

Kindness is contagious — especially in a pandemic

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All eyes are on the death and devastation wrought by the pandemic, and few are likely to notice the helpers. But the Good Samaritans are everywhere, ensuring stranded migrant workers don't go hungry, homeless strays are fed, people who lost jobs don't struggle for essentials, children who cannot study online don't miss lessons, and plush offices make room for Covid-19 care

Salman Ravi was reporting from Delhi on workers walking back to their villages when he caught up with a family on their way from Ambala in Haryana to Chhatarpur in Madhya Pradesh. With their belongings bundled up on an old cycle, the family, including two children, had already walked 250km over six days in the scorching heat of May. The father was barefoot. On the spur of the moment, even as the interview was being broadcast on Facebook Live, Ravi took off his shoes and offered them to the man.

"They were completely broken — physically and mentally... I couldn't just witness it anymore," the BBC journalist said on camera in a follow-up story. The video of Ravi's gesture not only went viral, but also ended up inspiring many others to provide footwear for barefoot migrant workers trekking to their villages.



Right step: A wall mural in central Delhi captures the moment a journalist gave his shoes to a barefoot migrant labourer heading home

On the boundary wall of a police station in Tughlaq Road, a central Delhi area not far from where the incident took place, Delhi-based painter Aklaq Ahmad recently created a mural to record the act for posterity.

Amid the gloom brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, which has left over 3.5 lakh Indians infected and over 12,000 dead, many like Ravi and Ahmad have shone a light of hope. From distributing food to stranded migrant workers, providing financial relief to the unemployed, feeding stray animals, helping underprivileged schoolchildren continue studying even without access to online classes, and offering to convert offices and resorts into makeshift hospitals and care centres, hundreds of hands have reached out to comfort the world in its hour of distress.

Personal vs professional

“Should journalists be the fourth pillar, critiquing the government, or should we be helping people in more tangible ways? That dilemma isn’t really there for most journalists this time around, because of the division we can make between our professional lives and the personal commitment toward a human being. For many of us the personal call is a higher call,” says Lalita Subramaniam (name changed on request), a senior journalist with a leading English daily who started helming relief coordination efforts after the government announced a nationwide lockdown on March 24 to stem the spread of the novel coronavirus. She and a dozen other prominent journalists across television, print and the digital media, who wish to remain anonymous, came together spontaneously, sharing information and mobilising relief for families in distress.

Calling themselves The Merry People of Hindustan, the Delhi-based journalist group has helped raise over ₹4 lakh, which has been transferred to the bank accounts of over 150 migrant families across Bundelkhand in both MP and UP, West Bengal, Odisha, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand.

The point was to reach out to strangers in need and help them financially for at least four months.

Journalists had stood up to help people in times of earlier crises, too. Many, for instance, arranged for legal and financial aid for victims of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots and the recent communal violence in Delhi. “But this time [during the lockdown], it was a no-brainer,” Subramaniam says, implying that many felt they had to step out to help those in need.

“I use my press identity as a Schengen visa of sorts, calling up various district magistrates and cops to mobilise shelter and food for the passing migrants,” she says with a laugh. Elsewhere, too, journalists have been using their credentials by invoking the power of social media to alert and, sometimes, Twitter-shame authorities in a bid to step up relief efforts. Several have pooled in resources to send trucks with ration supplies to remote villages where people have been left with no food or money.

A stray thought

Returning from his morning walk at 6, Vidit Sharma immediately heads out again from his rented flat in Noida sector 31. Carrying sacks of rice, crates of eggs, and milk packets, he arrives at a vacant ground in the neighbourhood where he’s built a makeshift open kitchen. With the help of a friend, Sharma, a 28-year-old training manager at a Delhi-based automobile company, cooks 100 kilos of rice and boils 500 eggs and 50 litres of milk. The rice is spread on sheets to cool. The eggs are peeled. By 12 noon, drums filled with the food are piled on the back of a cycle rickshaw, and Sharma leads the way on a scooty as the group goes in search of their four-legged friends.



Barking joy: Sharma has been feeding 750 stray dogs daily since the lockdown

The route has been expanding, from sector 31 all the way to 18, the nerve centre of Noida teeming with malls, markets and commercial buildings. The stray dogs in this area wait for Sharma's arrival. They bark, yodel and squeal in excitement when they spot him from afar.

When all their foraging hotspots — restaurants, bars and campus canteens — downed shutters, depriving them of leftover food, Sharma came to their rescue.

“In the first week after the Janata curfew [on March 22] was announced, I decided to check on how the stray animals were coping. I found them starved, several dying of hunger. That's when I decided I had to do something,” he says over the phone.

Sharma feeds 750 stray dogs and 50-odd pups twice a day. In video recordings he shares over WhatsApp, the dogs can be seen circling him in groups as he serves them the food.

