



The Harbinger Of News: Covid-19 And News Media In India

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The Covid-19 pandemic became an unprecedented story for the journalists across the world. The unmatched hunger of the people for news related to the pandemic resulted in a persistent news cycle. ‘Infodemic’ⁱ of misinformation, added to the personal challenges of the facing a pandemic made this an extremely unique time for the journalists.

The world of news media witnessed many challenges during that time and it is often said that the changes inflicting news media as a result of the pandemic have had a long-lasting impact. The news consumption habit of the public has also undergone massive changes, which have impacted the news media too. However, this crisis also has shown a secondary positive effect of increasing the speed of journalistic innovation. As the senior executive editor of Bloomberg, Chris Collins commentedⁱⁱ this pandemic is the “ultimate data story”, which is also “most challenging” and “unprecedented”.

In spite of this hunger for news, the media organizations across the globe witnessed unparalleled job cuts. Poynter Institute study points out that in the US alone more than 33,000 journalists either lost their jobs, furloughed or were given pay cutsⁱⁱⁱ. This is an ongoing trend and journalists are losing jobs by the day. In fact, the report which was updated on February 17, 2022 pointedly states that “we do not know the full impact of the last year...”^{iv}

The pandemic challenge hit the media organizations in multiple ways. The print media changed over to digitized version overnight. The fear of the virus coming to the household through the newspapers made people wary of buying newspapers initially. Many newspapers and magazines ceased to print their hardcopies and went completely digital. However, slowly they reverted back to the print format in India and during the successive waves after the first one, people kept on buying newspapers almost as usual. Many newspapers like the

Business Standard, which was accessible through a paywall removed it and made the online versions accessible to all during the first wave. However, they are now back behind the paywall. Though print was in the process of coming back to the pre-lockdown level in India, however, the second wave slowed it down. Circulation wise most of the newspapers registered pre-Covid-19 level, and the circulation revenue growth also has been impressive^v. However, recovery in the English language newspapers have not been very heartening (Banerjee and Shukla, 2023).

Advertising revenue has been moving increasingly towards the digital platform for some time now. KPMG report^{vi} of 2020 predicted degrowth of both print and television in 2021 and eventually growth will happen only in 2022. But due to the second wave and ensuing lockdown, the 2021 report^{vii} reveals that degrowth happened in a very different way. Television in fact saw a decline of 22 per cent in advertising revenue during the lockdown not because advertisements were less but because of highly discounted advertising rates. The report now talks of varied timelines of recovery for every sector. The report suggests that TV, Films and Music will take one to three years, and Print Radio and OOH will take beyond three years to recover. However, it will not be at par with the projected pre-Covid-19 growth rate. Satya Easwaran, partner and head, technology, media and telecom, KPMG in India said, “Marketing spending has moved perceptively towards digital media and away from traditional segments like print, radio and to some extent, TV. A greater reliance on subscription and other paid options as well as the developments of a credible digital business model is going to be inevitable for these traditional media segments”^{viii}. In fact, the KPMG 2021^{ix} report predicts a reduced reliance on the traditional advertising revenue model and rather an increase in the subscription-based revenue model. Keeping in view the above, the legacy media even with better financial stability might eventually come out as a leaner organization vis-a-vis human resource.

In the midst of all this the journalists were still doing their jobs, reporting on the effect on the pandemic and satiating our quench for news and information. This article is an attempt to document and analyse what the journalists in India faced on field as well try to narrate the changes in their working conditions as a result.

Effect on news gathering

The most important fall out of Covid-19 on the journalists was the fact that number of them were arrested, issued show cause notices and assaulted for covering the pandemic in India, across almost all the states. In an incident^x that happened at Ahmednagar, Maharashtra, a freelance reporter was assaulted by a mob which comprised of 12 attackers were predominantly women and also members of the quarantined family. They were agitated as according to them they lost their jobs due to the said report. Similar incidences are scattered across the state.

As per the report^{xi} of the Rights and Risk analysis Group (RRAG), 55 journalists have been subjected to arrest, registration of FIRs (First Information Reports), summons or show cause notices, physical assault, alleged destruction of properties and threats for doing their jobs.

