avatar of the plains. Who knows, how many there were before She graced the earth to absolve the lineage of King Bhagirath of all sins?

It is a part of tradition to weave tales of happenings that deserve to be preserved, to be told and retold as per the wisdom of every age. And this tradition is alive and flourishing in every fold of these hills that were once venerated as Kedarkhand - the land of the Panch Kedars (The five Hindu temples in Garhawal Himalayas dedicated to Shiva). Story, fable, myth, legend, and even tall tales; all mingle and create a milieu heady with possibilities. As ever, there is one that ties them all together, the grandparent of several stories of Kedarkhand, without which so many would never have had a chance to be birthed.

The legend of Kedarkhand

Once upon a time, when the epoch defining war of Kurukshetra had culminated and the Pandavas had vanquished the Kauravas, Rishi Vyaas explained to the victors that their victory had come at the cost of several choices that were against dharma, including the sin of fratricide and the killing of Brahmins. To atone for them, he advised the Pandavas to seek out Lord Shiva who alone could pardon such misdeeds.

The Pandavas set off to Kashi in search of Shiva, who, annoyed at their actions, was avoiding them. Shiva disguised himself as Nandi, the bull, and left Kashi for the hills of Uttarakhand. The Pandavas realising that Shiva was camouflaged, gave a chase till a place where Nandi jumped into the earth. Bhima, the strong one, lunged to prevent Shiva disappearing and held on to the tail and hind legs, but the bull disappeared into the ground.

This place on the bank of the Mandakini River, where Shiva pulled off His vanishing act and entered the earth after leaving Kashi, his home in the plains is named Guptakashi (the secret or hidden Kashi); and a temple in the image of the Kashi Vishwanath of Varanasi stands at the place where this event occurred.

The bull later reappeared as Shiva in five different forms across the region of Kedarkhand. To appease Shiva, the Pandava brothers built temples at these five places which are today worshiped as the Panch Kedars.

Each temple is associated with a part of the bull or Shiva`s body. The hump of the bull is Kedarnath, the face, Rudranath, the navel at Madhyamaheshwar, the locks at Kalpeshwar and the arms at Tungnath.

Devprayag (literally the divine confluence) about 70 kms from Rishikesh, is the first of the five river confluences. It is at this confluence that the Alaknanda, which rises at the feet of the Satopanth and Bhagirath Kharak glacier near the border with Tibet, meets the Bhagirathi, formed at Gaumukh - the foot of the Gangotri glacier. From here, the river starts being called the Ganga, and this

Devprayag – the divine confluence of rivers Alaknanda and Bhagirathi

Tungnath Temple submerged in ice

confluence is no less holy than that at Prayag (the triveni sangam or confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna and Vedic Saraswati). A stone temple of Raghunath is the main attraction at Devprayag. It is said to be 2000 years old and Lord Rama himself is believed to have sat at one time, on the throne kept in the temple. A flight of steps from the temple leads down to the confluence of the Alaknanda and the Bhagirathi rivers.

Beyond Devprayag, the road soldiers on doggedly towards Badrinath. An offshoot of this artery leads to Chopta - a small region of meadows and evergreen forests that is part of the Kedarnath Wildlife Sanctuary. Surrounded by forests of pine, deodar, rhododendron and with swathes of rolling alpine meadows, known as bugyal in the local tongues, Chopta has a sky full of a million stars whose cool blue light is reflected from snow clad peaks that surround this little shangri-la for lovers of all things nature, especially birdwatching.

It is from Chopta that one begins several treks into these parts of the Himalayas including the Bisudi Tal trek, the trek to Kala Pahar, the climb to Deoria Tal and of course, the more popular climb to Tungnath - the arms of Shiva.

The arms of Shiva

A few kilometres from Chopta is the starting point of the climb to the Tungnath temple. Ranked third in the pecking order of the Panch Kedars, the word Tungnath literally means 'Lord of the Peaks'. At an altitude of about 12,000 ft above sea level, it is the loftiest of the Panch Kedars and often regarded as the highest stone Shiva temple in the world.

Historically, Tungnath has lacked the hustle and bustle of the more popular Kedarnath and Badrinath, however, it has of late seen an increase in the number of visitors, not just for the sacred aura of the place, but also the beginners trek that leads to a view that simply steals the show.

It is quite predictably, most often visited in the

summers and the broad grassy slopes with clusters of wild flowers and berries would be very pleasing companions up the cemented pathway. However, if you can brave the winters, there is delight of an altogether different timbre that awaits you.

Though the temple shuts for the winters, and the symbolic image of the lord is moved by the priests to nearby Makkumath, near Ukhimath, and from where it travels in a basket from village to village in the Garhwal hills; the road up the mountain to the stoic stone structure submerged in snow is a pilgrimage of the wild kind.

Like any trek, and especially in the hills, it is best to measure distances in time rather than metric units. On average walking pace, the temple is a three-hour walk from the base and the locals are known to walk up in under an hour. However, it is important to note, that the key to making it up in three hours, is to keep walking. Staring at the hour hands of the watch will move them to three hours, but won't bring the temple any closer!

I began the climb early on a cold February morning, with fresh snow all around, well settled, and the fog of breath adding itself to some low flying clouds and slight mist with a crisp wind that looked to jolt as much as it meant to caress the skin, quite dismissive of the layers of clothing. The walk

The Tungnath idol being taken to villages

Sculptures at Kalimath

was as every account of visitors had promised --- serene and exceptionally scenic. White as far as the eye can see, and sometimes brighter white when the sunlight would reflect off it. Numerous snowy peaks pierced the sky all around and created a setting that was ethereal as it was humbling.

For people from the plains, the temples of the hills often seem small, and Tungnath is perhaps on the smaller side amongst the hill temples too. The temple itself, is built in the Nagara style of architecture which is prevalent in the temples of North India and Nepal. The temple is similar to the Kedarnath temple but perhaps also seems smaller due to the sheer scale of the peaks that surround it. Behind the temple, is an endless view that also creates some strong winds that rally the many temple bells to create an experience which is magical, where every meaning to the word 'magical' pales as compared to the experience.

The temple itself is nestled under the peak of Chandrashila which is a further one hour and 1000 ft. trek from the temple. Literally meaning the moon-rock, an obscure legend remembers the moon God having spent time at this peak. In more recent times (well, relatively speaking), Ravana is believed to have performed penance here to appease Shiva, and also Lord Rama is believed to have meditated after defeating Ravana.

In the mountains, especially on the day you climb, the sun on your back, the wind on your face and no storms that get you waylaid are ample reasons to know that the Gods were on your side that day. It was one such day, and so were the next couple of days that were spent lazing at one of the many campsites that have mush-roomed in and around Chopta, and also birdwatching, which is quite a royal pass time at Chopta as more birds come to look at you than you have to go looking for!