“People are dying of hunger and all you care about are stray dogs?” he gets asked by angry members of resident welfare associations, for whom the dogs are a nuisance. “Instead of getting into a verbal spat, I started feeding poor people too. But only on weekends,” he says. He dipped into his savings and used a personal car loan to fund his mission. As the lockdown is being eased, he is fixing radium collars on puppies that were born during the lockdown, as they are in danger of being run over as traffic resumes on the streets. “The collars would help the pups become visible on the road,” he says.

Loosening India Inc's purse strings

Hinjewadi in Pune, Maharashtra, is abuzz with activity after IT giant Wipro Ltd opened the country's first dedicated hospital for Covid-19 treatment here last week. The company's independent but vacant facility was repurposed into the 1.8 lakh sqft hospital, with 504 beds, 18 ventilators, intensive care units, two ambulances and other medical facilities.

“The fully equipped and functional hospital has been handed over to the Zilla Parishad to provide medical care, under the guidance of the Medical Director,” a Wipro Ltd official told BLink in an email interview.

With Pune's positive case load exceeding 12,000 and the death toll at over 500, the company established the hospital as a part of its “long-term response to augment the healthcare infrastructure”. During the lockdown period, the company reached out to more than 1.8 crore people across the country with a range of humanitarian and healthcare interventions, the official said. After providing nearly 78 lakh people with cooked food, dry rations and personal hygiene items, the company says it will focus on livelihood regeneration in the second phase of its humanitarian assistance.

In April, according to a report in XXXX Wipro contributed over ₹1,125 crore to Covid-19 relief measures. Similarly, Tata Trusts has pledged ₹1,500 crore towards Covid-19 relief. XXX recently reported that India Inc has committed or donated more than ₹2,700 crore as direct and indirect aid to combat Covid-19 distress.

Building bridges for children

Not just corporate donors and celebrities with financial muscle, even thousands of ordinary Indians have stepped up to the plate to help ease the suffering of fellow citizens in the wake of the pandemic.

At Omkar Nagar, a densely populated slum near the Miyapur Metro station in Hyderabad, each day a dozen students arrive in batches of three and four at a small shed that doubles as a makeshift classroom. The students, in their early teens, all belong to families of rag-pickers and beggars. Two years ago, Yuvaneshwari K, the founder of the NGO Chottu ki Education, had knocked on their doors, convincing the parents to send their children to her bridge school. The goal was to bring the kids up to speed with the learning indicators of government schools, to ready them for formal schooling. The lockdown has poured water over these gains. “Once the lockdown lifts, several of them would go back to begging if we don’t act fast and find a way to keep up the momentum of learning,” Yuvaneshwari, a software employee with Dr Reddys, says over the phone from Hyderabad.



Fuelling dreams: Children of ragpickers in Omkar Nagar are schooled

Social distancing has meant that the teachers cannot go to the slums to teach. Online learning wasn't an option. With the help of an enterprising collegegoer who lives in the slum, the kids are now taught math, English, Hindi and Telugu over a WhatsApp video call. Homework is given and exams are held too. The arrangement isn't perfect, says Yuvaneshwari, but at least it has ensured that the children don't fall off the education map. While the coronavirus has exposed the country's great digital learning divide, Yuvaneshwari's effort goes a long way in ensuring that poor children can still keep up with school.

Random acts

Kindness comes in all shapes and sizes. While some found their cause in providing food (see box on Vikas Khanna) and financial relief, some simply wanted to spread fun and laughter (see box on Danish Sait).

Going viral

Danish Sait's comic relief comes in one-minute packages



Danish Sait: — laugh away the lockdown

Whether it is his Bengaluru Bobs (dudes or machans to the rest of the world) discussing Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 'Atmanirbhar speech' — Dude 1: "Bro, he's too Hindi, no?"; Dude 2: "No, dude, we are too South Indian!" — or the expletive-spitting drunk itching for a fight with "Ey, who are you calling low-caste?" only to be smacked down by his wife with an acerbic "Bewarsi kudka (drunk lout), it's not low-caste, it's locusts", Bengaluru comedian Danish Sait's very 'South of the Vindhyas' characters are always ready with a tickle-worthy response to all of the world's problems.

What began during lockdown 1.0 (as time is measured these days) as an improv project because "all the phone conversations were anyway about the same thing", Sait's one-minute videos and their zany cast of characters (all played by him) now have a cult following on social media. The rib-tickling sketches are eagerly anticipated after any major news break — whether it's the 'sonic boom' from a recent Air Force sortie that rattled Bengaluru or the higher tax on parotta or the #BlackLivesMatter protests in the US.

His characters are quintessentially 'Bengaluru' and, just like the city, they speak multiple languages including Dakhni, Kannada, Tamil and English. Despite the strongly local flavour, the improvs have found a pan-Indian following, including celebrities and even the odd politician among them. When former Jammu and Kashmir chief minister Omar Abdullah, who was recently released from a seven-months-long preventive detention, alluded to Sait's comic take on Modi's 8 pm national addresses, Sait tweeted back, "Sir! You are the original lockdown star."

