

Post COVID-19: The Most Adaptable Will Survive

*Amitabh Kant

COVID-19 has radically transformed lives. India's decision to impose a three week lockdown across the country to protect its citizens is unprecedented in scale. Prevention and containment strategies pursued by China, South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore have revolved around border controls and barring entry of visitors to break the chain of transmission. European countries like Spain and Italy procrastinated, paid a huge price and had to subsequently announce national lockdowns. US with partial lockdown continues to have a steeply rising curve with major fatalities. Given the high transmission nature of the virus and absence of vaccines early causalities will be aviation, travel and tourism. This pandemic will redefine the way we live and exist. It will create new norms.

Firstly, the biggest consequence of COVID-19 outbreak is the transformation of the way we work. Some of the large Work from Home (WFH) experiments are underway leading the world to radically rethink traditional work assignments. Innovation in technology are moulding lives in a manner that would have been unimaginable a few years back. The idea of working in a job with fixed timings in an office could become irrelevant. This has been made feasible because of availability of high speed – low cost internet coverage and increased usage of data sharing and communication apps like Zoom, WebEx, JiRo, Asama, Slack, Skype etc. They will ensure virtual meeting keeping intact communication streams and managerial collaboration. WFH would reduce time spent on commuting, enhance productivity and improve work – life – balance. In India WFH offers a unique opportunity for more women (particularly mothers) and specially abled individuals to significantly contribute from home and significantly raise the female labour force participation rate from its present meager 26%.

Secondly, the impact of this pandemic on global supply chains is witnessing unprecedented disruption of the type which the world has never seen before. To flatten the curve a vast number of countries are doing lockouts and telling their populations to just stay at home and not go to work. In a globalized world, global supply chains were run on outsourcing and thin margins. The size and scale of Chinese manufacturing was so enormous that every product had Chinese components and every company had become reliant on China. Automobile parts to mobile components, drug ingredients were all being sourced from China. This will now be severely disrupted. Businesses will look for alternative destinations – likely India, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia – and factories will get relocated. Many businesses will create domestic supply chains. Entire supply chains will undergo massive disruption. This is an immense opportunity for India but would require key reforms across sectors to make the nation highly efficient and competitive. Our companies would also require size and scale to penetrate global markets.

Thirdly, we will see the phenomenal rise of telemedicine. The Indian health system is characterized by a severe shortage of doctors and health practitioners. The key to managing the Corona pandemic is to keep sick people out of hospitals. Virtual consultations with Doctors will stop the overcrowding of hospitals. In the US, insurance companies reimburse for tele-

consultations. At the peak of Corona in China several telemedicine services such as WeDoctor, JD Health and ALI Health launched corona clinics and guided patients. In India, only recently the government released the telemedicine practice guidelines (Link: <https://www.mohfw.gov.in/pdf/Telemedicine.pdf>) which enable registered medical practitioners to provide healthcare using telemedicine. The Central Government and Medical Council of India have fully loosened their reins on physical checks.

Since we are all practicing social distancing, patients and physicians will rethink our accessing healthcare with face to face interactions. We are all used to taking photographs on mobiles and even measuring heart rate, pulse etc. We will soon be sending them to our doctors and getting medical advice. This will radically reduce the pressure on hospitals.

Fourthly, since a vaccine for Coronavirus has not yet been innovated the only way to fight its spread is to practice social distancing. It puts space between people and enables us to break the chain and stop the spread of the virus. While the official phrase is social distancing we can well think it of as physical distancing. This will become a way of life as there is no evidence to suggest that the virus will disappear rapidly. Even after restrictions are lifted we can have second wave of infections. We will have to be prepared for Coronavirus to be with us for the foreseeable future. The reality for all of us will be that we will be constantly defending ourselves against an unknown enemy. We will have to get back into social interactions and economic activity but do so only by keeping ourselves safe by physical distancing. This will be the new norm of tomorrow.

Fifthly, we will see the emergence of contactless delivery. We are living in a new reality. Customers would like orders delivered with no contact. The delivery person would also like to reduce the risk of infection by avoiding contact with people in the supply chain. Consumers will avoid casual shopping and people will be eating out far less. Given the global adoption of social distancing consumers will order delivery more often. Infact this will grow and expand at a rapid pace. During the lockdown period delivery has gone from being a convenience to a necessity, particularly in food and medical supplies. The future will belong to E-Commerce and E-Pharmacies.

The present times are a period of upheaval and radical disruptions. It is at these significant inflection points that future leaders lay the foundations and gather momentum for their future leadership.

“It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, it is the one that is most adaptable to change”.

It is imperative that we initiate policy and structural reforms to ensure that the decisions and reforms we undertake today ensure India's bright future.