

Coronavirus in India: How life can change after lockdown

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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.

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.

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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.

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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 footfall 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 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).