The worst crackdown happened due to coverage of the massive humanitarian crisis that was witnessed by India post the sudden lockdown of the country in the first wave: the unprecedented exodus of the migrant

labourers by foot and other means. The Prime Minister of India, at 8 PM of March 24, 2020, declared that the country was going to be in complete lockdown from 12 midnight. No one was prepared to handle the mammoth crisis of the migrant workers travelling by foot or even packed in trucks and buses etc. Many public interest writ petitions were filed for redressal of the pathetic conditions of the migrant labourers in different parts of the country. When these petitions were being heard by the Supreme Court of India (SCI) on March 31, 2020, the Government of India petitioned to the SCI that media be restrained from “deliberate or inaccurate” reporting, particularly by the web portals, having a “serious and inevitable potential of causing panic in larger section of the society”^{xii}. However, the Supreme Court rejected the prayer of the Government of India and stated, “We expect the media [print, electronic or social] to maintain a strong sense of responsibility and ensure that unverified news capable of causing panic is not disseminated. A daily bulletin by the Government of India through all media avenues, including social media and forums to clear the doubts of people, would be made active within a period of 24 hours as submitted by the Solicitor-General of India. We do not intend to interfere with the free discussion about the pandemic, but direct the media refer to and publish the official version about the developments”^{xiii}.

The Supreme Court’s statement did not deter the State governments from their attempts at gagging the media. Rampant FIRs were registered in many states against the journalists. In West Bengal, journalists were threatened that they would be booked under the Disaster Management Act if they published one-sided stories during the coronavirus outbreak and were warned to “behave properly”^{xiv}. The Mumbai Police went another step ahead by issuing a gag order under section 144 of Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC) on May 23, 2020 “*prohibit(ed) any person inciting mistrust towards government functionaries and their actions taken in order to prevent spread of the COVID-19 virus and thereby causing danger to human health or safety or a disturbance to the public tranquillity*”^{xv}. On May 13, 2020, the Editors Guild of India expressed concern over “*a growing pattern of misuse of criminal laws to intimidate journalists in different parts of the country*”^{xvi}. Such examples are aplenty in other states too.

India has been placed in the 142nd place in 2020 and 2021 as per the Press Freedom Index published annually by Reporters Sans Frontiers, a two places downgrade from the Index of 2019. As per a report titled *Behind Bars: Arrest and Detention of Journalists in India, 2010-20*, prepared by Free Speech Collective, in the decade of 2010-2020, “154 journalists in India were arrested, detained, interrogated or served show cause notices for their professional work and a little over 40 percent of these instances were in 2020”^{xvii}.

India was put under countrywide lockdown on March 25, 2020, as mentioned above. On March 20, 2020 the Union Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeiTY) sent out an advisory to all social media platforms to “inform users not to host, display, upload, modify, publish, transmit, update or share any information that may affect public order and unlawful in any way”^{xviii}. Just the day before the sudden lockdown was declared, the Prime Minister had a meeting with the editors of the 20 biggest mainstream print media outlets asking them to publish positive articles on the pandemic. This followed many overzealous State governments issuing notifications to regulate the media coverage regarding the pandemic.

After lockdown was announced, thousands of stranded migrant workers became desperate to reach home and horror stories and visuals started streaming in the news media regarding their plight. As already mentioned above, many organizations filed Public Interest Litigations (PIL) in the Supreme Court to direct the Union as well as State governments to mitigate the issue. Two PILs were taken up by the Court and the Union government was directed to file a report by March 31, 2020. The government listed the measures taken by them to address the issue. The Court expressed its satisfaction at the measures taken by the government and said, “exodus of migrant labourers was triggered due to panic created by some fake/misleading news and social media”^{xxix}.

This approach towards media and particularly the journalists is clear from the numbers of journalists arrested while reporting the pandemic. Most of them are free-lance journalists mostly operating in rural India. The report^{xx} compiled by *Free Speech Collective* are full of stories of the harassments faced by journalists and its pan-India nature. While someone was pulled up for reporting on the dire condition of hunger by the Dalit children during the pandemic and forced to survive on grass, another one was slammed with multiple FIRs due to his reportage of sloppy handling of the migrant issue by the district administration during the lockdown. Another journalist was put behind bar for two days for his reportage of the blatant violation of lockdown rules by the powerful with the connivance of the local police. Yet another reporter of a digital news portal faced arrest for his report on massive corruption that the local administration indulged in distribution of food to the migrants. A journalist had to face the wrath of the administration in the form of show cause notice as he reported on how people were going hungry and selling off their household items to buy food.