The embrace of Shakti

Being carried up Tungnath in the arms of Shiva, it was only natural to yearn for the mother goddess; the embrace of Shakti that denotes that dynamic, creative energy which pervades and sustains the universe. Not far from Chopta, on the banks of the Saraswati River is a pious village that is home to one of the Siddha Peeths of the region - Kalimath.

Consecrated to the Kali avatar of Shakti; it is perhaps the only place where the feminine trinity of Saraswati, Lakshmi and Kali are worshipped together. In a unique tradition, the upper half of the goddess is placed at the Dhari Devi Temple near Srinagar (Uttarakhand), where according to the local lore, the devi changes in appearance during the course of the day from a girl to a woman, and then to an old lady; while the lower half is worshipped at Kalimath. However, no idol or image is worshipped at Kalimath. Instead, devotees worship the kund (a tank) which is inside the temple, and, the tank is always covered with the Raktpat Sri Yantra. This kund is opened only once in a year at the time of Ashta Navami, of the Sharda Navaratri at midnight, with only

GuptKashi

The Kalimath main shrine

the chief priest present.

The religious tradition of Kalimath believes this to be the place where the Mother Goddess disappeared here after winning the battle with the demon army of Shumbha and Nishumbha and killing the demon Raktabija, described in the tantric text, the Durga Saptashati. Rakta-bija had the demonic power of replicating himself from every drop of his blood spilt on the ground. All attempts to kill him had led to an entire clone army of the demon. It is for this that the Goddess manifested from her brow, the bloodthirsty Kali, who devoured every drop before it could touch the ground. In the ages after having disappeared in the ground, the continuous religious tradition was interrupted by a natural calamity, before the great sage, Adi Shankaracharya resurrected and revived this seat of power.

Local traditions insist that all new vehicles must be brought to the temple to be worshipped and a string tied to them to offer the protection of the Mata. Not very far from the Kalimath temple is a temple to Goddess Lakshmi, where it is believed that a wooden fire burns continuously since the beginning of Sat-yug. Several ancient temples in the vicinity dedicated to Lakshmi, Saraswati, Shiva, Gauri house antique idols and Shivlings.

A poet's Au Revoir, not Goodbye…

Amongst the many divine mythologies and legends in Kedarkhand is a legend of another personality who, like the stories of the Gods, is as much history as he is a mystery - the great Sanskrit poet - Kalidas. Author of classics like Abijnanashakuntalam, and Raghuvansham; Kalidas is believed to have been the court poet of the legendary King Vikramaditya of Ujjain, and his most famous composition is undoubtedly the epic - Meghdoot.

Strong belief ties Kalidas to Kalimath, where different versions of stories abound regarding his connection to the place. Some believe Kavlitha, three kilometres from Kalimath to be the place of his birth, others regard it the place where the Devi bestowed him with knowledge, transforming the simpleton into a literary genius. Some whisper of him having composed some of his masterpieces in the vicinity of the Kalimath temple.

A panoramic view of Kalimath

Whichever may be true - as you would like to know truth to be - it is quite certain that wherever he composed these verses of the Meghdoot, his soul was certainly at home in these hills of Kedarkhand, one with his revered Mother Kali -

"In the North lies the great divine soul, the king of the mountains, the Himalaya, which is a scale to measure the length and breadth of the Earth."

Akul Tripathi is a senior media and entertainment professional.
You can follow him on Instagram :
https://www.instagram.com/akul-tripathi/?hl=en

"As a country, we need to learn to be more accepting and laugh at ourselves more."

Anamika Haridas, a 24 year old comic's jokes are witty, dark and logical. Her bits oscillate between anecdotal and observational and whether she's talking about her parents or her dating life, she provides a unique perspective on common experiences.

She is also a self-taught rapper, drummer, actor, and singer. Active in the Pune comedy circuit, she has been a part of over a hundred shows.

Anamika in a tete-a-tete with A. Radhakrishnan.

When did you discover your passion for standup comedy?

Absorbed in stand-up comedy for quite a while, I signed up Pune Stand-up Group on Facebook for an open mic and wrote a set, showing up to a nice little art café in Pune. Two of my friends were sweet enough to show up and it's been over two and half years now.
As someone who has always been involved in public speaking, theatre, cracking jokes and making friends laugh, it seemed like an intriguing idea to start a few months after my first job with a mobile network operator in Pune.

Difference between comedy and stand-up comedy?

Stand-up comedy is one art form under the vast umbrella that is comedy. Performed in front of a live audience, jokes are taken to the stage and tweaked, improved, changed, and discarded as we go along. It is also a craft, practiced and honed.
Comedians strive to improve a joke with each re-telling. A written joke can be considered comedy, but a joke only becomes a stand-up joke once it is taken to the stage.

Is defining funny hard?

Comedy is subjective. What I find funny, you may find bland; what you find funny, someone else may deem offensive.
There's a saying that 'everyone on this planet has twenty minutes of material'. If you look at your own life, I'm sure there are funny stories or observations that make you and your friends laugh out loud. How you tell the joke now may be very different from how you said it the first time. There's no formula, it just gets better with practice.

Is there a certain structure to a joke that makes it funnier?

Typically, a joke has two main pillars: a set-up and a punch-line.
Almost every joke follows this basic format. The set-up is the premise of the joke: the build-up to the punch-line is the reveal. The unexpected turn a joke takes, leads to laughter.
Additionally, one can add a tag, which is a line after the punch line that adds to the joke. You can take this basic structure as a guideline to apply when re-telling your own stories and jokes. However, you can break any structure at any point if you think that's funnier.

How is walking on stage and making people laugh and forgetting about your own issues for a while, an awesome job to have?

It's amazing. The feeling of just focusing on your set, interacting with the audience, sharing your stories, some of which you may not have even told anyone about before, is very empowering. It's amazing to know that what you feel resonates with people.
Talking about something automatically takes back the power it has over you. Laughing at it, even more so.

What platforms do you perform on? How do you do stand up in times of pandemic?

In the before times, we would actually go up on stage and interact with humans across various city venues. Now, it's all on Zoom. The shows are typically listed in bookmyshow and

insider and also on your local comedy venues' social media handles.

One positive outcome is that geography no longer limits us. We can do shows with producers and venues based elsewhere. The audience also expands and we're able to perform for a Bombay and Delhi audience in the same show. We've also all upped our social media game, with comics releasing sketches and short sets on Instagram. So, if you are looking for new content, now would be a good time to follow smaller comedians and local performers.

How did you get over stage fright?

Thankfully, I have been fortunate enough to not experience this on a big scale. One helpful tip if you're feeling nervous before a big show, is to do some dance moves or jump around back-stage. It might sound silly, but it gets the adrenaline going and you'll end up pumped-up and excited.

What is it like to be a woman in comedy? Does gender matter?

