













SENTINELS OF THE SOIL

A tribute to Frontline and Healthcare Workers in India's fight against COVID-19















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India's COVID-19 fight is people-driven and gets great strength from our COVID warriors. The biggest lesson from the pandemic is that for humanity and the human cause, nations need to work together and move ahead together. Right from the beginning of the pandemic, India has been committed to sharing all our experiences, expertise and resources with the global community in this battle. Guided by the approach of 'One Earth, One Health', humanity will certainly overcome this pandemic.

> Shri Narendra Modi Hon'ble Prime Minister of India



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Message

2020 and 2021 have been challenging years for all. The unforeseen events that accompanied the global pandemic caught everyone by surprise. India too had a fair share of challenges. At that point of time it was the people from different walks of life who emerged from all corners of the country and rallied behind the Government to combat the pandemic. These were India's brave hearts!

I feel privileged to pay tribute to these Frontline Workers and Healthcare Workers who through their spirit of service at this critical time have earned the title of 'COVID Warriors'. Their selfless and tireless efforts contributed in a big way in the successful management of COVID-19. This photobook will offer the reader a glimpse of the sheer grit and bravado of these COVID warriors that led them to accomplish extraordinary tasks.

On the release of this photobook, I express my deepest gratitude to the Hon'ble Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi for his visionary leadership and for steering the country through these troubled times, for being the beacon of hope and courage and for inspiring millions of COVID warriors from taking on the battle from the front. I am sure the readers will find this photobook a compelling read about the battle waged bravely by our COVID warriors.

Mansukh Mandaviya

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Message

The outbreak of the global pandemic in early 2020 took the world by surprise. Covid-19 was a new disease of which little was known and humanity was totally unprepared to deal with it. At such a time even with risk to their lives several people across the country rallied behind the Government to combat the pandemic.

It gives me great happiness to know that the Ministry has with the support of UNICEF captured the stories of these brave people from across India. Indeed, these stories offer a glimpse of the lives of simple folks who rose to the occasion when the nation needed them the most. Often when the going gets tough, the tough get going and these stories embody this spirit. It is indeed endearing how such simple people, despite challenging circumstances, came up with such innovative ideas to spread awareness or lend a helping hand during the pandemic.

Hon'ble Prime Minister of India Shri Narendra Modi led the battle against COVID-19 from the front. It was his zeal and his commitment to protect the people that inspired countless corona warriors to join in the service of humanity. I offer my deepest respect to the collective spirit of humanism displayed by our corona warriors. I believe on reading this book the readers will be equally inspired to hold them in the highest regard.

Dr. Bharati Pravin Pawar

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Foreword

India responded to the COVID-19 pandemic in a proactive & pre-emptive manner. While the response was steered by the Government, it was a collective and collaborative response. India's Healthcare Workers and Frontline Workers like the Doctors, Nurses, Community Health Workers, Sanitation Workers, Police, Volunteers, Ambulance Drivers among many others valiantly stood behind the Government in the hour of the country's crisis.

The Frontline Workers are a critical link in India's response to COVID-19. From providing COVID care services, to counselling and motivating the patients, ferrying patients, sharing factual information with their communities, to being the face of the vaccination drive and carrying it to the last mile and battling vaccine hesitancy - the Frontline Workers are the ones who have sustained the recovery process.

While the individuals whose stories are captured in this book are unique to the Indian context, I am confident that these stories will inspire people globally. It is the self-belief and zeal of the Frontline Workers that lends credence to the words "We shall overcome!"

I acknowledge the contribution of the Ministry's IEC team and UNICEF India in bringing out this photobook. I believe this effort will document the great sacrifice made by the Healthcare and Frontline Workers and bring for them the applause that they truly deserve.





When the global COVID-19 pandemic broke out in early 2020, it was nothing short of an apocalypse, throwing every semblance of human life on earth into a tizzy. At such a time when the world was still grappling with the impact of the new Virus, there arose from amongst the ordinary people, a phalanx of samaritans who staked their all and went out each day, quietly going about their duties, to save us from

people as they joined the country's efforts in fighting the pandemic.

This Photobook is a tribute to that ambulance driver, who without waiting for the last rites of his loved ones to be completed, rushed to resume his duties. He knew that every minute behind the wheels could mean another life saved. The sirens heard round the clock at the peak of the pandemic were like lifelines running across the streets. The photo book pays respect to that lab technician, who collected throat and nasal swabs day in and day out, knowing fully well the risk of



infection to him and his family. The book salutes the Doctor and his healthcare team who as in charge of a Community Health Centre in a remote tribal area, worked tirelessly to overcome the entrenched hesitancy against vaccination in his community, so that science could prevail over superstition. The book celebrates the young volunteers—'Sathiyas' (friends) of Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram for finding ingenious new ways to bust myths and for taking the lead in making their community understand the importance of vaccination in keeping them safe from the pandemic. They proved yet again that children

can become the harbingers of a new awakening. This book applauds India's Frontline and Community Health Workers, who transcended their call of duty, reaching hitherto unreached and far-flung terrains with the spirit of not leaving anyone behind.

India's battle against COVID-19 is indeed a story of such sentinels whose images will remain etched in our minds for eons to come. The book pays tribute to the COVID-19 heroes whose groundswell of support at that critical juncture has become a national legend.





The Government of India steered COVID response efforts on a "mission mode".

Jan Andolan – a mass campaign launched by India's Prime Minister, Shri Narendra

Modi, placed enhanced focus on making India's response a "People or Community-led movement". His clarion call imbued every Indian to face the pandemic head-on.

The first story is of young volunteers who realized that if their community had to be saved from the pandemic, they would have to generate greater awareness among the community. Racing against time, these volunteers thought of unique ways to articulate the importance of the COVID-19 vaccination.





