

# Takeaways from a ‘coronised’ 2020

The unprecedented year has resulted in the introduction of new practices that may see prominence in the next decade

**AMIT KUMAR JAIN**  
**SURBHI JAIN**

At the start of 2020, nobody would have imagined that two zero two zero would literally mean four zeros. Covid-19-induced lockdowns in many countries across the world brought life to a standstill. After the rumblings throughout the year, there is a ray of hope in the form of the approval of vaccines in some countries and imminent approval in most others. The new year, therefore, is likely to bring back the world on track sooner or later. But life will never be the same again.

As succinctly described by Yuval Noah Harari, author of international best-seller *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* in one interview: “This virus will divide our history in BC and AC eras ie, Before Covid-19 and After Covid-19”. Here are some of the takeaways from 2020 for next decade:

## Automation and robotics

Automation has proved to be the most effective remedy to pandemic-like situations. Robots, autonomous cars and drones are already being used by China, the US and other countries for delivering essential goods and medicines to customers in the infected areas to avoid physical contact. Automation is slated to replace 30-40 per cent of jobs by 2030. The next decade will witness a renewed interest in complete automation and more budgets will be allotted to keep things on auto-pilot and immune from invisible, but potent, viruses.

## Work from home

Many progressive companies have already adopted WFH under employee-friendly policies and to save expensive office spaces in cit-

ies like Singapore and Hong Kong. Employers and employees are increasingly experimenting with WFH and have realised gains in terms of improved efficiency, better levels of satisfaction and the saving of time spent in commuting and of expenses towards office space. Post Covid-19, many companies are likely to include work from home as a business continuity plan. This may, however, dilute the distinctions of home and workplace and its attendant requirement of work-life balance.

## Contactless technology

To prevent the spread of infections through surfaces such as biometric attendance systems, elevator buttons, stair railings, doorknobs, switches etc, contactless technology like voice commands or facial recognition can be used. Thermal cameras can be integrated with facial recognition-based attendance system. Digital payments using contactless credit/debit cards, UPI, PayTM and other electronic mediums are likely to be preferred over currency notes which may be a carrier of the virus.

## Deglobalisation/self-sufficiency

Thomas Friedman, the award-winning *New York Times* columnist in his famous book *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century* published in 2006 presented a picture of globalised world in a free trade era where countries are interdependent on each other for supply of goods and services from the most efficient producer. The spread of the coronavirus has shown how such a global world falls flat when international boundaries are sealed to control a pandemic. Post Covid-19, the countries will like to prefer a certain de-



**New normal** The future will see a host of changes in work and lifestyle

gree of self-sufficiency in essential items over gospels of a 'flat world'.

## International travel

According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) report 2018, global travel and tourism with a growth rate of 3.9 per cent is the second-fastest growing sector in the world, behind only manufacturing. With such large-scale international travel, it is not surprising that Covid-19 spread with lightning speed to over 200 countries within three months of the first reported case. The post-Covid-19 world is likely to witness replacement of business travel with video conferencing, webinars in a big way.

## Way of life

The slow spread of Covid-19 in Japan is attributed to the Japanese protocol of sanitisers, face-masks and washing hands since 2003,

when Japan was hit by severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS). Such practices are likely to become integral part of life the world over now. The handshake will be replaced by folded hands (*namaste*) or curtsies or any other similar gesture avoiding physical contact.

## Right to privacy

South Korea is one of the few countries which could successfully contain the spread of the coronavirus without resorting to a lockdown. Legislation enacted there gave the government authority to collect data from mobile phones, credit cards and other avenues from those who test positive to reconstruct their recent whereabouts and help in contact tracing. Post Covid-19, countries are likely to introduce similar legislative reforms to track and trace the whereabouts of

people infected with communicable diseases, sacrificing the right to privacy in the larger public interest.

## Telemedicine

During the pandemic, many patients relied on telemedicine to avoid Covid-19 exposure during visits to the hospital. The pandemic has proved the efficacy of telemedicine, which may be continued given that it provides to far-flung areas. The Covid-19 pandemic will boost the government's efforts to proliferate telemedicine and improve patients' confidence in the practice.

### Impact on environment

The silver lining of the pandemic has been the positive impact on the environment. A number of studies have shown that the pandemic situation significantly improved air quality in different cities across the world, reduced GHG emissions, lowered water and noise pollution, which may assist with the restoration of the ecological system. However, once economic activities restarted, the gains of the pandemic were lost. This indicates that we need to redesign our co-existence with nature so that our growth is green and environmentally sustainable.

Every disaster has the potential to be turned into an opportunity. In an intertwined world, this virus will leave a stubborn stain. We will have to make relentless efforts to cope up with the upheaval brought by this event and remove this stain. All of us will have to tighten our belts to bring the world back on track and prepare ourselves for such eventualities in future.

*Amit Kumar is with the Ministry of Railways and Surbhi is with the Ministry of Finance. Views are personal*