This is a question all women in stand-up have been asked at least once in their career.
The fact is that we do live in a patriarchal society where most professions are male-dominated. A woman is more likely to have to overcome multiple hurdles to even do basic things like go to work. As a majority of shows happen in the evening or night, travel and safety become an issue. If you want to perform in a different city, this is also something that you tend to consider.
As for performing, audiences are nice and welcoming people, especially if you perform in more liberal/metropolitan cities, but that may not always be the case.
There is also a bias that women comedians only talk about a few limited subjects. People with these notions have not actually watched women perform either live or on video. Women comedians, just like their male counterparts, talk about a wide variety of subjects.

Is comedy a career good enough to pay all your bills?

Yes. As with any other art form, it takes time to hone it; so it may be a while before it becomes a full-time career, but yes. It is valued and a lot of big comedians make way more than they would in their previous jobs or a corporate career.

Is it true that comedians offstage are generally loners and fairly quiet?

Not really. Just like anyone else, we all have our moments of extroversion and introversion. This quiet loner notion probably stems from the fact that a lot of comedians view the audience as a whole, separate entity. It's like Jerry Seinfeld once said, I can talk to all of you, but I can't talk to any one of you.

Who are your influences?

I enjoy watching Norm MacDonald, with his long, shaggy dog style jokes; Daniel Sloss and his way of articulating himself with such a strong narrative; Ali Wong, with her hilarious observations and no holds barred anecdotes; James Acaster with his absurd yet somehow completely logical style, etc.

How does comedy function? What is the most important part(s) in telling a joke? Is a lot of comedy also the stuff you leave unsaid?

Comedy is about laughter, yes, but it is also about control. A good comic is able to control the reaction of their audience; it is about the ability to tighten and release the tension at will. It can definitely depend on the things you leave unsaid. Where you rely on implications for a joke, where you place a pause, all of these contribute to its impact.

What type of comedy do you do?

I find that my jokes tend to be anecdotal and observational and some of my content can be regarded as dark. I tend to write about my experiences and weird observations and commentary on society and my life with regard to it.
Sometimes, you get a thought and immediately want to write about it and these tend to be bits that do well quickly, because since you already find it funny, your conviction comes across when narrating it to an audience.
Most comics pre-write their jokes, but once on stage, the joke can become refined. What you see in YouTube videos and recorded performances though, is the culmination of that effort. Months and years go into seeing most of the stand-up content you see online, though it may look effortless.

Do you research first and incorporate it in your act?

The amount of research depends on the type of bit you are doing. If you're into more topical comedy and political content, it is important to know your facts and present your informed view. Research also helps in observational bits as you may stumble upon new things about a subject that strengthens it.
Stand-up is about control and as you level up in your skill set, you'll be able to prompt the reactions you want better.

How would you rate your audience today?

As stand-up evolves as an art form, so does the audience. Stand-up
comedy has only existed as a mainstream thing in India for about 15 years. When most of the current big names in the country started, this was not a full-time profession.
When the general public gets exposed to the concept longer, they pick up more on nuance and subtle jokes. This is why local talent should be supported, because it benefits not only the artiste, but the art form.

What defines you as a comedienne in front of an audience?

Of course we want laughter. That's what we're after. But comfort on stage, being able to address and bounce back if something's not working and build if something is, are also important. Getting closer and closer to being who you are in front of an audience is something that we also strive towards as artistes.

Anamika giving a live performance

Isn't it a most brutal aspect of stand-up comedy that nobody really knows if a joke will work until they've told it on stage? Even if it works with that one audience, will it work with any other?

Yes. You never really know until you get on stage, but you learn to develop a thick skin and also learn to laugh at yourself. It is quite confrontational in a way. If something is not working, you're presented with the reaction immediately and have to figure out how to win back the crowd.

The world is big and everyone can have an audience that understands them. In the meantime, just focus on improving.

Have you been afraid of failing or realise it is a part of the job. If only 4-5 people showed up for the show but you still had to do your act, is it a pretty bad scenario?

In the early days, bombing (read: doing badly) felt like the end of the world. You question everything about yourself and question whether you should be doing this at all. The next night, you might kill (read: do well) and feel like you're the best ever. After a while, you realize that it is all part of the art. You're able to bounce back more.

Let me tell you, four to five people is still a good number of audience members. There have been nights that ten comics on a line-up perform to one or two audience members. By the end of the show, we're all best friends. We all hope to get to point where we cultivate a dedicated audience and a large one, so we can continue to work better on our jokes.

What do you feel about recent controversies abusing religion etc.?

Most people who take offence to these types of jokes are those who have just been influenced by a mob mentality, without actually understanding the subject matter of a joke. We need to understand freedom of speech and expression. As a country, we need to learn to be more accepting and laugh at ourselves more.

What are your plans for the future?

Well, given the current pandemic, a lot of us comics, in addition to doing online shows, are making our presence felt on social media. Many of us have started putting out digital content and that will definitely continue for the foreseeable future. We can't wait until we're able to perform in front of a live audience again, though.

**You can follow Anamika on
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A. Radhakrishnan is a Pune based freelance journalist, short story writer and poet.

Tourism-affiliated businesses face uncertainty

The travel agents, on the other hand had no recourse but to pay customers from their pockets. "My wallet balance is increasing, but the cash balance in my bank account is falling. It's the travel-agent community that's getting hurt, says Easemytrip Chief Executive Officer Nishant Pitti referring to the credit he is accumulating from airlines.

Tour operators face existential crisis

Delhi-based tour operator Shahzaad Khan says, "I have a family of five to feed with an ailing mother... and a staff of four to take care of. The lockdown crippled my life. And even now, I am not sure how long will it take before life becomes 'normal' again" Before the lockdown, Shahzaad had been organising heritage walks and cultural tours in and around Delhi for almost 15 years. "Sometimes, on special request, I would also organise tours to Varanasi, Agra, Jaipur, Ahmedabad even Kutch. I don't have any social media presence. My business has grown only with word of mouth and I have cared for my staff like a family," he says.

Shahzaad's situation is symbolic of thousands of tour operators across India who are waiting for a 'miracle' to happen. Shahzaad's octagenarian mother Tehseen feels tough decisions have to be taken in tough situations and says, "Who knew a day like this will come? I will support my son in whatever he does for the family's sustenance."

Small enterprises struggle to survive

Hundreds of associated small businesses that thrive on tourism such as shops, enterprises making and selling 'local' handicrafts, artefacts, art-work and other merchandise have been hit as well. In Mumbai's Dharavi which is popular among international tourists, potter Ashish Solanki sits quietly outside his now-shut shop in Kumbharwada. "The lockdown happened at the peak of the tourist season. All my merchandise now lies unsold. With my family, I had started preparing for the season and had created the inventory well in time. The season was just picking up when the pandemic brought everything to a halt," he says.

Ashwin's is one of the hundreds of families who made a living by making and selling pottery works. "My income is gone but the expenses remain intact. And this year the rains in Mumbai really made things very difficult. All my inventory...my hardwork... my pots were damaged in the heavy rains." "We were hoping to see some business during Janmashtami and now the Ganpati festival. But now, with no end of the pandemic in sight, that hope's gone too. I might have to look for some other work or go back to the village." .