Even as the largest vaccination drive gained pace across the country, there was no time to lose. Harshali and her colleagues had a challenging task to accomplish if their community had to be kept safe from COVID-19. The team decided to go door-to-door and talk to each resident of the community to address their apprehensions regarding vaccination.





Harshali and her young brigade seek every opportunity to meet members of the community. Here, her colleague and she are seen acquainting one such member on the necessity to observe COVID appropriate behaviour to keep safe, viz wearing a mask, maintaining physical distance and regularly sanitizing hands.



"We had to convince people in ways they understood", said Harshali. "So we adopted a customary tradition practised to invite community members to weddings in which a mixture of rice and turmeric is placed at the door of the guest. Instead, we placed the mixture of rice and turmeric at the door of eligible beneficiaries as an invitation to come for COVID-19 vaccination", said Harshali.





"People were pleasantly piqued and they agreed to come for the vaccination", said Harshali.



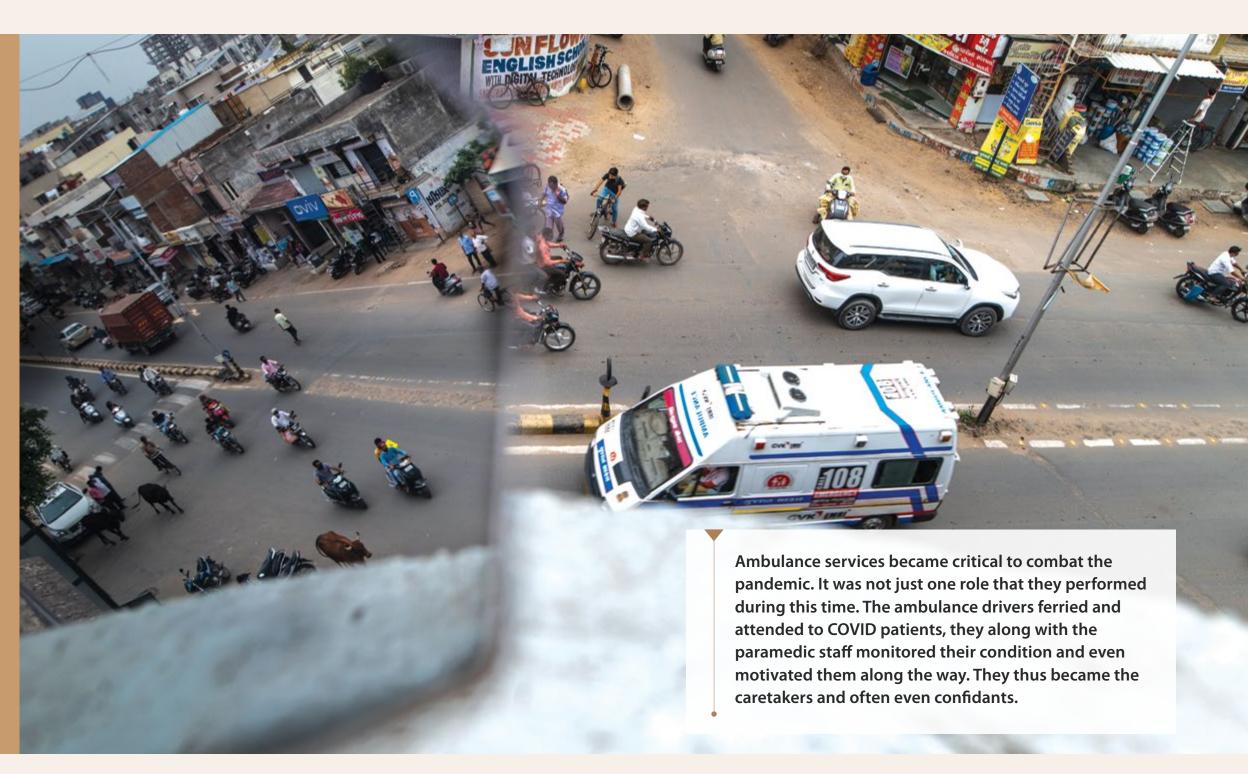






The Government of India's COVID-19 response efforts were supported by a competent fleet of Frontline Workers, which included among others the ubiquitous ambulance drivers even as they supported the country's emergency medical services 24x7, during these unprecedented times.

As thousands of ambulances were pressed into service, they often became the face of a responsive system that successfully reached out to multitudes during the pandemic.







"There were non-stop calls for help", recalls Pravin when talking about the patient load during the pandemic.



Nisar Malik, another ambulance driver from Gujarat reminiscences how families handed over their loved ones with choked voices. It was such moments that made him realize the significance of his profession.







Miles and miles were covered even as the streets echoed the sound of sirens during the pandemic. Indeed, without these ambulance drivers behind the wheels, the reach to critical care would have been longer for most.





