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Present now



# The New Normal

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*- Invited for the theme of 'Reimagining the Post-Covid-19 City'*

The world has been rudely and brutally shaken and bruised by the Corona Virus. Human innovation can transform every hindrance and adverse situation into an opportunity for improvement. If we draw the right lessons, we could turn this into an opportunity.

Let me give a personal example. I live in Mumbai and was scheduled to travel to Dehradun to conduct a two hour Right to Information workshop in late March 2020. This had to be cancelled because of the lockdown. I would have been away from home for about 72 hours to conduct this workshop, and the cost of the trip would have been about twenty thousand rupees. We rescheduled it and conducted it in April by conducting a webinar. The total time spent by all the participants and me was about 125 minutes, and almost no cost was incurred. In my opinion, it was as effective as it would have been if I had gone to Dehradun. The only difference was that there were no handshakes or photographs.

Whereas earlier, the concept of working from home had been accepted in some businesses, it had been largely deemed necessary to have physical meetings and to work together in an office. People would travel halfway around the globe for a one-hour presentation. For conferences and meetings, often the time for travelling was far higher than the actual time spent in the meeting. Most of the expenses were on travelling and hotels. Even for meetings within, say, Mumbai, two hours of travel would be undertaken for a 30-minute meeting. During this Corona crisis, people are enthusiastically using various e-platforms to communicate and hold meetings.

Some courts have also adopted e-hearings but with great reluctance and only for urgent matters. Most quasi-judicial bodies like Information Commissions have treated this as a paid holiday. If they made a small change in the way their brains are wired, they would realise that if they accept e-hearings as the norm, it will save the time and effort of hundreds of hours of litigants, witnesses and lawyers. The area currently required for courts would be adequate for double the number of judges. I do not think there was much shaking of hands or backslapping in the courts and Commissions. All the proceedings could be recorded, and these would be truly open courts under the watchful eyes of a number of people who could watch live streaming. For a large number of activities, physical proximity is not required.

Cabinet meetings and significant meetings of the Prime Minister have been held with Chief Ministers and with other officials across the country. Video conferencing, meeting, and even socialising have become very well accepted. Schools have taken to the virtual classroom concept with great enthusiasm, and education experts say the response is very encouraging. In many government schools, computers were being provided to school students.

It is not being suggested that there would be no physical meetings. But it is certainly possible that these could be reduced to about 30 per cent of the earlier times. For socialising, it would still continue as before.

The spaces required for many offices could be reduced by at least half, by getting less than 50% of the staff to be present on any given day. Incidentally, Video Conferencing of hearings in RTI matters has been the norm for the Central Information Commission for over a decade. My own experience is that once people get used to the idea, the time taken for hearings is no more than in the usual hearings. Unless the courts and other

quasi-judicial bodies start their work immediately by virtual hearings, the burden of pending cases will become unbearable. It is not an exaggeration to say that given the present scenario, social distancing may be required at least until December 2020. If we use technology, we can make this into an opportunity to use time and resources more gainfully.

The benefits can be immense. Everyone must consider making this normal and reduce travel time and expense. A significant reduction in people travelling will also lead to lesser pollution and carbon footprint. I would seriously urge that we try and convert this crisis to redesign the way we work. We could then convert this crisis into an opportunity of lasting value. This is the time to challenge our earlier concepts and get a positive outcome in the way urban centres work and function. This could lead to a better quality of life with less travel-induced stress and an actual reduction of traffic and consequent pollution. We should make this our new normal, at least in our Urban Areas.

*First-generation entrepreneur and Distinguished Alumnus awardee of IIT Bombay. Sold his company to become an RTI activist. Shailesh was part of the National RTI movement, which was involved in drafting the National Act. He was a convener of the National Campaign for People's Right To Information (NCPRI). The only RTI activist to have been chosen as a Central Information Commissioner, he disposed of a record of over 20000 cases, ensuring most cases were decided in less than 90 days. He gave many landmark decisions on RTI, apart from organizing the first digital paperless office in the Commission, passionately pursuing the cause of ensuring a time-bound justice delivery system and improving governance systems apart from conducting workshops and advocating active citizenship.*

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