Transporters nervous owing to restrictions

Some states like Maharashtra reached out to transporters to address their issues during the lockdown. This was done in June after Mumbai Bus Malak Sanghatana (MBMS) demanded that the 'pass system for interstate travel be scrapped while inter-district travel in private buses is still prohibited'. Transport Commissioner Shekar Channe said, "The government has formed the task force to resolve the issues of transporters that have arisen due to restrictions imposed due to Covid-19 outbreak."

"Most of us are engaged in tourism-related transport activities. After the lockdown ended, most businesses were permitted to resume operations, but tourism is last on priority. That makes our future uncertain too. It's important that we do something about it soon before it gets too late," says a nervous Mumbai-based tour bus operator Nitin Shinde. The discussions will also include representatives of Maharashtra State Trucks, Tempo, Tanker Federation; Bus Transport Federation; of various autorickshaws and taxi unions; president of Maharashtra Truck, Tempo, Owners Association; and other transport associations.

Government initiatives are inadequate

All the businesses and operations associated with tourism are virtually closed since the lockdown was implemented. With no revenues and mounting 'unavoidable' fixed costs, debts and liabilities, the entire tourism ecosystem is on the verge of crumbling down. In May 2020, the central government made a slew of announcements to provide relief to some of the worst affected sectors in the country. The government announced it was 'extending the validity period of approvals and classification of hotels till 30 June'. This came as a short-lived relief to hotel owners, tourist transporters, travel agents, tour operators and other affiliated entities. These businesses won't survive till movement of people comes somewhere close to that of pre-COVID times.

In most countries around the world, including India, travel agencies are experiencing a significant shift in enquiries from prospective travellers. "People now want to travel to domestic destinations.There is a fear of being stranded abroad, " says Ahmedabad-based travel consultant Ruhi Jain adding "Tourism is going through a tectonic shift in terms of people's preferences, destinations, stays and travel patterns. The COVID-19 pandemic has really shaken people to the core."

Shalini Sood is a volunteer with The History and Heritage Project – A DraftCraft International Initiative to document details, analyse facts and plug lacunae generated by oversight or to further national or foreign agenda in History and Heritage Across India and Beyond Borders

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Beating economic blues amidst pandemic

Undaunted by job loss, three women diversify from their core areas of expertise to launch new ventures and make success stories out of them for others to follow.

Seeing an opportunity in every crisis is the defining characteristic of an entrepreneur. Most successful entrepreneurs use crisis to their advantage by repurposing their business to changing circumstances.

COVID pandemic has posed a challenge of epic proportion to entrepreneurs. Especially, women entrepreneurs who have to multitask -- care for the family members, do household chores as well as manage their business.

While many women-owned enterprises are struggling to survive amidst the pandemic, there are inspiring examples of women who have used this crisis to pivot their business model. This article presents the success stories of three enterprising women who have turned a crisis into an opportunity.

Chitra Kambli, a Thane district resident found a business proposition in supplying vegetables to households as people had apprehensions venturing out amidst the pandemic. She was running a day care facility for infants and children below the age of seven for the last eight years. The day care facility had to be closed following an outbreak and the three women who used to work in the facility lost jobs.

In April 2020, Chitra decided to home-deliver vegetables in her neighbourhood. She employed two men for procuring vegetables in bulk from Kalyan wholesale vegetable market. She had the mobile numbers of the parents who were the clients of her centre. Every day, she would send a Whatsapp message to them informing about the vegetables available along with the price. She started receiving orders on Whatsapp. She also opened a Google Pay Account to enable buyers to make online payment for their purchases. On an average Chitra receives around 70 orders. After meeting all expenses, she made a profit of Rs. 600 every day.

Mumbai-based clinical dietician Kanchan Patwardhan too had to re-invent her business following the lockdown. She is the founder of Kanchan's House of Health & Nutrition. Her diet products cater to the specific health concerns of pregnant women, children and people suffering from diabetes, hypertension and other ailments.

In order to expand business, in December 2019, she had launched a food processing business to manufacture and supply premium health and diet products under the brand Dr. Nutree. With the lockdown, her clinic had to be closed for face-to-face counseling. Realizing that digital technology could navigate her through this crisis, she along with her team of three dieticians switched over to online counseling and consultation to their existing clients. The team also conducted free online webinars for educational institutions and corporates on healthy diet, workout and lifestyle management for sound physical and mental wellbeing.

In order to create large-scale awareness about healthy food habits and boosting immunity amidst the pandemic, she shared recipes of nutrition food on YouTube. That attracted significant number of viewers and she began receiving business enquires and new orders. Her brand of healthy food products gained considerable popularity and her wise counseling earned trust among prospective clients.

Orders for health mix products were received through Facebook, Whatsapp and other digital platforms and these orders were fulfilled by hiring a courier services company. Even though the input cost had increased because of supply disruption during the lockdown, Kanchan did not increase the price of her products, nor did she compromise on quality.

Kanchan has a piece of advice for women entrepreneurs. She says women should not allow their entrepreneurial flame to be doused under any circumstances. They should take challenges head-on and revive their business through product and process innovation. Kanchan is also happy that she could also spend quality time with her family during the lockdown.

Thane-based Vibhuti Karnik

Mumbai-based clinical dietician Kanchan Patwardhan

Kulkarni, Proprietor, Career Vision is yet another fine example of a successful entrepreneur. Career Vision conducts skill development programmes in English speaking, foreign language, personality development, child skill development and pre-school teacher training courses through its 51 franchisees across the country. Around 100 women trainers are employed in these centres.

Before the pandemic, these skill centres catered only to the local areas through physical classroom lectures. Following the pandemic, Career Vision adopted digital technology to provide online training classes to students even outside India. Her organisation trained more than 500 women across India on various skill development courses so that they could start their own business and be financially independent. The certified skill training programmes offered by Career Vision are recognized by Government of India and also other countries. Recently, Career Vision partnered with the Centre for Career Guidance, Mauritius to impart pre-school teacher training to interested candidates.

In yet another initiative, Vibhuti launched Pakhi Food to supply 'ready to cook and frozen foods'. She obtained franchise from large, reputed organizations for supplying vegetarian and non-vegetarian food. This initiative provided employment to around 15 distributors for supplying food items across the country.

Vibhuti is also the Director of Anjali Doors Pvt. Ltd., which manufactures metal and fire-safety doors for hospitals, industries, schools, and other establishments. The demand for sanitising products grew manifold during the pandemic. To meet this demand, Anjali Doors started manufacturing automized sanitising tunnels and pedestal hand sanitizer stands for which she received overwhelming orders from banks, offices, hospitals, industrial establishments and residential complexes.

Vibhuti strongly feels that women can use their multi-tasking skills to excel both at home and at business. Her deft handling of family and business responsibilities has motivated her 16-year old daughter to assist her in managing the digital platforms of the business. According to her, married women should not drop their career aspirations under pressure of family commitments. Instead, they should try to strike a right balance between work and life.