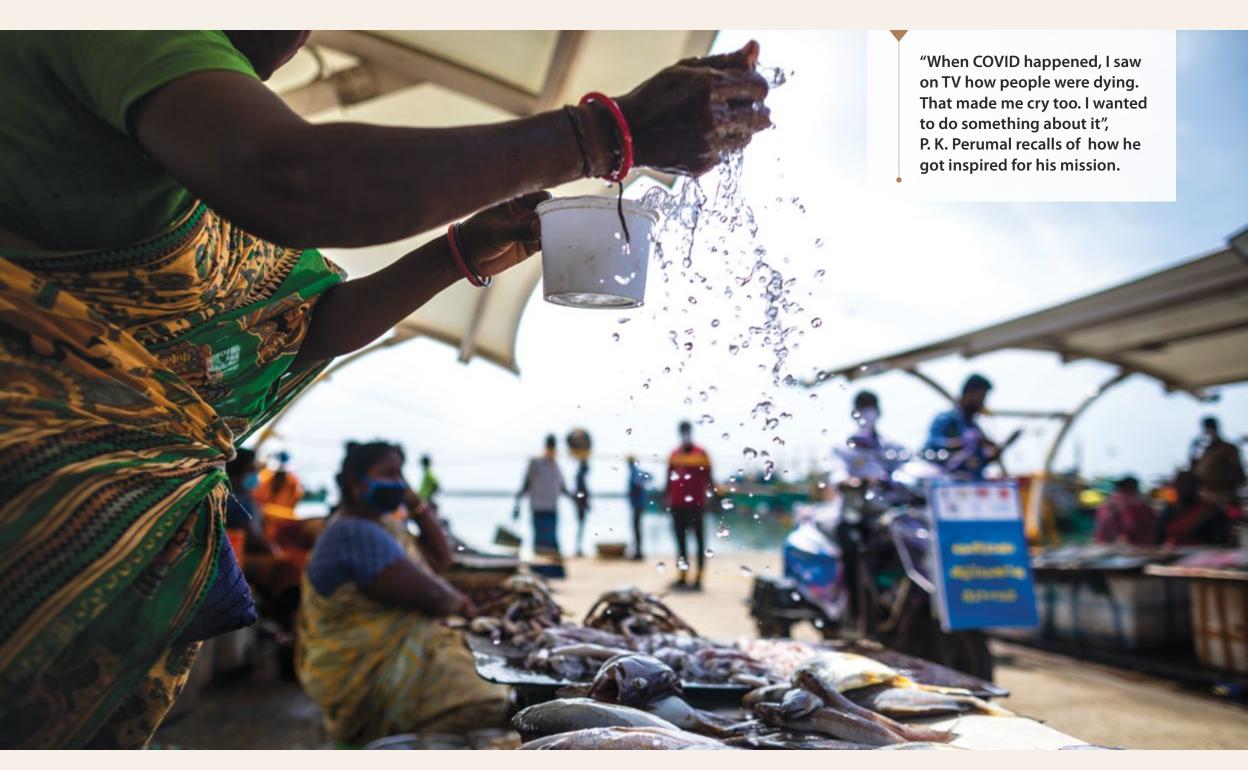




With the opening up of commercial activities post the first lockdown in 2020, a Chennai resident is concerned about the spread of the virus. He takes it upon himself to spread awareness about COVID Appropriate Behaviour. Taking inspiration from what he watches on T.V. he decides to do what he can in the best way he can to save lives. This despite all his personal challenges. The third story is not only of the indomitable spirit of P. K. Perumal but also of his ingenuity in utilizing his tools to reach out.

India gave rise to many such Perumals – fearless, compassionate and determined to be of help to their community during the pandemic. Their contributions are indeed commendable.







Perumal took to the busy markets of Chennai on his customized two wheeler fitted with loudspeaker and mic, cautioning people against the virus.



Right from delivering medicines to the ill, to groceries at people's doorsteps, P. K. Perumal did all to support his community members. He exults as he talks about his experiences and how he never charged for his petrol expenses.

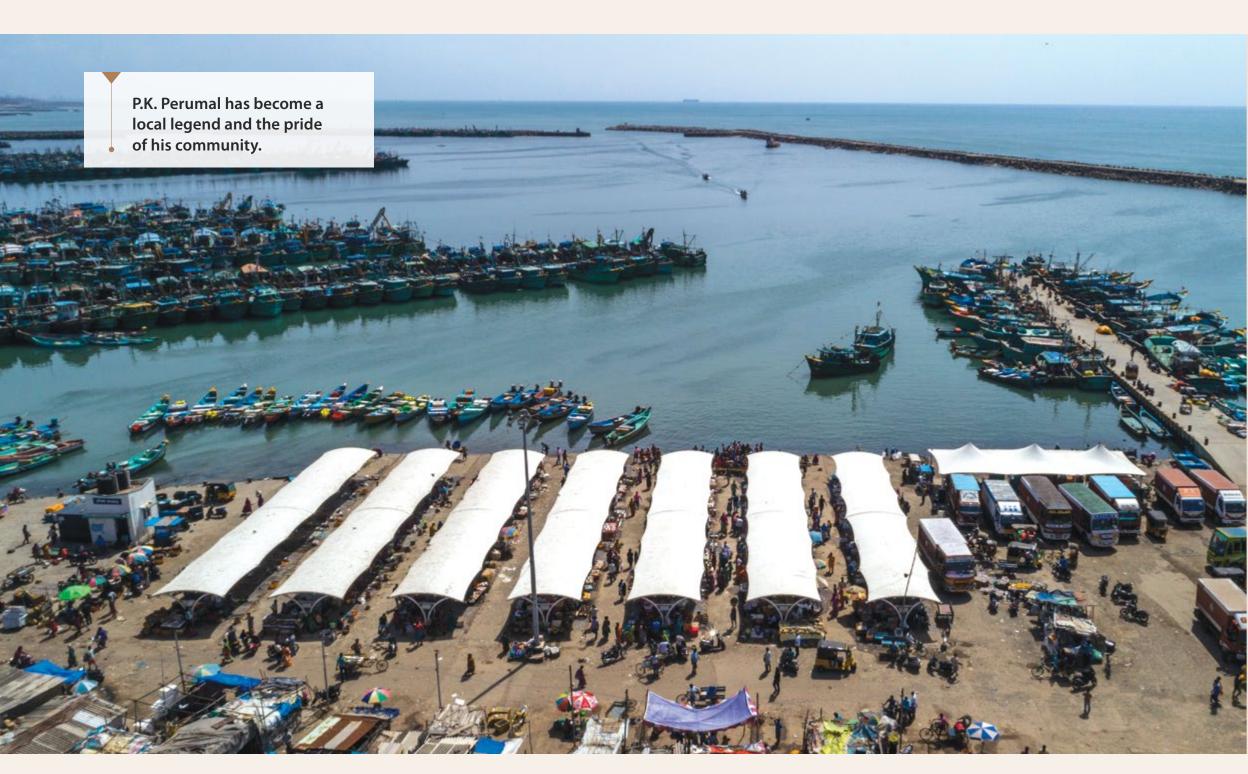




P. Sveta, his daughter recalls with pride how he would leave early in the mornings and return by 3 pm. As soon as Perumal reached home, he would wash his hands, feet and face. He would then plan for the next day in the night itself.









