

How Covid-19 pandemic is likely to change/ impact the way we work in Mumbai?

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

For the past four months, most people working in Mumbai's offices -- right from financial analysts to those in advertising, media, insurance and a host of other industries -- have been mostly working from home. The suburban train service, touted as the lifeline of Mumbai, has been suspended for common commuters for almost the same period - something that had never happened in the history of this metropolis. Many people who would not even think about working outside their offices are now doing the job from their homes as offices are shut. Discussions are happening through conference calls/video calls, and meetings are held through apps like Zoom and Google Meet.

Unfortunately, several people have also lost their jobs due to economic problems that have arisen with the lockdown. The businesses are suffering as revenues are shrunk, and managements are looking at various ways to cut costs to stay afloat. It is now more or less certain that the unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic will force changes in the lives of the people living in megacities like Mumbai. These changes will be because of health and hygiene, or it could be because of the impact on businesses and industries as the economy is likely to be in bad shape for some time. Work as we know it may not be the same way for Mumbaikars in the post-Covid 19 era.

Take, for instance, the media industry that people like me work for. Except for those who have to go to the field, such as reporters and photographers and senior-level staff, several media

staffers are working from home. Reporters and photographers are sending their content from the field instead of going to offices. Several meetings are now replaced by conference calls or video conferencing. Team meetings are happening through mobile phone applications. Several people on the desk who edit the copies or make the pages are doing so from their homes. They have been provided with computers loaded with necessary software at their homes. Basically, newspaper offices are now partly physical and partly virtual.

Post-Covid, it is likely that the media managements would consider work from home for a section of its staff. Field staff could now be asked to send their content--text stories, pictures, videos--from the field or from home instead of coming to the office. How much of that would be feasible will be known in the coming days.

Like the media, several other industries are likely to change ways of functioning in the post-Covid economy.

So what is likely to change in Mumbai?

The way we work

One of the aspects of cost-cutting would be reducing the expenditure on establishments. This could mean a section of the workforce would be asked to work from home or from outside instead of coming to the office. The four months of the lockdown have shown that people can work from home. There have been issues--right from poor internet connectivity to problems in coordination, but still, work is getting done. As such, work from home is likely to become a significant aspect of running offices. If a particular establishment has a staff of 50, it could ask more than half of its staffers to work from home. The people in senior managerial positions may come to the office regularly, while others may be asked to work from the field or home. This could save cost for the establishments.

The management may also consider this as time-saving because staffers working from home need not spend 2 to 4 hours travelling every day in a city like Mumbai. Some offices may consider asking staffers to come to the office on alternate days or certain days in a week and work from home the rest of the days.

The way we travel

Nobody is sure how long the Covid-19 pandemic will continue to affect our lives. As such, Mumbaikars will be concerned about their daily commute, which for many means travelling in overcrowded trains and buses. Many would prefer personal travel, which means using their two or four-wheeled vehicles for the daily commute. This would mean more congestion on roads and more parking woes in Mumbai's commercial areas.

Office timings

The option of staggered office timings was being discussed earlier as one of the measures to reduce crowds in suburban trains. Post Covid-19, this could be considered seriously. The policy planners in Mantralaya are looking at this option to cut the number of commuters during peak hours.

What would be the impact of the changes in the functioning of Mumbai's businesses? With businesses and industries adopting different measures to handle the post-Covid crisis, there is likely to be an impact on the city--something that urban planners will have to take into consideration.

Possibility of decongestion of Mumbai

More establishments may prefer to shift to suburbs or upcoming areas in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR). The rents are cheaper, and the workplaces would be closer to the residences of staffers, most of whom stay in the suburbs within Mumbai

or in the MMR. This may turn out to be a boon in disguise for the government, which has been trying to decongest Mumbai for several years now. The area closer to Navi Mumbai airport, Thane, Raigad, areas along Mumbai-Pune expressway and Mumbai-Ahmedabad expressway could see growth because of this.

Lifestyle

It may sound like a bit of a stretch, but many Mumbaikars would be more concerned about their wellbeing, especially their immunity. The pandemic has shown those with lifestyle-related illnesses such as diabetes and poor immunity are more vulnerable to the Covid-19. As such, people would prefer to invest time in jogging, exercise and other health-related activities. They would also expect the state and city authorities to provide more open spaces for the same. The state and central government will do a great service to the city and its residents if they expedite the development of Mumbai's eastern waterfront. Mumbaikars would insist on keeping most of the opened area of the port free of construction so they will get adequate open spaces for themselves and their future generations.

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