Role of MVIRDC World Trade Center Mumbai

MVIRDC (M. Visvesvaraya Industrial Research and Development Centre), World Trade Centre, Mumbai reaffirms its commitment to stand by thousands of women enterprises in Maharashtra and across India during this challenging time. Through workshops and other online programmes, we are educating women entrepreneurs and other small business owners on adopting digital technologies to sustain their business.

Vibhuti Karnik Kulkarni, Proprietor, Career Vision

Rupa Naik

On 7 June 2020, with the help of veteran management consultants, we conducted a special online programme to guide women entrepreneurs on ways to overcome technology challenges. Recently, we organised a workshop on Digital Content Management that focused on how small business owners can use digital tools to promote their products and services. In July 2020, we organised a webinar with the world's leading online retailer Amazon on how our micro entrepreneurs can showcase and sell their products through its website. World Trade Center Mumbai is also creating awareness about the e-trade desk, a unique initiative of World Trade Point Federation (WTPF), to enable local MSMEs access world markets in 70 countries.

No doubt, the epic proportion of the crisis is testing the survival of enterprises. But this is the moment to stay motivated and demonstrate perseverance as this is just another episode in the long entrepreneurial journey of a woman. The crisis of today will only strengthen our resilience and self-confidence. WTC Mumbai stands committed to mobilise resources for the revival of women-owned enterprises. Together, we can conquer this crisis through courage and conviction.

Rupa Naik is Senior Director MVIRDC, World Trade Centre, Mumbai. She is well travelled and has extensive knowledge and experience in trade promotional activities. She has been responsible for the active participation of the Government to support MSMEs and build a platform for women entrepreneurs in India, among other things.

Myopic education policies

*Although the National Education Policy 2020 appears to be groundbreaking, it fails to clearly spell out how the ambitious goals will be achieved by 2025, feels **Poorvi Bose**, as she analyses it and also highlights some of the ground realities and failures of the Right to Education (RTE) Act.*

Teach for India

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 was recently approved and its revolutionary ideas are being discussed not only among experts but also by common people of the country. Proposing a revamp of the entire education structure, this policy has received a divided response with some applauding it and others being skeptical about its implementation. With a two-year experience of being a teacher through 'Teach for India' and a public policy post-grad, I find myself in the latter group too.

Since Independence, education has been given a top priority to address the literacy levels in urban and rural areas. The National Policy on Education in 1986 and 1992 focused on compulsory education for children up to 14 years, being more inclusive of all communities and introducing common entrance tests for professional courses. In 2009, The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE) was passed which announced that all children from the ages of 6 to 14 will be provided free education and also stated other requirements to improve the quality of education.

RTE and ground reality

I had the opportunity of witnessing the execution of RTE on ground through my two-year fellowship in Mumbai. Having read the RTE Act in the first year, I started observing the differences between what was on paper and what was happening on ground, especially in the underprivileged areas.

Features like free education, no detention policy, non-discrimination of any child for admission and schools in neighbourhood were well implemented in the two schools located in the slums of the city, where I taught. However, many salient requirements of the Act were not appropriately executed nor were the authorities and parents aware about them. Under Chapter 3 of the Act, the Government is obligated to provide necessary infrastructure like teaching staff, learning equipment and training facility for previously out of school children. The schools I was at did not have well-functioning classrooms i.e. usable blackboards, working lights and fans, non-leaking roofs or enough desks and benches. Neither were there science labs, playgrounds or computer labs with enough computers. There were no well-maintained toilets, potable drinking water or helping staff for cleaning the premises.

Apart from this, what was surprising was that there were not enough teachers for all the subjects. The mentioned teacher-pupil ratio was never maintained. I was teaching Mathematics and Science to 95 students in 10th grade. Teachers were burdened with substitutions and had to take on subjects more than their share.

Section 21 of this Act details out the requirements and duties of School Management Committees (SMC). Elected local representatives, parents and teachers were to form the SMC, create a School Development Plan and monitor the working of the school. The Principals of both the schools were not aware of such a requirement and thus never sought to form it.

The learning outcomes of students were also not at par. Since students could not be held back in classes anymore, even those who failed were promoted to higher grades. Interacting with students from other grades, I realised that many Grade 7 students did not know basic addition and multiplication. Neither could they read and comprehend sentences in English or Hindi. This trend was observed even at the national level according to the ASER 2018 Report Card. It says that in 8th Grade, only 43.9% of the students can do division and 28% of Grade 7 students can recognise numbers up to 99 but do not know subtraction. In government schools, only 44.2% of students in Grade 5 can read only up to a Grade 2 level text.

NEP 2020 and the future

Analysing the National Education Policy (NEP) through the lens of my experience in schools of a top tier city like Mumbai, has risen doubts about its execution. The previous 10+2 structure which included children from the ages of 6 to 18 years has now been modified to a 5+3+3+4 structure, thus including ages 3-6. Students in higher grades will be given the flexibility to choose subjects and there will no longer be any hard separation between different streams like science, arts and human-

ities. School complexes are encouraged to be created where they can share resources and infrastructure.

The NEP has stated that by the year 2025, universal foundational literacy and numeracy should be achieved in all primary schools. Languages are given great importance in the document, stating that the medium of language should be the home language till Grade 5 and textbooks will also be made available for them. Vocational courses will also be encouraged by highlighting its benefits and giving students from Grade 6 an opportunity to intern for it. There will also be common entrance exams for undergraduate and graduate admissions where students will be given the freedom to choose the subjects.

> If schools in a city like Mumbai do not have the basic infrastructure like labs, clean toilets, drinking water, staff rooms and internet facilities, one can well imagine the scenario in rural schools. In 2018, 58% of the schools in Arunachal Pradesh, 43% in Assam and 35% in Uttar Pradesh needed repairs of the buildings. And in West Bengal, 26% of teachers said that there was no facility for drinking water and clean toilets.

The process for employing teachers will be more transparent with special attention given to teachers who know local languages. The pupil teacher ratio (PTR) should also be maintained at 30:1 as mentioned by the policy and there will also be continuous training provided to teachers. The policy emphasises the use of technology and online classes.

Although the policy seems groundbreaking, it does not specify how to achieve all the mentioned aspects, making it seem over-ambitious. Increase in allocation of the budget i.e. 6% of the GDP as compared to the previous 3% will help in some areas. If schools in a city

like Mumbai do not have the basic infrastructure like labs, clean toilets, drinking water, staff rooms and internet facilities, one can well imagine the scenario in rural schools. In 2018, 58% of the schools in Arunachal Pradesh, 43% in Assam and 35% in Uttar Pradesh needed repairs of the buildings. And in West Bengal, 26% of teachers said that there was no facility for drinking water and clean toilets.

Teachers should have the expertise needed to be able to teach classical languages and given proper training to keep up to date with the latest educational practices. There were more than 10 lakh vacancies for teachers in India in 2018, and in 2016, 14% of the secondary school teachers were not professionally qualified. The needed PTR is not maintained in top-tier city schools, seeking such results in a decade or two throughout the country seems like a far-fetched idea.

