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HOW LIFE CAN CHANGE AFTER LOCKDOWN

Fewer flights & costlier fares likely – to ensure sc in multiplexes, stores may limit entry, restaurants

By Nirbhay Kumar in New Delhi

FOR about one and a half months, the Centre has halted travel by air, metro rail and inter-state buses across India to slow the spread of coronavirus.

Hotels, restaurants, cinemas, malls, gyms, sports complexes, schools, colleges, besides social, political, cultural, religious and

other gatherings, have also been shut.

But even when the lockdown is lifted, or more curbs go, life will never be the same again. Major changes await people as the country will have new ways of shopping, travelling, checking into hotels, watching movies or even dining out.

Most companies engaged in providing services like air travel, retail, food & beverages (F&B) and hotels are expected to cut down their offerings in initial months as they follow social distancing norms and

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VIRUS TIGHTENS ITS GLOBAL GRIP

- Global virus cases cross 4 million as France, Spain inch towards re-opening.
- Anthony Fauci (above), 2 other US virus task force members in quarantine after their potential exposure to coronavirus.
- Donald Trump's handling of the pandemic has been an absolute chaotic disaster for America, former US Prez Barack Obama has said.

North Delhi Municipal Corporation Mayor Avtar Singh, Standing Committee head Jai Prakash and others sanitise the CM residence at Flag Staff Road in Delhi on Sunday.

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slash cost overheads in the face of tough business environment.

Post-lockdown plans are being charted as the government gets ready to lift further restrictions. Most industries expect demand to remain subdued at least till October before the festive season lifts consumer sentiment. Hoteliers, airlines, retailers and shopping mall managers say they intend to play it safe when they re-open.

After zoning out districts and areas among red, orange and green on the basis of coronavirus case numbers, the government has substantially removed curbs outside hotspots and allowed stand-alone shops and establishments to open. It has signalled that more economic activities would be permitted after May 17, the last date of lockdown 3.0.

To be sure, the classification is revised at regular intervals and if no coronavirus cases are found in an area, it can be declared as green zone by the government.

Many industry experts feel the outbreak will result in drastic changes in the attitude, behaviour and preferences of consumers and businesses will remodel their products and services accordingly. Consumers will be more concerned about their health and expect greater hygiene from service providers.

SHOPPING MALLS

Customer experience is not going to remain the same at shopping malls, according to industry insiders. Mall owners are charting out new rules taking into account customer foot-fall and building structure.

Manoj Gaur, Managing Director of the Gaur's Group, said large format stores like Big Bazaar could be advised to limit entry and follow social distancing norms, while preference could be given to small stores to start operations.

"The large format stores would be advised to maintain social distancing norms, high standards of hygiene and limit entry of people," he said.

On the possibility of lower revenue and high operating cost, Gaur said that government would need to announce a relief package including lower GST, without which many jobs could be lost.

In what seems to be giving the glimpse of shopping stores post lockdown, wholesale retailer Metro Cash And Carry India Pvt Ltd has strictly prohibited customers who do not wear mask or are found with 99-100 temperature during thermal screening.

"We have mandated wearing mask for every customer. We are doing infrared temperature scan for everyone and those with 99-100 temperature are not being allowed. Only limited people are allowed every hour, 50-60 as against 500-600 at any given time earlier. To ensure safety of both customers and employees, cashiers are required to wear face shields," Metro Cash & Carry India MD and CEO Arvind Mediratta said.

Moreover, the Indian arm of German retailer has started giving appointments to customers over phone or electronically for visiting the store so there is no crowding.

Footwear and apparel retailer Woodland would also limit the number of customers entering the store at a time and require them to wear mask and gloves. The company is working on plans to disinfect a product after trial by customers.

"Normally when we try shoes and all, we have disposable socks. Similarly, we will see how a product which is tried can be disinfected. Even for garments



People board a bus that will take them to a quarantine hotel after landing from London into Chhatrapati Shivaji International Airport as part of a massive repatriation effort due to the Covid-19 pandemic, in Mumbai on Sunday.

LIFE AFTER THE LOCKDOWN

INDIA BRACES FOR HUGE LIFESTYLE CHANGES

A DIFFERENT FUTURE

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we are working on something like that," said Harkirat Singh, Managing Director, Aero Club (the manufacturer of Woodland and Woods brands of footwear and apparels).

CINEMA

Movie-goers may also be in for a disappointment as new releases are extremely unlikely. They'll have to make peace with some pre-released movies.

Movie production has gone haywire and multiplexes are likely to resort to old movies. Multiplex owners will discuss future plan of action with distributors after clarity on lockdown.

"It is difficult to say. We will have to see how things go. We will have to start talking to distributors at that point of time and see what kind of content pipeline is there and what all options we have. So, that is difficult to predict at this point of time," Multiplex Association of India (MAI) President Deepak Asher said.

Asked if old Hindi movies will be played, Asher said it was an option but there would also be English movies and other content.

Discussing the re-opening strategy post lockdown, the MAI President said that it has been proposed that multiplexes would not sell more than 50 per cent of the seats to ensure gap of one seat between two people.

"We are planning to stagger timings of films and intermissions to ensure that too many people do not come to lobby or other areas," he said.

AIRLINES

Just like the cinema experience, flying will see changes too. Tata-Singapore Airlines joint venture Vistara has communicated to its customers about temporary removal of all reading material from seatback pockets.

"When air travel resumes, we understand that you may have apprehensions about flying. We have taken some very important

steps in the last few weeks to ensure that your flying experience with us becomes safer and more secure," Vistara CEO Leslie Thng has written to customers listing out measures in place to prevent coronavirus.

Like most service providers, airlines also face double whammy of low demand and higher expenses for implementing social distancing norms.

Putting each social distancing norm in place has a cost, a top private airline executive said. There is also uncertainty over some states imposing a longer lockdown in the red and orange zones, which can affect flights.

If the restriction on air travel is removed and states continue with lockdown, it will pose challenge for both passengers and airlines.

"Grounding the aircraft is quicker than flying them again! Because when you ground the aircraft you park it wherever you find the place and it is parked all over the place, not necessarily in official parking bays which have fuel pump links, etc. To get them back into operations will take many days longer than grounding them," he said.

The industry expects some pent-up demand in initial days as people stuck at various places would avail the service. But demand would slump thereafter at least till people feel safe to fly.

This is the reason airlines would be offering fewer flights and sectors. The nodal Civil Aviation Ministry is expected to announce opening of domestic flights with various riders for fly-

ers, airports and airlines.

Private airlines such as SpiceJet, IndiGo and Vistara have opened booking for flights starting June 1, 2020.

HOTELS

Similarly, hotels are also expecting the demand to pick up after at least six months of the lifting of lockdown. As certain restrictions such as on public gatherings are expected to continue even after the lockdown, hotels will not be offering space for conference, weddings and events. The hotel industry expects a sizeable cut in manpower and other costs. In absence of lower demand, they are unlikely to provide all services at once.

"Business will come back starting with accommodation. In terms of meetings, conferences, weddings, we are looking at much longer gap before the states allow you to do those things and people feel comfortable getting together in closed places. So, we are looking at probably accommodation first and just room service for dining. Then gradually restaurants for in-house guests and then for outside guests to come in too," said Ajay Bakaya, Managing Director, Sarovar Hotels.

Bakaya said that payroll and energy were the two major expenses and they would be rationalised in the wake of lower demand.

"If there is no collection, how are we going to pay? Where is the money coming from," the hotelier asked.