These stories are actually few amongst the many that had happened across India. Suhas Chakma the director of the Rights and Risk Analysis Group rued, “India has become the riskiest place for journalists in the world”. There has been attempts “...to suppress press freedom under the garb of deliberate or inaccurate reporting on Covid-19”^{xxxi}.

Effect on livelihood

Many journalists also had to go through the terror of job loss during the pandemic. Retrenchment was already going on in the media industry, the lockdown actually made it rampant and more poignant. Journalist Rosanna Thomas commented, “Covid-19 is being used as an excuse. Even months before this, there were harsh measures afoot”^{xxii}.

News Click reports^{xxiii} that during the period of two months after first lockdown, at least 410 journalists have lost their jobs in several media houses across India. The Times of India retrenched more than 18 journalist, 46 reporters, six cameramen. 17 producers of *India Today* lost job. 15 journalists from the *News Nation* channel; 45 journalists from web portal *The Quint* were asked to go on leave without pay; *Hindustan Times and Mint* asked more than 100 journalists to resign. Similarly, more than 50 journalists from *Sakal Times*; 13 journalists from *Gomantak Times*; 100+ journalist were asked to resign from *The Hindu*. The Delhi Union of Journalists reported how the *Indian Express* enforced pay cuts in April, 2020 and by June they began to retrench journalists as well as 20 contractual staffs across other departments. May 31, 2020 was the last day for the

Northeast and Jharkhand bureau of *The Telegraph*. This led to the Northeast bureau laying off five of the six permanent staff. Other news organizations like *Cricket Samrat* and *Nayi Duniya* too shut down their print editions due to the economic effect of the lockdown. The big newspapers retrenched many journalists in their regional bureaus. In April, Times of India sacked many journalists in their Kerala bureau. Bloodbath was witnessed by the Tamil media too when a newspaper laid off 200 people and another popular magazine *Vikatan* verbally asked 176 employees to leave.

Various wage boards for journalists and non-journalists constituted since the initial The Working Journalists and Other Newspaper Employees (Conditions of Services) and Miscellaneous Provisions Act 1955^{xxiv} mandated a number of provisions to safeguard the journalists from the working conditions that they are facing now. However, in the mid-80's when the news organizations introduced the concept of consultants with a higher salary but no obligation on the part of the organizations, things started changing. Many journalists agreed to the higher pay structure in lieu of job security, ignoring the fine prints on their contracts. Thus, when the journalists were laid off on WhatsApp or through phone calls, many could not even take recourse to the Industrial Dispute Act of 1947, which is meant for the entire industry, as they had already accepted a contract contrary to the provisions in the Act. According to Sujata Madhok, General Secretary of the Delhi Union of Journalists, contractual jobs are not legal, but the journalists accept it unquestioningly. Most of the time they get a call or even a WhatsApp message, asking them to resign and accept whatever the management is offering. "When we ask for the contract from the effected journalist, so that we can get them justice, they are reluctant to share that. The fear of getting a bad name in the industry keeps them from getting justice for themselves" said Madhok^{xxv}.

The National Alliance of Journalists, Delhi Union of Journalists and the Brihanmumbai Union of Journalists, filed a PIL in the Supreme court, demanding the suspension with immediate effect the rampant terminations, forced resignations of the journalists etc. after the announcement of the nationwide lockdown. The Press Council took Suo Moto cognizance of the issue and Supreme Court also heard the appeal. However, that the matter is still under consideration betrays the importance of the issue. We were told by our contact amongst the petitioners, who preferred to stay anonymous that there is a catch to the issue. The petition was filed based on the Ministry of Labour letters to the secretaries of Central Ministers, State Chief Secretaries and employers' associations, wherein they were asked to "extend their cooperation by not terminating employees" in this "challenging situation". The letter further requested the employers to regard the leave taken during this period as "deemed to be on duty without any consequential deduction of wages". This provision should be applicable to even the industries or offices which were closed down during the lockdown.

"The termination of employee from the job or reduction of wages in this scenario would further deepen the crises and will not only weaken the financial condition of the employee but also hamper their morale to fight the epidemic," the letter stated^{xxvi}.