Online classes as an alternative could seem possible if every household had the needed facilities. In 2018, only 24% had internet and 11% had any type of computer. Uninterrupted electricity is not available in most homes. Students located in villages and remote hilly areas may not be able to access the latest technology and will fall short of experiencing new forms of learning. The global pandemic has highlighted the failures of online classes.

Twenty years to achieve the aim of the NEP seems quite less when we look at the impact of RTE for the last ten years. None of the aspects mentioned in the RTE Act have shown a full 100% result. The NEP 2020 is aiming to do too much, with too less of time and resources.

Poorvi Bose is an Electronics Engineer and a Teach for India fellow, Poorvi Bose is presently pursuing her Master's in Public Policy for NLSIU Bangalore.

From masterchef to desichef

Yashodara Sirur *who specialised in cooking only fancy cuisine at home; narrates her experiments with Indian cooking during the lockdown.*

(Left) Spicy Kheema made with Garlic Naan; (right) Ultimate comfort food - Creamy 'Maa ki Dal'

I've always been a 'MasterChef' kind of cook. I don't mean to say I cook exceedingly well, just that I cook the fancy stuff they keep cooking up on reality TV. In short, I specialise in cooking what my mother doesn't. On my culinary journey from crème brûlée to carbonara, and parmigiana to pork chops, I missed the stop at Desi-ville, and never learnt to make batatyachi bhaji and vaangyache bharit.

Not blowing my own trumpet here, but learning to cook my own masale-bhat was a bit like reinventing the wheel. My mum – the maker of the best masale-bhat, ukdiche modak and puran poli in the world – is ever ready to cook up her trademark dishes for me. So why try to best the best eh?

On the other hand, when the craving to have hot seared salmon strikes, I would have to go all the way to a fancy restaurant and shell out a handsome sum. Therefore, it was simply prudence that drove me to cooking my own global food!

But of course, life has a way of slipping in a spoon of vinegar just when you've brought the creamiest of milk to a rolling boil. Just when I was feeling like an accomplished little housewife whipping up my husband's favourite restaurant-style menus, the coronavirus struck!

Bam! And there I was working from home, juggling my toddler's demands, and cooking. The cook's on holiday of course, so if I want my fix of khichdi, I can't simply instruct, I got to make it myself. Social isolation means that I can't drop by mum's place and replenish my stock of thalipeethachi bhajni either. At a time like this, when I would have loved to have some global cuisine, I have barely any ingredients – no fancy vegetables, cheeses, herbs or meats. And having been stranded away from home, I don't have a fully-stocked kitchen, or access to my little herb garden. Hell, I don't even have butter and vanilla to bake myself a pity-cake. (Looking at you Instagram bakers – where you getting all those eggs from?)

Most days my refrigerator only has the humble tinda, cabbage and cauliflower. And suddenly I'm as bad as a bachelor cook cooking her first vegetable-wali Maggi.

The other day, tired of badly-made cauliflower bhaji, I called mum and got her recipe of dahi vada. It sounded so simple. Soak, grind, deep fry. A child could do it. But what my mum neglected to tell me was just how much Urad dal I needed to soak.

I wildly miscalculated and I ended up with enough dahi vadas to feed a wedding party. Oh no, we didn't waste any, we ate and ate till our waistlines became as plump as the vadas.

My latest culinary (mis)adventure has been the surnoli – a Konkani delicacy similar to a coconutty pancake. I made it thrice - not because it was so good that we had to eat it again and again, but because I just couldn't bear to get it wrong. The last I made it was on Easter day. Jesus rose from the dead that day, my hackles rose with a mixture of fury and trepidation, but my surnoli batter absolutely refused to rise.

Now that we are many months into the lockdown, I am slowly learning to make the best of the ingredients I have.

These days I am reminded of a story my grandmother used to tell me – a story from her childhood, when she was but a little girl helping her mum run the house. This is a story from the 30s, a time when people were not used to the abundance of today.

One miserable rainy day, grandmother's father brought home an unexpected guest – his boss. While there was some simple fare like dal, rice and chapati for lunch, that day there were no vegetables in the house! They lived on the very top of a small hill, and the closest shop was a good distance away. Now grandmother's mum couldn't serve such a mediocre lunch to a distinguished guest. She handed a basket to my grandmother and said– "Run along and get some taikilo from the bushes outside." Taikilo is a bitter leafy plant that grows wild in Goa and Karnataka.

My grandmother unobtrusively returned after foraging for the taikilo. Her mum washed and chopped it, threw in some herbs and made a simple saute-style taikilya bhaji. The tenderest of the leaves, she mixed with besan and spices and crafted into crispy fritters. The earthy lunch was a success and the guest went home singing grandmother's mum's praises!

And that, as my grandmother would have said, is the ultimate test of a good cook. The ability to prepare simple, healthy, hearty food even when you are a couple of ingredients short. It's the ability to take bitter taikilo and transform it into a treat! Isn't that what life is about too? To take the lemons proffered by life and turn them into lemonade, and if there's no sugar, to just sweeten them with jaggery? That's what I hope to learn from the lockdown.

Yashodhara Sirur is an avid reader, cat-lover, IT consultant, part-time writer and mommy! In her spare time, she's often googling 'Bibbidi Bobbidi Boo' to sing to her 2-year old and thinking up ways to go as green as can be!

WHO AM I?

I am a proud Indian,
citizen of the world community,
inhabiting this lonely ....
but lovely little ...
planet ...

Earth...

EBRAHIM ALKAZI

The doyen of Indian theatre (1925 - 2020)

Ebrahim Alkazi was a contemporary theatre director, legendary drama teacher and connoisseur of the arts credited with changing the lexicon of Indian theatre. A man of few words, extremely disciplined, and with a charismatic personality, the perfectionist was considered the father and engineer of modern Indian theatre. The visual grandeur of his productions made his works incredible. His rigorous research before producing a play, led to important advances in scenographic design and revolutionised the art form.

Born in Pune, Maharashtra, Alkazi, one of nine siblings, was the son of a wealthy Saudi Arabian businessman trading in India and a Kuwaiti mother. While his family migrated to Pakistan in 1947, Alkazi stayed back. He schooled at St. Vincent's High School, Pune and later St. Xavier's College, Mumbai. As a college student, he joined Sultan Bobby Padamsee's English theatre company, *Theatre Group*. He later trained at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) in London in 1947. Honoured by both the English Drama League and the British Broadcasting Corporation, despite career offers, he returned home to lead the Theatre Group, from 1950 to 1954. He founded the monthly *Theatre Unit Bulletin* in 1953, reporting on theatre events around India. He initiated his own Theatre Unit in 1954, including all aspects of the craft, from stage management to character delineation to lighting and props. Associated with the Bombay Progressive Artist's Group, who were later to paint for his plays and design his sets, he established the School of Dramatic Arts and became the Principal of Bombay's Natya Academy.