Ever since the COVID-19 pandemic hit the country, doctors have led from the front, with tremendous professionalism and alacrity. At a time when people were being advised to stay indoors, doctors, despite the risk to their lives, showed courage to carry out their duties. They have shown remarkable fortitude throughout the pandemic and continue to be symbols of hope, resilience and a never-say-die attitude. From attending to patients without a break, to providing online consultation services for the last mile, the doctors ensured 24 x 7 care for COVID patients in their quest to save lives.

The fourth story in the series celebrates the doctors for their role and shows how dressed in their PPE kits they became synonymous with hope in these dire times.





"In the month of April, during the second wave of the pandemic, we sometimes had to be on duty continuously for multiple shifts, without having anyone to relieve us", recalls Dr. Devashish as he mulls over the intensity of the pandemic.



"When life gets tough, the tough get going", recalls Dr. Desai with a smile. "It was essential to maintain some semblance of discipline in personal routine so that one could withstand the long haul in the hospitals."

"As medical students we read about how devastating the pandemics in the past were. I never thought I would be living through one myself, and so soon in my career", says Dr. Desai.

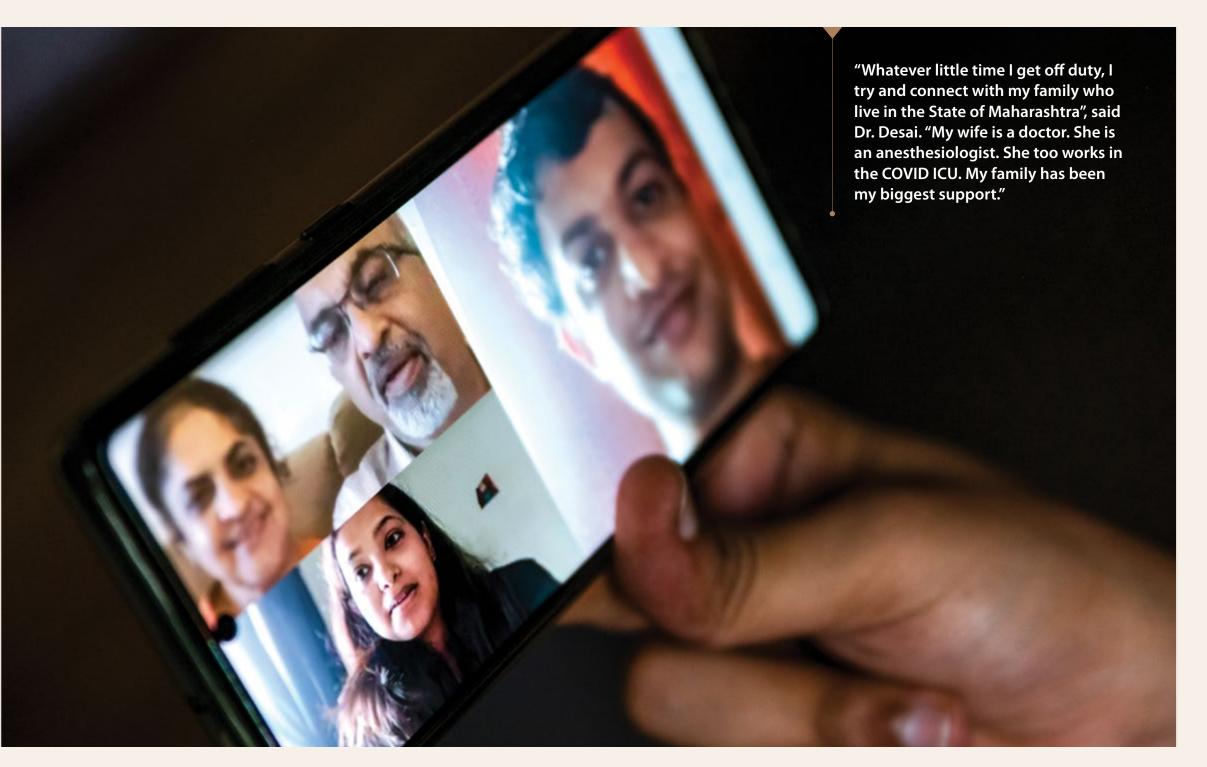


"I am astonished when I see people without masks, organising big gatherings. Do they not know how devastating their complacency and carelessness can be for them and their families", says Desai, who himself has painstakingly followed COVID Appropriate Behaviour for over a year now. "Please don't let your guard down even for a moment and get yourself vaccinated", he appeals to people.