However, this advisory was summarily dismissed in the May 17, 2020 guidelines issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs with these words: "Save as otherwise provided in the guidelines annexed to this order, all order

issued by the NEC (national executive committee) under Section 10(2)(I) of the Disaster Management (DM) Act, 2005, shall cease to have effect from 18.05.2020,"^{xxvii}. According to our source, the advisory was eventually withdrawn by the government of India due to the pressure of the owners and employers of the industries/offices. Therefore, the basic premise of the PILs might not stand in the court. Madhok, told that as the matter is still sub judiced she would not like to comment further on the issue.

Challenge of information gathering

The challenge of gathering the right information regarding the pandemic was another issue that was faced by the journalists in India. Supriya Sharma, the Executive Editor of the news portal *scroll.in* posted a series of tweets^{xxviii} on March 20, 2020 which shows the exasperation of a journalist in getting the correct data/information on the status of Covid-19 infections. She wrote: "I have been following all press briefings by Indian health ministry and reading every press note on #Covid2019. The government is stonewalling questions, not giving basic information. Can all journalists—not just health reporters—amplify this #thread so we can get clear answers."

The government of India formed a Group of Ministers (GoM) on February 3, 2020 to keep a watch over the Covid-19 situation world-wide as well as in India. Interestingly the number of meetings held by the GoM started getting lesser as the number of cases started climbing in India. In the meantime, 11 empowered groups were formed by the Union government for integrated response to the pandemic, which comprised of bureaucrats. The second wave was an utter chaos as far as data on death, infection is concerned. But that is a topic of another article.

On May 30, 2020 three prominent public health organizations, viz., Indian Public Health Association, Indian Association of Preventive and Social Medicine and Indian Association of Epidemiologists issued a statement^{xxix} where they accused the government of relying "overwhelmingly on general administration bureaucrats" The statement said, "Had the government of India consulted epidemiologists who had better grasp of disease transmission dynamics compared to modelers, it would have been better served".

At the beginning of March, the Health ministry started the practice of organising daily briefings at 4 PM even if it was a Sunday or any holiday. By mid-May, the briefings became less frequent with the weekend having none. Mid-June saw complete disappearance of the meetings for as long as a fortnight. However written updates on number of cases, number of cured patients etc., were made available. This eliminated the possibility of uncomfortable questions being asked by journalists. In fact, the health ministry official being questioned on why the face to face briefing had become infrequent replied, "We are releasing two press briefs" (daily)^{xxx}. During the peak of the second wave, only bulletins were put out and mostly twitter was the primary source.

The New Indian Express published an article on May 8, 2020 which was highly critical of the government handling of the Covid-19 issue. It stated that there has been a clampdown of the government on "its own top scientists and agencies and is releasing selective data that handicaps both patients and doctors". The article further noted that, "The Indian Council of Medical Research, the nodal agency for the outbreak management for the last 10 days has just been giving out daily updates on total tests in the country but no

update on how many people have been tested or what is the state wise distribution of tests”. The article drawing attention to the fact that the ICMR representative went missing from the daily government updates since the last week of June 2020, attributes it to the controversy that erupted regarding the “over pricing of the 5.5 lakh of Rapid Antigen test kits from China”^{xxxix}. In fact, a Health journalist, Anoo Bhuyan on April, 28 in a series of tweets^{xxxix} talked about the possibility of stifling of the voices at ICMR.

The New Indian Express article also reported that the members of the task force on Covid19 and several of its sub groups were asked not to speak with the press. It further notes that, “A sub group of vaccination and drug research for Covid19 was quietly disbanded in May because the chair of the Group asked some difficult questions to top government officials in a meeting.”

This article disappeared from their website within 24 hours. Though the archived format of the article is available^{xxxix}, but according to the news portal, *The Wire*^{xxxix} the editor and the writer did not offer any explanation to the questions that they posed them regarding the disappearance of the article from their website.

The above example has been extensively cited to bring attention to the issue of how difficult it had become for the journalists to access and publish information during the pandemic. Initially, the daily health briefings were ordered to be limited to Doordarshan, the government-controlled television network and ANI (Asian News International), a news agency reportedly close to the government. However, eventually accredited health reporters were also allowed.

However, things started changing soon. Banjot Kaur, health journalist with *Down to Earth* tweeted^{xxxix}, “So #PIB sent an invite (in thread) at 2.28pm saying all were invited for PC on #COVID_19 at NMC. However, as we went there PIB PrDG made it clear that questions ONLY from #DD and #ANI would be taken. If possible one more from those present”. Same day another health journalist Nikhil Ghanekar tweeted^{xxxix}, “The Indian government fielded a grand total of 3 questions today from DD and ANI in their daily press briefing on #COVID19. Reporters who could not attend due to lockdown or commuting issues asked to send question online, none were asked.”

