

Stories of Hope from India, during Second Wave of Covid-19

by Nikhil Sachan

Hope is a word that breathes. A word that lives in itself. It's the most powerful force on earth. That's why I love to talk about stories of hope. Let me quote my favorite poem about hope, written by Emily Dickinson —

“Hope” is the thing with feathers —

That perches in the soul —

And sings the tune without the words —

And never stops — at all —

When we talk about Covid-19, it becomes very difficult to sing happy tunes of hope. But that is probably the most beautiful thing about hope. With hope, you can see light in the darkest of times.

On January 11, 2020, the first Covid-19 death was reported in China. As I write this piece (as of September, 2021), the world Covid-19 death toll stands at 45 lakh (4.5 million), and 21.6 crore (216 million) people are reportedly infected with this disease. India has been one of the worst affected countries, our official tally of infections is 3.27 crore (32.70 million). Of these 440,000 people died. This is the official figure, unofficial figures put the death toll much higher, with some sources saying it could be as much as 10 or 20 times more.

During the second wave of Covid-19 in India, a major reason for the high number of deaths was the acute shortage of oxygen. There was an unprecedented surge in demand of medical oxygen during the second wave – the demand in the country peaked to nearly 9,000 MT as compared to 3,095 MT during the first wave – and the authorities were not prepared for this.

Today, I want to talk about the stories of how my countrypeople stood up for each other and helped their friends, family (and even strangers), when the country was gasping to breathe.

My first story is from a small town Hamirpur, where I was born in 1986. This small town is situated at the *sangam* (confluence) of two rivers – Yamuna and Betwa. I have fond memories of this place. When Covid's second wave happened, Hamirpur bore the brunt of it. There was a severe oxygen shortage, but then a few good people stepped in to help.

A businessman in this town decided to refill oxygen cylinders for just one rupee so that Covid patients could get the treatment they need.

As Covid-19 cases continued to surge in the state of Uttar Pradesh, there was similarly an extreme shortage of oxygen cylinders. The available ones were being sold at prices as high as Rs 50,000-100,000 in the black market.

Manoj Gupta, the owner of Rimjhim Ispat Factory in Sumerpur Industrial Area in Hamirpur, decided to refill oxygen cylinders at a cost of one rupee to help in the treatment of Covid patients.

Gupta refilled over 1,000 oxygen cylinders in his bottling plants and saved the lives of hundreds of Covid patients. People from nearby towns and districts — Jhansi, Banda, Lalitpur, Kanpur, Orai, and several other districts — made a beeline at his oxygen bottling plant to get a refill for a single rupee.

Manoj Gupta had contracted the viral infection a year back, during the first wave of Covid-19 and he knew the pain of it. He knew how a person feels when they gasp for a breath.

He says, "I have experienced the suffering because I have gone through a similar experience. My bottling plant has a capacity of refilling 1,000 oxygen cylinders per day and I am giving the refilled cylinders at one rupee to all."

Some would say that he was resourceful and he was just being a businessman but the flagbearers of hope do not depend on resources. Just sheer willpower helped him and others like him to believe that they can help their countrypeople.

WhatsApp, Facebook, and Telegram became very helpful tools during the pandemic. Within a few days, there were thousands of groups on these social

media channels where you could ask for a lead for an oxygen cylinder and within seconds you would receive hundreds of responses.

Let me share another story.

An auto-rickshaw driver in Ranchi in Bihar decided to offer free rides to people who need to go to hospitals.

Amid the gloom over the rising coronavirus infections, an auto driver in Ranchi decided to lead by example, emerging as a ray of hope for people facing a medical emergency. In April and May of 2021 it was becoming extremely difficult for those who needed to get to hospitals to get an ambulance.

Ravi Agarwal, who drives an auto-rickshaw, decided to offer free rides to people. At this time most other such drivers were either reluctant or refusing to take passengers to hospitals for fear of contracting the disease.

In an interview, Agarwal said that he had been running the service since April 15. "There was a woman who needed to go to Rajendra Institute of Medical Sciences (RIMS). No auto driver was ready to take her there out of fear. She was ready to pay whatever money was being demanded. I offered to take her and dropped her near the trauma centre there. I don't know if she was a Covid patient or not, but I declined to accept the money she offered. When I was returning, I realized that many people like her are being denied transport services because of the fear of Covid."

Isn't this an inspiring story? A man from the bottom of the pyramid, struggling for his daily wages and food, emerged as a superhero. And there were many men like him, who didn't bat an eyelid when it came to helping people.

This is another favorite story of mine, which greatly inspired me.

A man from Bokaro in Jharkhand drove 1,400 km to Noida in Uttar Pradesh with a gas-filled cylinder to save his friend's life.