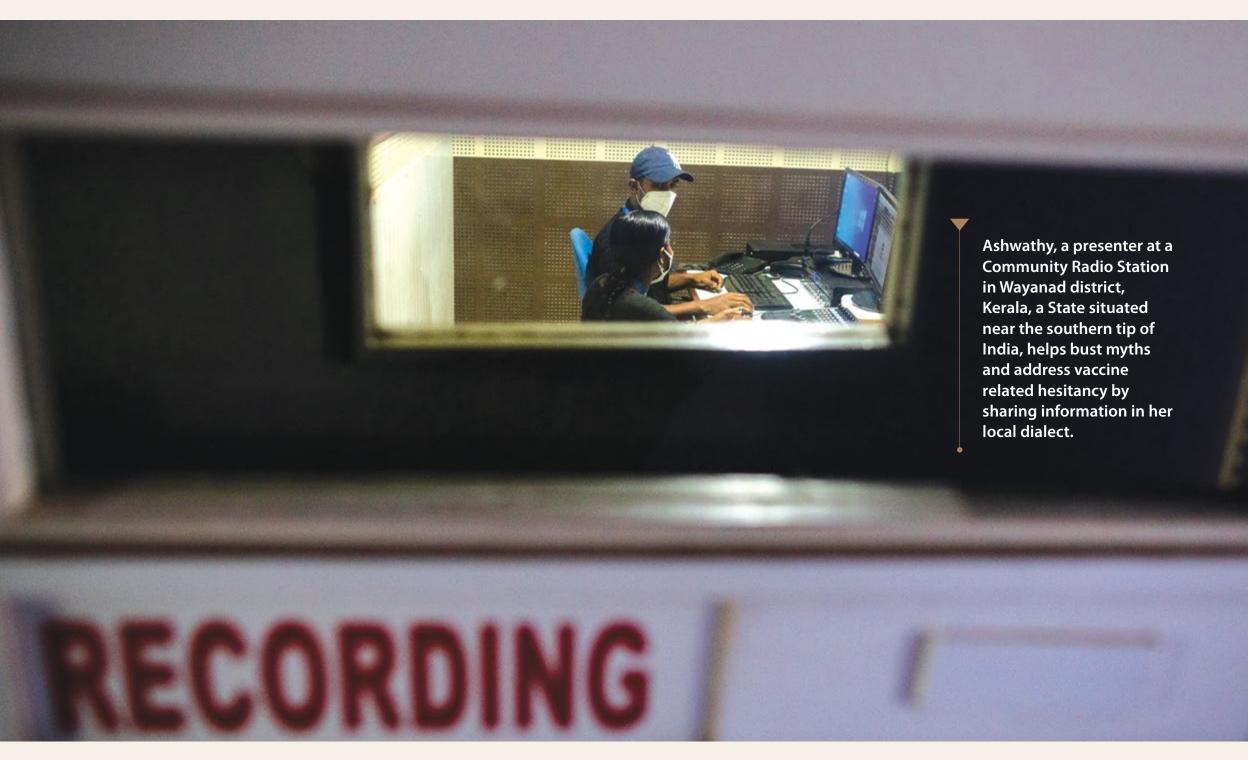




During the pandemic one of the most critical aspects was to reach factual information on real-time basis to people. This especially posed a challenge given the country's vast topographical diversity. The Community Radio Stations played a significant role in reaching correct information to people at a time when they were mostly confined to their homes.

The fifth story is of Ashwathy Murali, the perky radio jockey from **Radio Mattoli**, Kerala, who enthused the villagers to take the COVID-19 vaccination and walked the talk by being the first to do so herself.







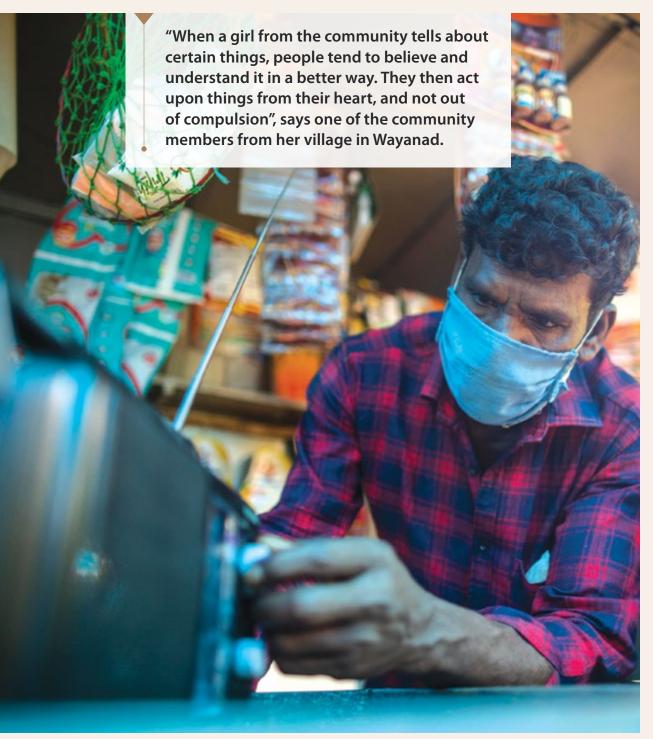


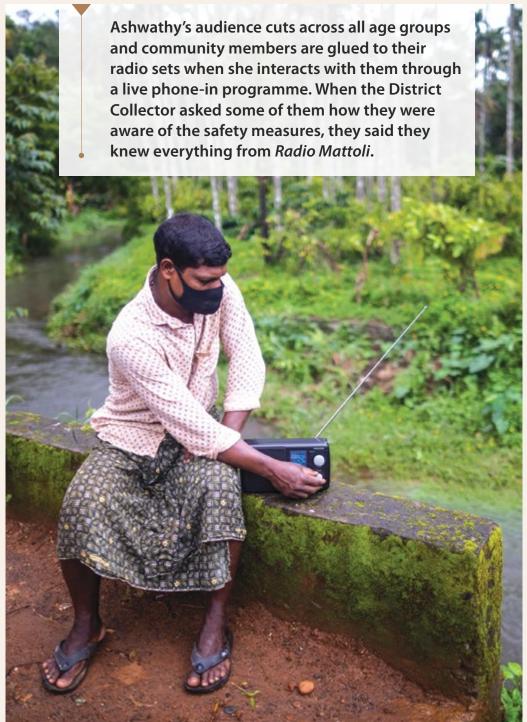
"I used to hear the radio since I was in eighth standard. I always liked Radio more than TV. During the pandemic, I listened to programmes that featured doctors. Since they were in English, I wrote down everything they said. Then I translated with the help of Google in a way I could understand, and finally into Paniya language", says Ashwathy recalling her experience.