Supriya Sharma too tweeted^{xxxix} the same day, “Will the India’s robust news media loudly question the government’s move to cut off questions at the daily #Covid19 press briefing? Reporters who attended today's briefing were told *explicitly* (sic) that officials will only take questions from DD and ANI”.

Just after the April 1, 2020, press conference, Vidya Krishnan, a health and science reporter tweeted^{xxxix}: “There is a media gag in place, doctors have been threatened to not speak out against lack of PPE kits, & the health ministry says we have no local transmission (w/o scaling up testing) Genuinely struggling to understand how we can continue reporting in this Orwellian setting”.

In the order of March 31, 2020, mentioned above regarding the phenomenon of migrants walking down the streets, the Supreme Court added another dimension to the issue when it said, “The Court is pleased to issue a direction that no electronic/print media/web portal or social media shall print/publish or telecast anything without first ascertaining the true factual position from the separate mechanism provided by the Central government^{xxxix}”. This followed the Home Ministry direction to the state secretaries to create a web portal

where “people could verify facts and unverified news promptly”^{xl}. The Editors Guild of India, the apex body of the journalists, expressed perturbation in a statement put out on April 2, 2020: “Blaming the media at this juncture can only undermine the current work being done by it under trying circumstances. Such charges can also obstruct in the process of dissemination of news during an unprecedented crisis facing the country. No democracy anywhere in the world is fighting the pandemic by gagging its media”^{xli}.

Effect on the health of the journalists

Over and above the above issues, the journalists also faced the pandemic up front. Many journalists got infected as they were out in the field reporting from the first day. In mid-April, 2020, 53 journalists tested positive in Mumbai. Gurbir Singh, the president of the Mumbai Press Club wrote^{xlii} to the Chief Minister that, “Most media houses have shut their offices and have not provided any protective gear, or special insurance to these frontline personnel. However they continue to demand reports and visuals and expect the journalists to move around the city risking life and limb”. The letter further requested the Chief Minister to take “immediate steps to safeguard” the lives and profession of the journalists, urging to provide “special insurance cover” for them in the line of other frontline workers.

Even before the Mumbai incident, two journalists in Chennai — a 25-year-old print reporter and a 23-year-old journalist part of the editorial team of a Tamil news channel — also tested positive for the disease after both showed mild symptoms. A journalist from Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh also tested positive for Covid-19 in March.^{xliii}

The Delhi government initiated a special Covi-19 testing facility for the journalists on April, 22, 2020. The Central government too asked the journalists to be cautious and take adequate precautions. According to the Network of Women in Media, India, which has been keeping a live updated list^{xliiv} of journalists who have lost their jobs in this entire period, a total of 562 journalists have lost their lives when accessed on September 01, 2021. Out of these 562, more than 300 died during the second wave.

UNESCO issued a statement on June 9, 2020 regarding the incidences of fatalities amongst journalists while reporting on Covid-19. The statement said, “Journalists are on the frontline and put their safety in peril every day to bring citizens reliable and verified information on the pandemic. Their contribution has been invaluable for us all. But many lack protective equipment and access to healthcare, and some have been made to pay the ultimate price for their coverage of the health crisis. I stand in solidarity with media workers and their families during this demanding and perilous time^{xlv}”.

According to the Geneva based non-profit, *Press Emblem Campaign*, which focuses on press freedom and journalists’ safety, as on February 18, 2021, India is in the fourth place in the number of fatalities amongst journalists^{xlvi} with total number standing at 55 due to Covid-19 infection. The most disturbing fact was that the journalists who succumbed to the viral infection were quite young.

The lackadaisical approach of the media organizations towards its own journalists is epitomised by the story of infection in the Zee media group office. It reported 28 Covid-19 cases on May 18, 2020. A report^{xlvii} published by the news website *NewsLaundry* suggested that the first reported case in Zee News was on April 29,

2020. However, no one else was tested for Covid-19 infection, nor any standard government protocol of quarantine etc., was followed.