A cross-section of society battling the Covid-19 blues is eagerly lapping up the laughs. “After a long day at the hospital, the videos always act as a stress-buster,” a doctor commented on Twitter. A journalist battling depression had commented, “Danish, battling mental aberrations was never easy. You make me want to believe in the theory that life isn’t so bad, da. I watch you every day. And feel my spirits lifting.”

For Sait, who was earlier diagnosed with clinical depression, the improvs were an unexpected success but making people laugh has always been high on his agenda. “It makes me happy that I get to give people the gift of laughter while doing what I love,” he says, adding, “I feel that the end result of a lot of things people want to achieve, such as a good job or anything like that, is to feel happy and smile. So, in a sense, I am getting to the end result without the process.”

Sibi Arasu is an independent journalist based in Bengaluru

In early May, a group of children’s writers came together using the hashtag #Thodareadingcorona (the brainchild of author Roopal Rashomani Kewalya) and treated children to live storytelling sessions on Instagram. This proved to be a treat for kids holed up at home, what with schools shuttered and their parents busy working from home.

Other do-gooders sought to provide human connection for those starved of it. The medics at a Covid-19 care centre in the Miao sub-division of Arunachal Pradesh’s Changlang district, decided to pin their photos on their PPE suits. They realised that it can be frightening for patients who cannot see a human face behind the mask or feel the warmth of touch, especially when they are dying. The photos helped put a human face to the voice that asked after them each day.

Kindness is infectious, too. A rickshaw puller who had received ₹3,000 as relief aid from Subramaniam’s team, distributed the amount to five others who were struggling to make ends meet. We mistake the needy for always wanting, but the reality will surprise us, Subramaniam says.

It is worth recollecting the words of the Palestinian-American poet, Naomi Shihab Nye, who wrote Kindness in 1958:

“Before you know what kindness really is

you must lose things,

feel the future dissolve in a moment

like salt in a weakened broth...

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore.”

It makes even more sense during a pandemic.

From migrant to migrant

Michelin chef Vikas Khanna experimented with khichdi recipes on his Manhattan rooftop before rolling out his mammoth Feed India drive



Caring star: Khanna has fed over 14 million people through his drive

It is past midnight in Manhattan when Chef Vikas Khanna sits down with a mug of steaming coffee for a phone interview with BLink. “Ever since I started Feed India, my body clock is fully aligned to India time. I’m awake through the night to coordinate relief deliveries,” says the Michelin star chef, whose restaurant Junoon in Manhattan has a three-month waitlist. Feed India is Khanna’s mammoth effort, launched on April 1, to provide cooked meals and dry rations to those hungry and stranded during the lockdown. This week, with a 3,000-kilo bulk delivery at Varanasi’s Annapurna mandir, Khanna has fed a whopping 14 million people.

In late March, when he saw the first news reports of migrants walking back home to their villages, it reminded him of his own early days in the US. He was a poor student living in Queens in the early 2000s. With just \$3 in his pocket, he had set out for his first day on a new job at a local deli. The deli was closed that day and he hadn’t been informed. He had to walk back a long way, cold and hungry. “To me, walking is rejection. It just killed me when I saw them walking,” he says.

He used his social media handles to identify the routes taken by the migrants. Apart from his own funds, he leveraged his “social media currency” to draw support from several big food brands, which agreed to pitch in with bulk supplies. The National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) agreed to use its resources and manpower to take Khanna’s food to the hungry. Where the NDRF didn’t have a presence, grassroots NGOs helped.

Being a chef, Khanna was particular about what would be served. He wanted to be sure the cooked food would taste fresh given India’s brutal summer. So on his terrace in Manhattan he began to experiment with various rice preparations — khichdi, masala rice, bisibele bhat and more. He kept each one wrapped in woollen blankets under the hot sun to simulate the Indian summer. “The bisibele bhat lasts fresh for eight hours,” he says. Many experiments later, through varying combinations of ingredients, he came up with the perfect khichdi that would stay fresh overnight. This would be served with pooris, stuffed chilli pickle and juice or mineral water. He has also delivered soaps, sanitary pads, shoes and other essentials.

There were days when Khanna would wake up to nearly 1,000 emails asking for help. At one time, he had a team of 1,000 on the highway managing food distributions for 80,000 people at a go. “The experience has taught us how to think on our feet,” he says, recalling how he has delivered food on highways, inside Shramik Special trains for returning migrant workers (delivering within 3.5 hours after being alerted that the workers had no food to eat), and in interior parts of rural Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra where the returning migrants, quarantined in government schools, have no food to eat.

The most gratifying of all, for him, has been delivering food to leprosy colonies, which suffer so much social stigma that relief doesn’t reach even during a pandemic. A woman in a Hyderabad leprosy colony insisted on talking to him over a video chat. “She said in Telugu, ‘only two things reach our colony: sunlight and you’. I cried that day,” he says.

Will Khanna wrap up his drive, now that we are in the Unlock 1.0 phase? “I don’t have the guts to. I can’t stop now,” he says.