"Though often I had to burn the midnight oil, it was all worth it when I was able to address the queries from the community. Every person vaccinated gave me a sense of personal triumph", she says.









The Government of India launched the largest vaccine drive in the world on 16th January 2021, to combat the pandemic. The drive was scaled-up in phases and first covered the Healthcare Workers and Frontline Workers who were most at risk from the pandemic. The challenge was not only demographic but was also in terms of reaching the vaccination across the country, across varied topographies and many a times to hitherto unreached areas. The credit goes to the team of Healthcare Workers who took it upon themselves to ensure that everyone was covered. It was not an easy task as deep rooted hesitancy had to be overcome and rampant myths about vaccination had to be countered.

The sixth story of India's COVID warriors is one such story of a team of Community Healthcare Workers covering miles and miles across hills and rivers, to reach remote communities and ensuring that no one was left behind in the vaccination drive.











"We went from village to village, door to door and explained to people the risk of exposure to COVID-19 disease and the benefit of vaccination. We told them that we too had taken both the doses of COVID-19 vaccine and were safe", says Dr. Maida.



Slowly, the vaccination drive picked up.

Committees were formed in villages and they started further explaining to the people how it was the best way of protection against the pandemic.

Convincing the locals to overcome their hesitancy was an exercise both of patience and reasoning.

Gradually, the word spread around.









As COVID-19 took on pandemic proportions, India had to quickly ramp-up the testing capacities. Early identification of cases, followed by isolation and treatment was integral to Government of India's "Test, Track, Treat" strategy to contain the virus from spreading rapidly. This exercise called for quick scaling up of the laboratories and training of lab personnel including technicians. As on date the country has already crossed the half billion mark of total samples tested.

The seventh story on COVID warriors pays tribute to lab technicians like Anand Singh who took on the virus, literally with their hands.







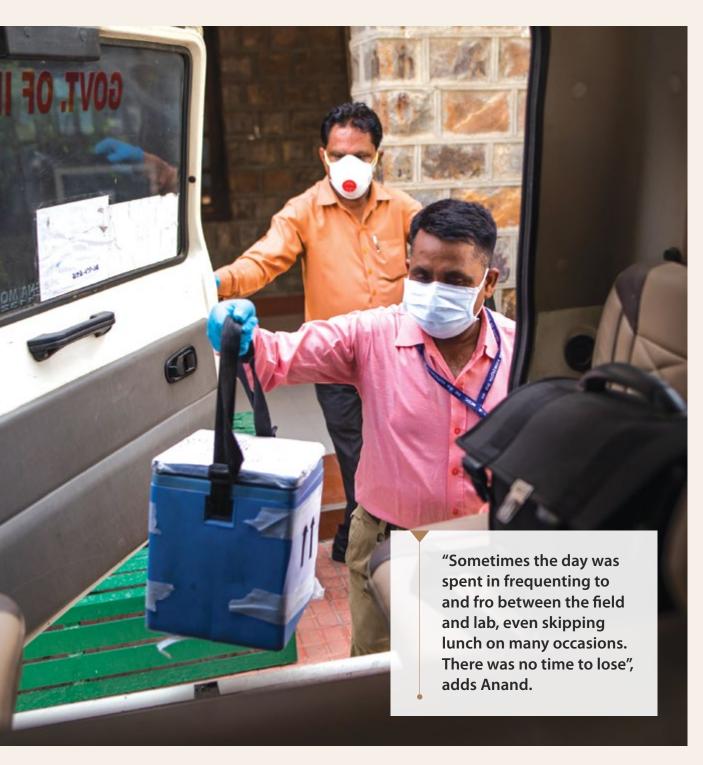
"This was a critical time for the entire country and in this hour of crisis, all health workers needed to work together and support the Government. This was the only way out", says Anand when recalling the spirit that made him go on.

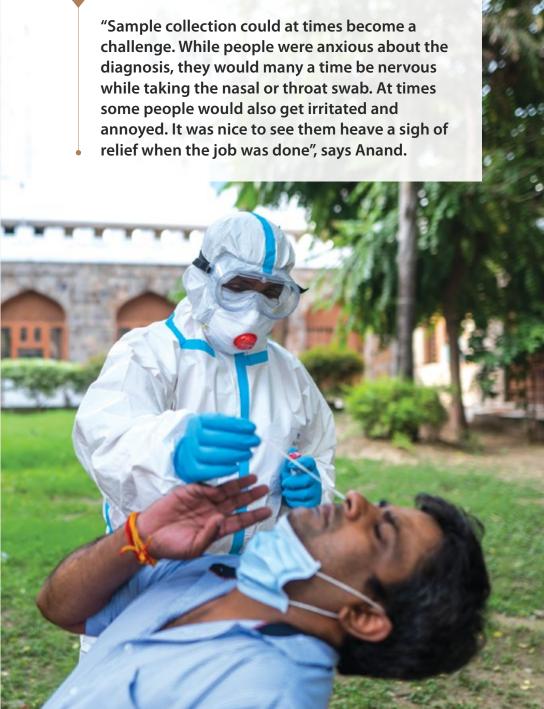


Anand and his colleagues went through intense training by the Government of India as the country braced for COVID-19. The invisible enemy had yet to show its disturbing face.