At 37, Alkazi moved to Delhi in 1962 as director of the National School of Drama (NSD), a post he held for 15 years. He catalysed NSD into India's premier theatre training institute, along the lines of R.A.D.A in London. While there, he also created the Repertory Company in 1964 and directed its productions. He introduced cutting-edge training methods, academic rigour, technical discipline, and international standards in an attempt to professionalise the already-vibrant Indian theatrical scene.

Alkazi made Hindi drama a phenomenon by staging Oedipus Rex , King Lear and Moliere's The Miser. He produced /directed over 50 plays like, Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*, Mohan Rakesh's *Ashadh Ka Ek Din*, Dharamvir Bharati's *Andha Yug*, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, and numerous adaptations of Shakespeare and Greek plays. An inspiring teacher, he guided and pushed hard his students to realise their potential. He also mentored well-known film and theatre actors and directors like Vijaya Mehta, Naseeruddin Shah, Uttara Baokar, and Pankaj Kapoor. In 1977 at 50, Alkazi quit the NSD and theatre (though he returned briefly in the 1980s with three plays). He tirelessly patronised related aesthetic endeavours, and set up the Art Heritage Gallery in Delhi with his wife, Roshen who had designed costumes for all his plays, and built his collection of art, photographs and books.

To enlarge the audience for contemporary art, he launched several large projects, including international exchange exhibitions, publications and scholarship awards. The Alkazi Collection of Photography at Sepia International Gallery in New York City is one of the world's largest private collections of historical photographs, with emphasis on 19th and early 20th century images of India, Myanmar (Burma), and Sri Lanka. He was a winner of many prestigious awards, including all three Padma awards, the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for Direction (1962), the Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellowship, the BBC Broadcasting Award (1950), the Kalidas Award (1986), the Harmony Heritage Award (1999), the Roopwedh Pratishtan's Tanvir Award (2004) and the Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters from France (2012).

Alkazi died in Delhi of cardiac failure aged 95. He is survived by son Feisal Alkazi and his daughter Amal Allana, both well-known theatre directors.

- A.Radhakrishnan is a Pune-based freelance journalist, short story writer and poet.

SAROJ KHAN
The legendary Bollywood choreographer (1948 –2020)

Saroj Sardar Roshan Khan was the most prominent of Hindi cinema dance choreographers. Known as The Mother of Dance/Choreography in India, she has to her credit more than 2,000 songs during a four decade career.

A beautiful teacher and human being, Saroj brought grace, dignity, expression and style to dance. Blending Indian classical dance with modern beats, she made dance look easy enough for anyone to dance. Vibrant, smiling, jovial and an inspiration, she single handedly changed the landscape of how songs were shot. She taught actors to work hard and lucky were the ones who got to learn adayaki from her. Many things to many people, she defined an era of dancing with abandon, emotion and passion and was an iron lady who called a spade a spade! Taskmaster, perfectionist, innovator, trendsetter, a genius who immortalised stars.

She gave the idea of sensuality a place in Bollywood. Her lasting legacy is how she could utilise the facial expressions of her dancers to craft popular, fast-paced songs. While her works fell within the ambit of populist framework, she left enough scope for the camera to lovingly capture the expressions of her lead dancer. Her dances spoke and were not merely visual treats.

Born Nirmala Nagpal in Mumbai in 1948, to parents who migrated after Partition, she started her career as a three- year-old child artiste with the film Nazarana as baby Shyama, and was a child background dancer in the late 1950s in films like Bimal Roy's Madhumati. She learned dance from the well-known dance master of the day, B. Sohanlal, whom she supposedly married in 1961 at the age of 13. He was 43 years and already married with four children, which she was unaware of. The couple separated in 1965 and she later married businessman Sardar Roshan Khan in 1975 and had a daughter by him. Saroj Khan soon shifted to choreography, first as an assistant choreographer and then as an independent choreographer with the film Geeta Mera Naam (1974). However, acclaim came only 13 years later with her quirky Hawa Hawai number in Mr India

(1987), with Sridevi dancing her heart out, and Laxmikant Pyarelal's foot-tapping music and the sensuality of Kaate Nahin Kat Te. Her best iconic dance hits are arguably with late Sridevi and Madhuri Dixit even as she collaborated with practically all the biggest stars. She also trained a slew of choreographers who went on to make a big name for themselves.

Main Teri Dushman, Dushman Tu Mera and Main Nagin Tu Sapera in Nagina (1986), Ek Do Teen in Tezaab (1988), and those alluring chiffon sari-clad Sridevi images from Switzerland in Chandni (1989) as she sings to her love Mere Haathon Mein, all materialised only with Saroj's magical touch. Others popular songs she choreograped included Tamma Tamma Loge (Thandedaar), Dhak Dhak Karne Laga (Beta), Choli Pe Peeche Kya Hai (Khalnayak), Ole Ole(Yeh Dillagi), Nimbooda Nimbooda (Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam), Dola Re Dola (Devdas) , Barso Re Megha, Guruand her last choreography for the song Tabaah Ho Gaye from Kalank filmed on Madhuri were some of the popular songs she choreographed.

Winner of three National Film Awards and eight Filmfare Awards, she also won the American Choreography Award 2002, Nandi Awards 1998, and the Kalakar Awards 2011, etc. In 2012, The Saroj Khan Story, a Films Division documentary directed by Nidhi Tuli was released. Saroj appeared on television reality dance shows like Nach Baliye, Ustaadon Ka Ustaad, Nachle Ve, Boogie Woogie and Jhalak Dikhhla Jaa. She also acted in the TV serial, Taarak Mehta Ka Ooltah Chashmah as a judge in a dance competition.

Saroj died in Mumbai of cardiac arrest, and is survived by her husband Sardar Roshan Khan, a son and two daughters. In her passing, an era of Bollywood dancing has lost its sheen.

- A.Radhakrishnan is a Pune-based freelance journalist, short story writer and poet.

MAJOR SANDEEP UNNIKRISHNAN

Supreme sacrifice of a brave Commando (1977- 2008)

Born on 15 March 1977, Sandeep Unikrsihnan was the only son of K. Unnikrishnan, an ISRO officer who had moved to Bangalore from Kozhikode. He studied at Frank Anthony School at Bangalore. A good athlete since his school days, Sandeep was keen to join the Army and always sported a crew cut. He joined the National Defence Academy at Pune in 1995 and was commissioned into 7 Bihar on 12 July 1999.His friends remember him as selfless, calm and generous.

Sandeep served in various stations and took part in counterinsurgency operations. He was selected to join the elite National SecurityGuards (NSG). He topped in the course at Commando Wing, (Infantry School, Belgaum), earning an instructor grading and commendation. He joined NSG Commando Service in 2006 and was posted to the Special Action Group(SAG) in January 2007.

On 26 November 2008, few buildings including the iconic Hotel Taj in South Mumbai were attacked by terrorists in which some staff members and guests were held as hostages.