When the May 18, 2020, Covid-19 case was reported, as per another report^{xlviii} by *Newslaundry*, Sudhir Choudhury, the editor-in-chief reportedly said, “I do not want to listen to any more complaints about someone’s fever or cough from tomorrow. Remember this: all of you will recover from the fever, but for the one who complains it will never be the same”.

Newslaundry further reports that there were a lot of laxity in regards of Covid-19 infection management in the Noida based channel. No safety protocols and guidelines prescribed by the government were being followed and the office was running in full capacity without any social distancing or work-from-home options in place for anyone. The government had mandated social distancing protocol in cab and had allowed only two persons to travel in a cab^{xlix}. However as per the report, Zee Media flaunted the rule and cabs were running in full capacity and most of the times four people were travelling excluding the driver. When these issues were raised in the official WhatsApp group, the HR went on saying that the issue will be addressed soon, but, was never done. In fact, the HR went a step ahead and asked the employees to “use personal vehicles if any”^l.

According to a news report^{li} of the news portal, *The Wire*, a young journalist in Mumbai, who was out in the field every day without any break, tested positive, he panicked as he had two young kids and ailing parents with him. He informed his bureau chief about that and received a message saying, “Take care and don’t step out for a few days”. The panic and worry of the reporter found no space in the administration. Most of the media houses issued advisories to take care but never explained how, said another senior journalist of a leading television channel on the condition of anonymity.

The effect of the second wave on the journalist fraternity was devastating. Senior journalists across media houses succumbed to the viral infection^{lii}.

Anecdotes they narrated:

One young journalist with a news portal, whom I interviewed, on condition of anonymity said, “I was reporting from the field. And there were numbers of issues I faced. For example, lack of comprehensive knowledge to safeguard self from Covid-19, scarcity of food, lodging and sanitary amenities on the field, balancing professional and personal emotional aspect after witnessing a mammoth humanitarian crisis. We were unable to maintain social distancing while covering a group of migrant labours. Accessing primary healthcare in case we fall ill during reporting assignments was also a challenge.”

Ritika Roy, an Assistant Producer in *Swaraj Express*, a television channel, which went off air in September, 2020 said, “After the lockdown there was a salary cut of 10%. When I tested positive, my organization didn’t help me a lot. Except the phone calls asking about my well-being. In a personal capacity I did everything I could to keep myself safe but I was going out throughout the lockdown so, there were high chances of me getting infected, which I did. The organisation I was working for during Covid-19 has closed now. When I was looking for a new job I didn’t get a hike in my salary. I had to join at a comparatively less salary in my new job. It’s been almost an year now, and I am still working from home.”

However, few senior journalists working with reputed and established media houses were happy with the way their organizations behaved with them. One senior health reporter working with a reputed English Newspaper, based in Pune, said, “The editors were very supportive when they learnt about my family members being positive with Covid-19 in terms of allowing me the option to take leave”. Her challenge was to get data “as initially official friendly sources refused to entertain calls from the media or then responded late to messages via SMS. Due to the scare most were unsure what to say and it was at this point expert scientists and doctors really helped us with our reports explaining to the common man what this nasty virus was all about.”

Another senior journalist, based in Delhi and working for a reputed television channel faced a very different set of problems. Requesting anonymity he said, “As TV news studios were restricted for reporters, we had to adopt new methods of news output as live hits using equipment like Camera/satellite dish/outdoor leased lines were not possible. Moreover, field reports, which were recorded outdoors had to be uplinked and edited in office without the presence of reporters. For live reports, we tried out different Apps like Live U, Skype, MS teams, Zoom. This meant greater coordination with the assignment desk as web platforms needed pre-generated links. Apps like Live-U allowed reporters to link directly to the PCR but it came with its own challenges as many phones would not be compatible with the application. As weeks passed, the production team found out more solutions to ensure that presentation quality doesn't suffer and reporters were given standees with channel logos and portable studio lights to be used at their homes. However, this entire strategy was dependent on availability of good broadband network. We also figured out ways to edit field reports with less turnaround time. Video feeds and bytes from field reports would be uplinked in a chronological order to office servers. We would then write the script with instructions on feed to be used. Instead of voice overs, we used PTCs in news packages”.

The young journalist, mentioned above, who had travelled along with the migrants had many poignant stories to tell. Presenting a few here:

“Although many horrible memories are etched in my mindscape, two of them still haunt me. Visuals of blood and puss from the feet of the migrants making a white and red line on the road are still very much alive in my memories”.