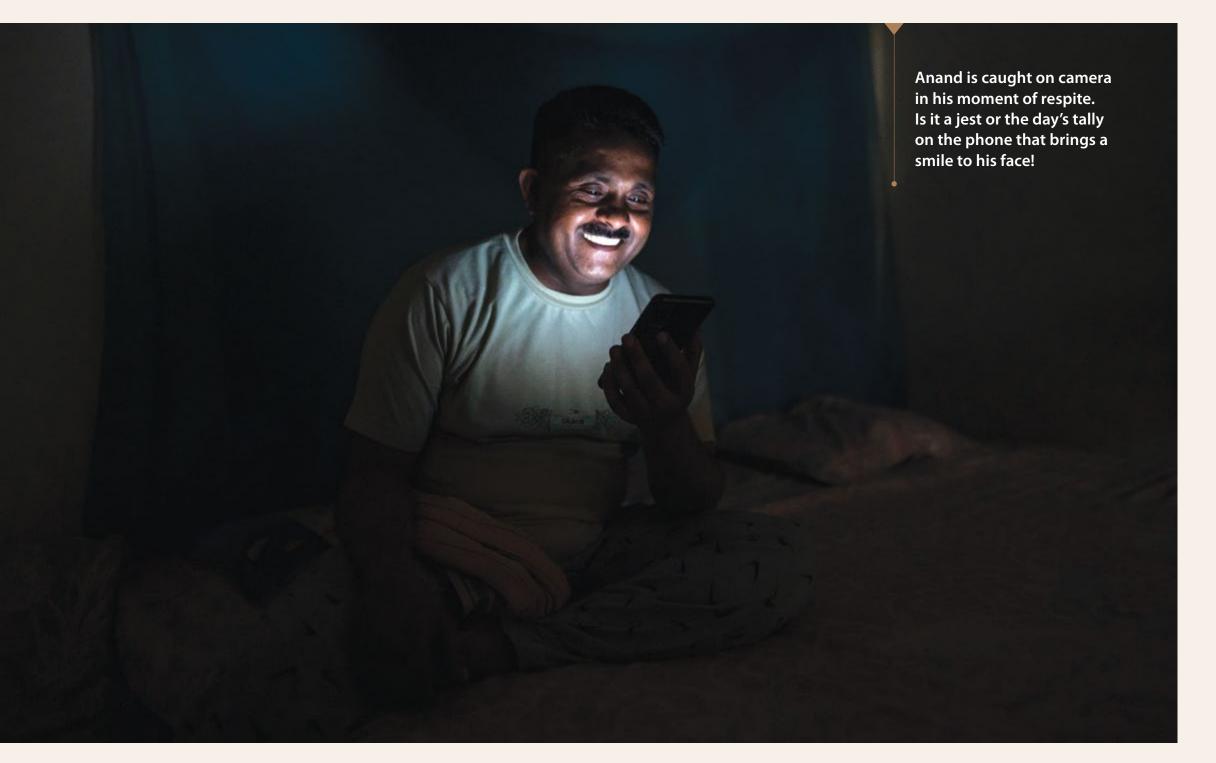


As the pandemic spread, its severity too intensified. Anand was shifted to the field, where his responsibility was to collect the samples of the suspected COVID-19 patients. It was also a test of his endurance.







