

WfH and the Century of the Mind

Covid-induced new normal has brought home to use that development can happen beyond cities, too

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Whether it was dinosaurs being driven to extinction by a falling comet 66 million years ago or the invention of the transistor radio in 1950, which reshaped electronics and computer design and became a stepping stone for the world's Fourth Industrial revolution, humankind has witnessed several disruptions in its evolutionary journey that have caused the new order to replace the old one.

The Covid-19 pandemic is certainly the next big thing in world history and sure to find a place among the milestones marking mankind's calendar. Ushering in a "new normal", the pandemic has brought into stark relief all the challenges that have beset the 21st century – problems arising out of climate change, globalisation, rampant urbanisation, and the scourge of the "divides".

Shaking the very foundations of the world's economic and social edifice, it is compelling us to introspect, unlearn what we have lived comfortably with and learn new lessons. There is now an understanding that this event could well be the reason for yet another historic global shift.

The Covid-19 phenomenon is no dead-end. No, humanity is just too resilient for that. Humanity knows just what it means to be at a crossroad, to look at the horizon for emerging opportunities, and explore the next set of possibilities. And, yes, Covid-19 has brought us to this crossroad today. The best minds in industry – Information Technology, Healthcare, Manufacturing, Retail, Education – are already working overtime seeking answers to the many questions posed by the pandemic.

The IT industry in India has played a critical role in helping it deal with the Covid-19 crisis. Had it not been for digital platforms, (hundreds were created overnight by both large and small Indian IT companies), school and college students would not have been able to attend classes and continue with their education.

Digital to the rescue

People would have been paralysed during lockdowns, unable to make online payments and money transfers securely and order food, medicines and other essentials without stepping out of their homes. Most importantly, professionals would not have been able to Work From Home (WfH), help their organisations remain operational and prevent India's economy from going into a tailspin.

Clearly, WfH – riding on and made possible by digital technologies as well as a rethink and regulatory relaxation by the Ministry of Telecommunications and IT (which liberalised connectivity to the home) – is a life saver.

At this time, (a period I like to call the "Century of the Mind" in the mid-90s), WfH seems timely, transformational and futuristic. It is enabling us to get integrated into what is expected to be the new world of work. Century of the Mind, for me, represents a post-Industrial world, where man has wrested control back from machines and occupied central position.

This is conceptually what WfH has made possible. Work is coming to where the employees are. While in the Industrial era, the hand had to move to where the machine was, in this Century of the Mind, the work is travelling to where the mind is.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, as organisations have



Working from home can take the pressure off urban centres. KS DEBPAK

shut down their physical facilities, employees have done their work from the comfort of their homes. Many, living in large metros, have chosen to walk away from their caged city existence to their homes in Tier 2 and 3 townships and even the hinterland, where they are enjoying their families and a superior quality of life.

WfH as a concept is not entirely new. It is in a sense an echo of another idea that truly gave wings to the Indian software industry and enabled it to become a global powerhouse. It was the Software Technology Park of India (STPI) scheme, launched in 1991, where the government showed great foresight, that dismantled many rules, and allowed software companies to be set up anywhere in India.

In this way, software companies were liberated and established themselves in smaller cities with affordable infrastructure, lower cost of

living for employees and ready access to a pool of talent at competitive prices. With WfH, we are seeing the same phenomenon. WfH is setting organisations and their employees free – free to be where they want to be and yet remain connected to their workplaces.

Yet another overriding benefit of WfH, is that it is taking the pressure off urban centres. Urbanisation, we know today has served its purpose, and overplayed its part. Its negatives far outweigh its once touted positives.

It has for instance overwhelmed the infrastructure of cities and dehumanised their workforce. Poor and cramped living conditions, long travel times, and virtually no recreation have led to a severe drop in the quality of life and Gross National Happiness (GNH) of countries. WfH on the other hand, has facilitated the return of people to their homes – to healthier and happier living

and enabled overwhelmed metropolises to breathe a bit.

Such de-urbanisation could well be a precursor to a bigger, more orchestrated move of people not just to the Tier 2s and 3s, but India's villages themselves.

Focus on rural

In his path-breaking 1972 book of essays: *Small is Beautiful: The Study of Economics as if People Mattered*, economist EF Schumacher had urged governments to build up the rural sector to achieve balanced growth. "There is no answer to the evils of mass unemployment and mass migration into cities, unless the whole level of rural life can be raised and this requires the development of an agro-industrial culture, so that each district, each community, can offer a colourful variety of occupations to its members".

The heart-wrenching exodus of India's 10 million migrant labourers from cities to their villages in 2020 owing to the pandemic gave India cause to think along these lines as well. At this time, the government announced a \$277-billion package as well as a \$7-billion programme to provide jobs to returning migrant workers for 125 days across 116 districts. This could be a trendsetter.

We also have the 1920 vision of Mahatma Gandhi to guide us here. The Mahatma's belief that inclusive growth for India could only come on the strength of sustainable, nature-aligned rural development and innovation as well as education and skilling of villagers, ought to serve as a beacon. If we do this right, the Gandhian dream of taking people close to their roots may well be within reach.

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