In one instance, Kusum Devi an 8-month-old pregnant construction worker in Greater Noida had to walk back to Shivpur in MP after being kicked out of job and accommodation. After walking up to Agra, her feet started to bleed and then she decided to board a bus. In the process of boarding the bus, there was an intense rush and someone in her group, stole the money which was tucked inside her blouse. She was left all alone to fend for herself at one petrol pump on the outskirts of Agra as she could not pay the fare. However, later another group travelling from Panipat to Jhansi took her with them and took care of her needs.

In another incident, a man was pulling his cycle-cart just outside UP assembly on a flyover. He was travelling from Kurukshetra and was heading to Gaya in Bihar, which was 1000 kilometres from there. He had his whole household items and his wife and two children riding on the cart. His children's faces were swollen

from mosquito bites. With just 50 rupees left, he bought some marijuana for his pain and biscuits for the children.

Conclusion

Like any other sector, media industry has also been effected by the waves of Covid-19 pandemic in India. The first wave caught all and sundry without warning. Everyone's reaction was more or less of a kneejerk one. As news and information, data and statistics about pandemic was the essential requirement for the journalists, it was taxing for them to access those. Moreover, the sense of the unknown kept everyone at their wit's end. There were changing guidelines from various authorities including the WHO regarding precautions to be taken during the pandemic, which made the task of a journalist far more arduous. Early March 2020, WHO categorically said^{liii} that masks are not required to be used by general public but later it turned out that mask is the most effective protection against the pandemic. Similarly frantic sanitization of the surfaces based on the belief that there is high probability of surface transmission led to hoarding of sanitizer and other such chemicals. In fact early March 2020, shops in Delhi were getting orders to the tune of 200-400 numbers of Hazmat suits, popularly called PPE kits, daily^{liv}. And obviously the affluent class was hoarding them for sure.

Newspaper sales too suffered due to worry of surface transmission. This also led to stigmatization of the patients. The household workers were virtually ostracized as they were regarded as carrier of the virus, giving the disease a class dimension too.

Alternative cure of Covid-19 was also another issue which created further confusion. While some television channels promoted alternative cure, few questioned the veracity of assertion. The job of a journalist in the midst of all these confusion was not an easy one.

However, one issue that has been sporadically addressed, requires to be analysed threadbare, is that of the effect of Covid-19 on the mental health of the journalists. The mental trauma that the journalists had to undergo is unfathomable. Going out and reporting when the entire population was ordered to stay inside, losing friends, colleagues, families and yet still reporting and filing stories could easily be a daunting task, taking a huge toll on their mental health. The worry of losing jobs, falling sick was no less traumatic an experience.

The second wave was a terrible challenge for the journalists in India, the third wave as they say is looming in the horizon. Covid-19 created serious uncertainty across the world. Developed countries with better resources struggled to come to terms with the disastrous spell of the pandemic. Given the size and diversity of India's population, tackling the pandemic was indeed a most challenging task the Government of India and the state governments had to undertake. Some omissions and commissions were therefore inevitable. However, there was a case for better dialogue before some of the abrupt actions were taken.

It is however important to mention here that many media houses did provide an excellent service in informing the population regarding the various facets of the pandemic. NDTV network and the government media wings like AIR, DD were at the forefront in this regard.

This was an unprecedented time and no one got a chance to prepare for it. Taking the above discussion in consideration, there can be a number of areas in which we can think forward and beef ourselves in securing a

shock absorber so as to minimise the negative fallout. The most important of all is, the creation of an emergency corpus fund by the government in collaboration with the media houses so that the journalists receive financial aids in case of unannounced exigencies. All media workers irrespective of being salaried or independent need to have verified identity card, which is nationally recognised so as to give them access to the required information without any hassles.

A concerted effort needs to be initiated by the government to create a sense of confidence amongst the media professional. In such a time of unprecedented emergency, media's voice is important for a democracy to critically analyse its preparedness. That synergy is something that the government can work on so that henceforth the bitter after taste can be avoided. People seek information in such time and the free flow of information should be ensured by the state. Hopefully the experience of the pandemic will ensure it. Therefore, it is of utmost necessity that a security network comprising of social and economic dimension is institutionalised at the earliest for the journalists. More importantly, they require to be recognised as frontline worker in the time of pandemic. They are the ones who keeps us connected.

Reference:

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