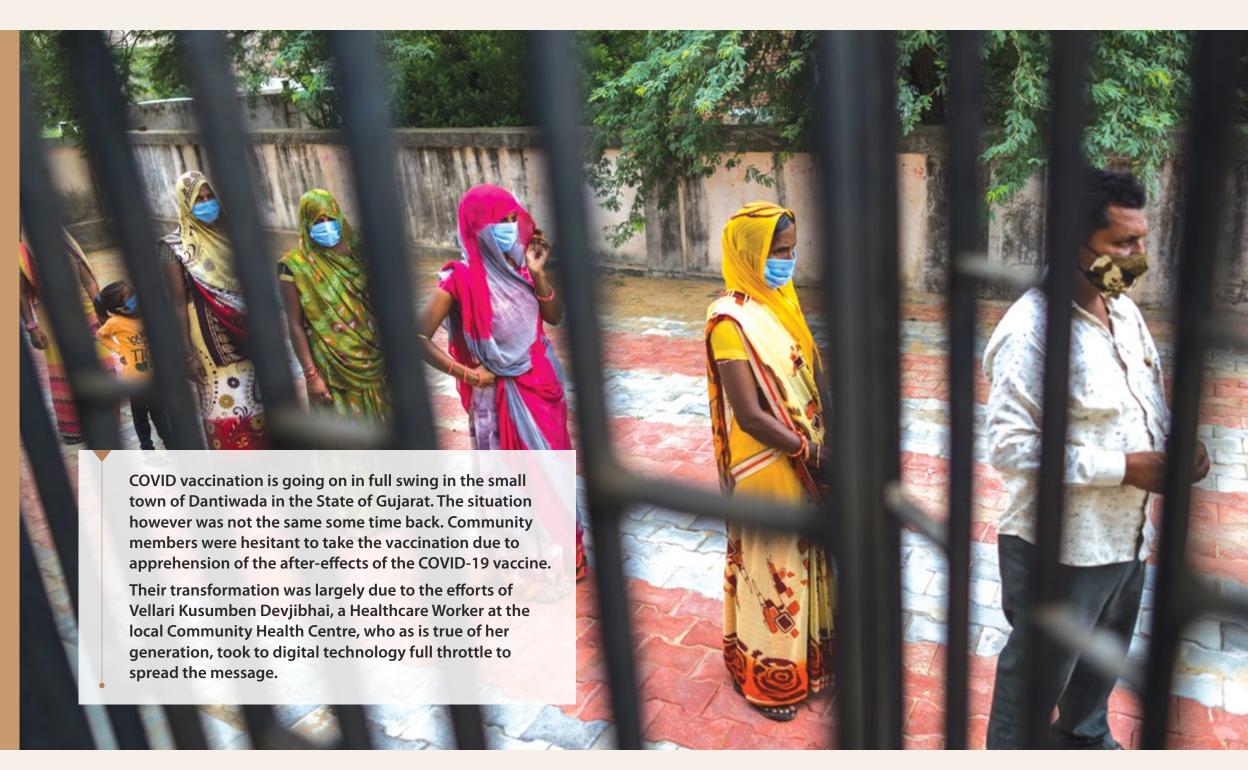






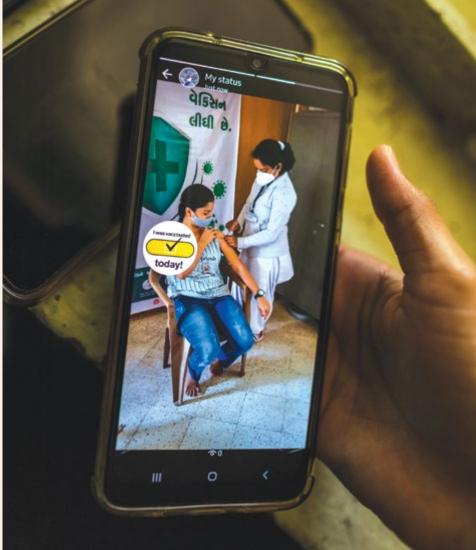
Gujarat's Dantiwada town is a glowing example of how an innovative method of leveraging digital technology provided a big push to the COVID-19 vaccination drive. This proved not only easy to use, but was the fastest way and also free of cost. Infact, the use of social media paved the way for community ownership or "Jan Bhaagidaari" which Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi had deeply desired as a means to combat COVID-19.

The last story in this series highlights how a simple idea of circulating photos of people getting vaccinated through WhatsApp instilled community trust in the vaccination process.

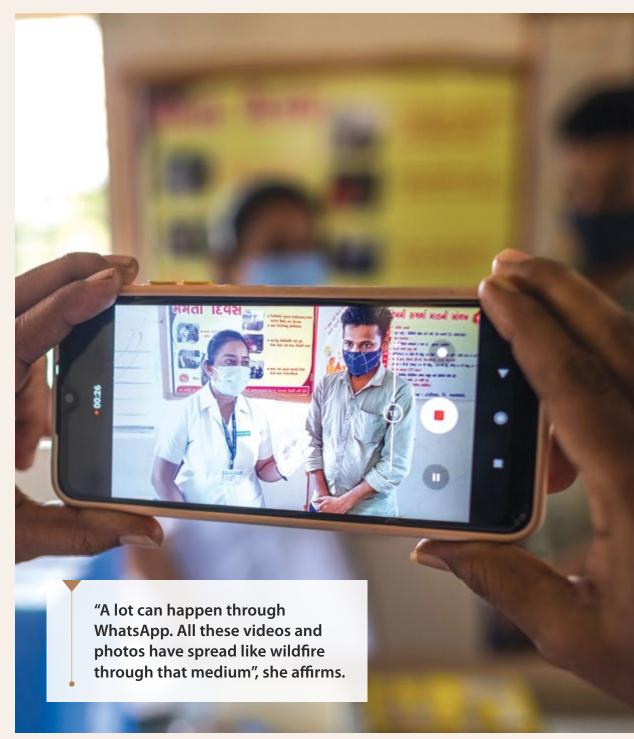




"Then I got an idea. I clicked photos of those six people on my mobile and put those photos as my WhatsApp status for others to see them. I sent these videos to my colleagues. They helped circulate the videos", she adds.





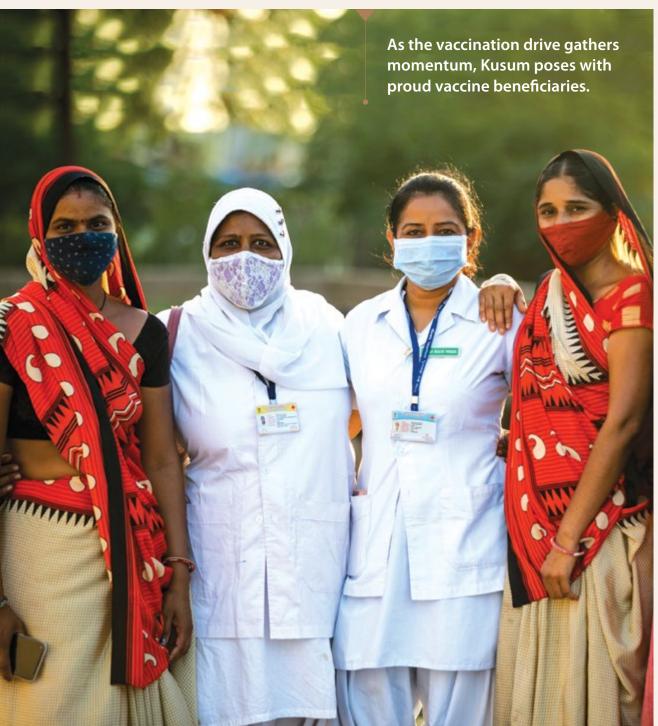






"People started turning up for vaccination in large numbers. What's amazing was the transformation from hesitancy to eagerness for the vaccines. They would even caution each other about the minor after-effects post-vaccination", she recalls.





"Now people call me up asking when can they come for their second dose", says Kusum brimming with a sense of fulfilment. "My father is very proud of me. Every time I leave for work, he asks me to be careful", she adds.



This photo book has been developed with the support of UNICEF India. **Photo Credits: UNICEF India**

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