Sandeep, then commander of 51 SAG, was given the task to clear the Hotel of the militants and rescue the hostages. He led his team of ten commandos at 1 a.m. on 28 November through the staircase which was pitch dark and water poured by the fire brigade was dripping down. The carpet fastened to the staircase was soggy and the boots of the commandos made a squishing sound. On the third floor, they found a room locked from inside and asked the occupants to open it. The guests were reluctant to open the door even when the commandos announced that they were police. The commandos broke open the door and rescued 14 hostages.

The terrorists were firing at them from above. Sandeep instructed two commandos to move near the door and clear the Palm lounge by throwing grenades. Just then the team came under grenades attack from the militants in which one commando was badly wounded. Sandeep arranged for his evacuation and went to the lounge alone. He threw a grenade and fired a burst as he bounded up the staircase. It was a terribly risky step as he did not have anyone to cover him. He headed to the ballroom which had two sofas and a circular table. He noticed a flash from under the table and a volley of bullets hit him. He was badly wounded and succumbed to the injury. His last words to his team mates were "Do not comeup. I will handle them alone."

His Commanding Officer, Col Sheoran, tried to call him on mobile and got no reply. By 3 a.m. on 28 November, all the 21 floors had been cleared and the tower was handed over to the police after which the search for Sandeep began. Major Kandwal and Major Jasrotia retraced Sandeep's movements and noticed a figure on the marble floor, face up. Sandeep`s body was riddled with bullets.
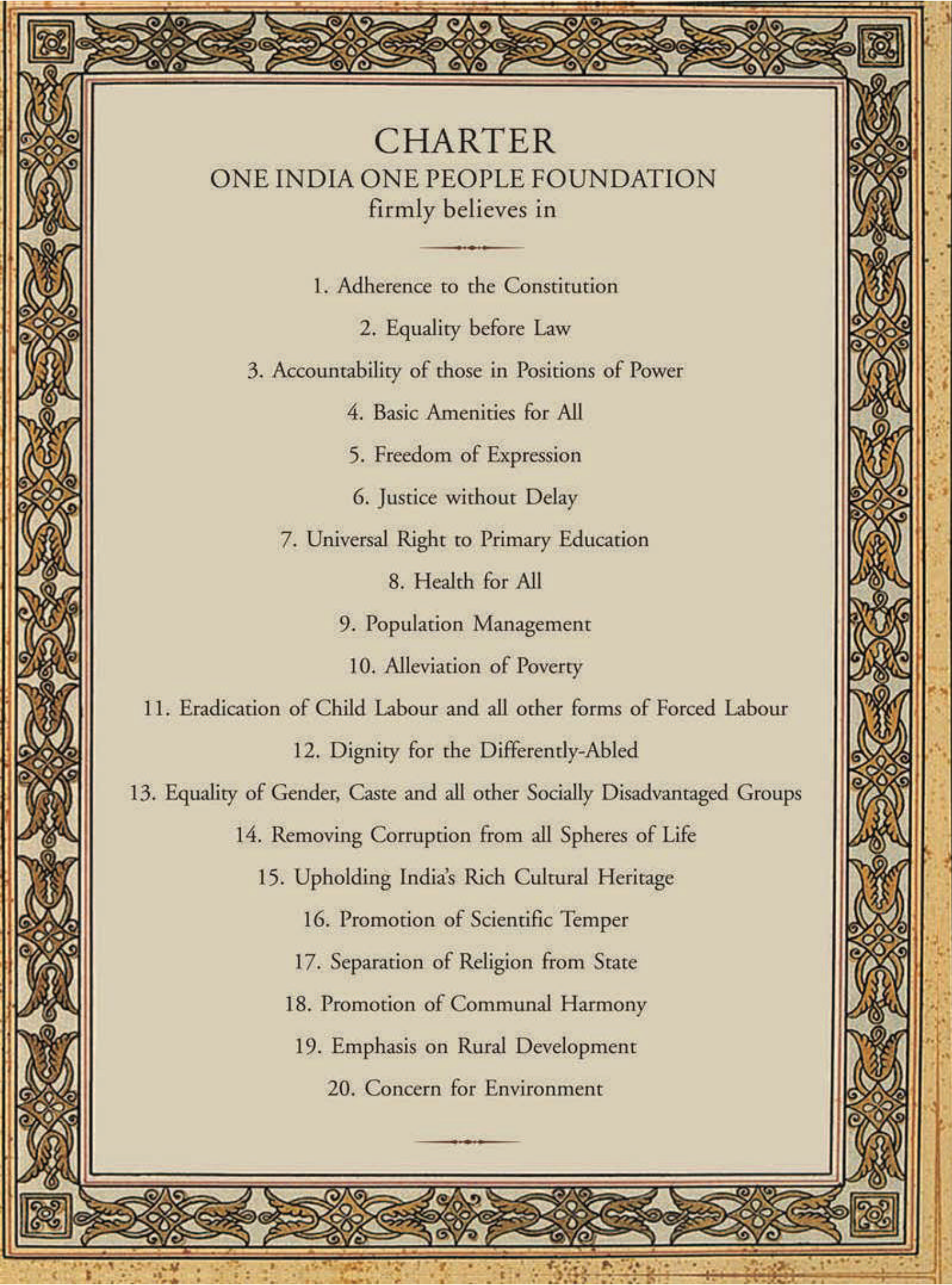
Sandeep sacrificed his life on 28 November and became the first officer in NSG to become a martyr. During the operation, his team had come under intense fire and one of his colleagues was grievously wounded. He pinned down the terrorists with accurate fire and rescued the injured commando. Despite being hit by a bullet in his arm, he continued to fight the terrorists till his last breath. Sandeep displayed exemplary bravery and leadership of the highest order and made a supreme sacrifice for the nation for which he was awarded the Ashok Chakra (AC).

The news of Sandeep`s death shocked his parents and wife. Thousands of people lined up along the route at his funeral shouting "Sandeep amar rahe." The road from Federal Mogulon Doddaballapur Road to MS Palya junction, Bengaluru, has been renamed Sandeep Unnikrishnan Road in his honour. His bust has also been installed at Ramamurthy Nagar - Outer Ring Road junction in Bengaluru.

Sandeep is survived by his wife and a daughter.

- Brigadier Suresh Chandra Sharma (retd.)

CHARTER
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firmly believes in

1. Adherence to the Constitution

2. Equality before Law

3. Accountability of those in Positions of Power

4. Basic Amenities for All

5. Freedom of Expression

6. Justice without Delay

7. Universal Right to Primary Education

8. Health for All

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11. Eradication of Child Labour and all other forms of Forced Labour

12. Dignity for the Differently-Abled

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Am I a South Indian first or an Indian first?

Am I a North Indian first or an Indian first?

Am I the President of India first or an Indian first?

Am I the Prime Minister of India first or an Indian first?

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Sadanand A. Shetty, Founder Editor
(October 9 th 1930 – February 23 rd 2007)
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