Answering an SOS call from the family of a Covid affected friend in Noida who wasn't getting oxygen support, a 38-year-old schoolteacher from Jharkhand's Bokaro drove 1,400km through three states in 24 hours with a gas-filled cylinder to save the man's life.

It wasn't easy to fetch an oxygen cylinder in Bokaro. Devendra visited several oxygen plants and suppliers in the steel city, but they all said he would have to provide an empty cylinder for them to refill. And this he did not have. In a last-ditch attempt, he used a contact to reach out to the operator of Jharkhand Steel Oxygen Plant in the Balidih industrial area. The technician agreed to give him a full cylinder against a security deposit.

Devendra then began his journey at 1.30 pm on Sunday, with a full oxygen cylinder in his car, he travelled 1,400 km through three states in 24 hours, and reached his friend Ranjan Aggarwal, who works in an IT firm in Delhi.



Illustration: Samia Singh

There were a few bureaucrats also who led by example. Some were instrumental in setting up models for fighting with Covid. Some were instrumental in setting up oxygen plants.

Dr. Rajendra Bharud, the District Collector of Nandurbar in Maharashtra didn't want to depend on anyone, so used his officially allocated funds to set up liquid oxygen plants.

The tribal district of Nandurbar in Maharashtra did not have a single liquid oxygen plant or tank before the Covid-19 outbreak last year. In September 2020, when there was a steady fall in the cases, Nandurbar District Collector Dr. Rajendra Bharud set up a liquid oxygen plant at the district hospital for Rs 85 lakhs. In January and February this year, he set up two more such plants, following which the capacity of oxygen plants in the district increased to 2,400 litres per minute.

He said, "I believed that a time could come when there could be a desperate need for oxygen and so we set up a plant with a capacity of 600 litres per minute when there weren't many cases and we had time on our hands".

When the second wave hit Maharashtra, the tribal district reported as many as 1,200 cases in 24 hours. At present, with his proactive effort, the total oxygen capacity in the district is 1,800 litres per minute and by adding 1,200 litres per minute from private oxygen producers and in-house resources, the capacity will reach 3,000 litres per minute. The cost of each plant came to Rs 85 lakhs.

"We utilized the funds from the district planning and development and the state disaster relief fund because the point is to not let a single person die because of the want of oxygen," he said.

A lot of communities also came forward during this pandemic. Especially the Sikhs in India, who are known for helping everyone, regardless of their religion, caste, and gender.

In Sikhism, a 'langar' is the community kitchen of a gurdwara, which serves food to anyone and everyone free of charge, regardless of creed, colour, caste, gender,

economic status, or ethnicity. People sit on the floor and eat together, and the kitchen is maintained and serviced by community volunteers.

Following that tradition, the Sikh temple (gurudwara) in Indirapuram in Delhi started a free ‘oxygen langar’, for Covid patients.

It was a unique initiative, nothing like this had happened earlier.

Amid SOS calls and messages for oxygen cylinders and concentrators flooding social media platforms, the Shri Guru Singh Sabha Gurdwara in Ghaziabad’s Indirapuram along with an NGO, Khalsa Help International, opened this unique langar to supply oxygen in its premises to Covid-19 patients till such time as they were able to find a hospital bed or home isolation patients whose saturation levels had dropped.

The volunteers also launched a helpline number for people to call and book oxygen cylinders. The roots of such community kitchens and volunteer-run charitable feeding are very old in Indian tradition and in the religions of this country. I’ve described the Sikh tradition above. In Hinduism too, there is such a history: during the Gupta period, from the early 4th to the late 6th century CE, the rulers had ensured that kitchens and almshouses called dharma-shala (today dharamshala) were set up to feed travellers and the poor for free.

The gurudwara’s oxygen langar was able to save around 1,000 lives and they inspired other gurudwaras in the country to open up similar langars. Soon there were many such examples.

There are countless such stories of compassion, hope, empathy, and love. I have seen people of my country stand up for each other during the most difficult times of this pandemic.

There was a 31-year-old man, Shahnawaz, from Mumbai who sold his SUV, Ford Endeavor worth 2.2 million rupees (2,200,000) to raise money to buy oxygen cylinders for those in need.

He was able to procure 160 of them and started working to help people.

Then there is the story of 22-year-old Ravali Thikka in Hyderabad, who travelled for more than two hours to donate blood to a woman who was nine-months pregnant.

The outbreak brought the best out in some people. During this time of “social distancing” people came closer to each other. Health care workers put in extra hours to take care of people when they were sick. They found more ways to meet with patients online so that everyone could feel safe. Teachers and schools quickly put lessons online so students could keep learning.

Pretty much everywhere you look around the world and here at home, you can find examples of people responding to this health emergency with kindness and hope.

Together, we engaged in an impressive act of community service.

That’s pretty powerful. Isn’t it?

As I said, Hope is a word that breathes. A word that lives in itself. It’s the most powerful force on earth.