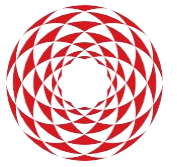# Ashoka in the time of COVID-19

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Message from the Vice-Chancellor

As with so many others around the world, we find ourselves today in a totally unanticipated situation – lockdown, physical distancing, a total change in our personal and working lives. Not one of us could have imagined that we would experience anything like this in our lifetime.

In the challenging times in which we live today, it is important to ensure resilience, continuity, stability, and reassurance. We have learnt much more about each other, the myriad daily challenges that many at Ashoka face, the courage with which they deal with these challenges. Blended with this are stories, laughter, and companionship. When this current crisis is behind us, and life returns to normal, this depth of understanding that has been enabled by the current situation will remain with us as a source of strength.
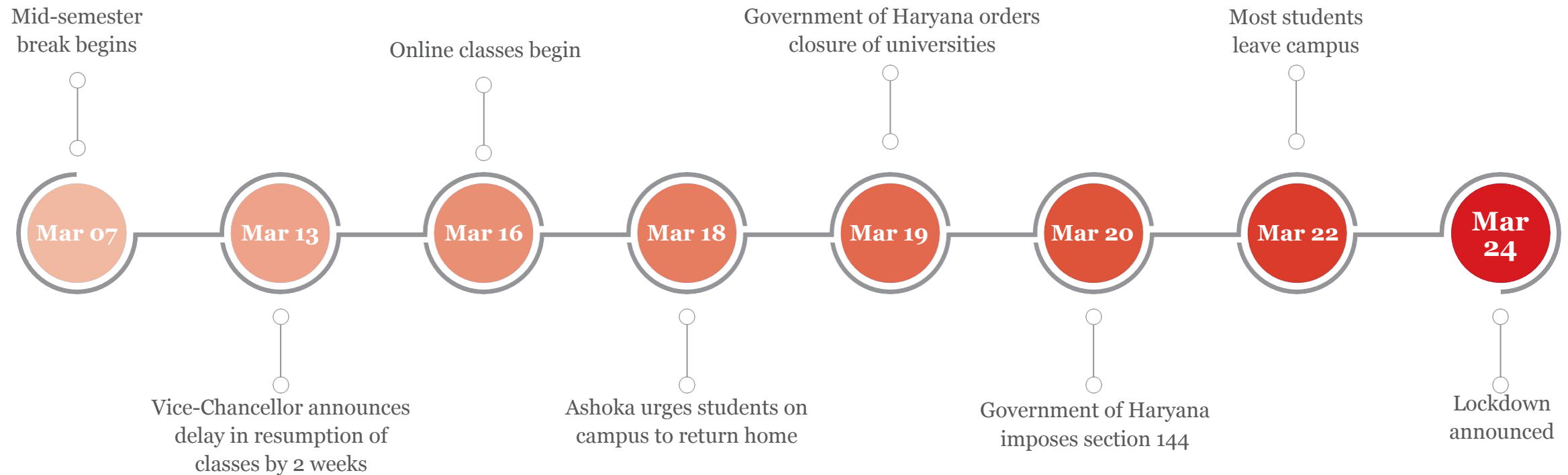
Stay safe. Stay connected.

Malabika Sarkar
Vice-Chancellor

INITIATIVES ON CAMPUS

Response Timeline

Ashoka acted swiftly to move students home and transitioned to online classes. This has helped in ensuring the safety of students and continuity of academics.

Mid-semester break begins

Online classes begin

Government of Haryana orders closure of universities

Most students leave campus

Mar 07 — **Mar 13** — **Mar 16** — **Mar 18** — **Mar 19** — **Mar 20** — **Mar 22** — **Mar 24**

Vice-Chancellor announces delay in resumption of classes by 2 weeks

Ashoka urges students on campus to return home

Government of Haryana imposes section 144

Lockdown announced

Proactive from the Start

- Advisory highlighting symptoms and precautions shared with the students, staff, and faculty

- Thermal temperature monitoring at the gate

- Wash basins installed at the main gate

- Lecture session conducted for 250 outsourced staff by Dr (Maj.) Narottam Sharma on COVID-19 in March

- Posters in Hindi containing helpline numbers put up in all washrooms

- Alcohol-based hand sanitisers placed across campus along with instructions on their usage. 18 locations and the University's Vasant Kunj and Vasant Vihar offices also covered

Additional Student Services

From the second week of March, Ashoka adopted a host of measures to ensure that students were not inconvenienced. These included:

- Round-the-clock availability of staff on email to ensure swift and proactive response to student concerns

- Establishment of a helpdesk at the University entrance to monitor the entry/exit of students

- Assisting students with travel and other facilities. This included booking of domestic and international flights

- Upgrading internet plans at no cost for students who are on 100% financial aid, in order for them to access classes from their home towns and villages

- Extraordinary measures adopted to protect students. Two students were stranded in Malaysia, but the University ensured their smooth return to India

The Campus Currently

Students, staff and faculty

- There are 149 students (including international students), 5 faculty members (some with family), few administrators, infirmary staff, teaching associates and teaching fellows on campus presently. There are also 30 workers (including housekeeping and security)

Housing

- All students and staff on campus provided with accommodation – separately for women and men. Medical assistance and laundry facilities are also available

Meals

- All meals available in the student dining. Support staff also provided with food

- For Ashokans living in the vicinity, food is being provided from campus

Housekeeping and hygiene

- Regular sanitisation of campus, shuttles and buses

- Adequate stock of provisions, medical supplies, masks and sanitisers for several weeks

- The Infirmary is functional

- All essential services have been ensured

Support Services

- The Shanghvi Library is providing updates and online resources, along with access to four daily newspapers. Free access to Harvard Business Review eBooks Collection and HBR Ascend for 2 months

- Academic offices such as the Office of Academic Affairs (OAA), the Young India Fellowship (YIF) and Global Education and Strategic Programmes (GESP), the offices under the Dean of Student Affairs, and support offices such as Ashoka Centre for Well-Being and Office of Learning Support have moved to an online system

- Administrative services are functioning from a virtual domain. These include, the Office of the Registrar, Admissions, Outreach, Career Development, Development, and Finance, to name a few

ACADEMIC INITIATIVES

Continuation of Classes

Ashoka's response has been swift and thorough, and has ensured that students continue their studies unhindered by the COVID-19 situation.

- The University moved its classes online from 16th March (the scheduled date for resumption of classes after the mid-semester break)
- Classes on Google Meet and Zoom are being conducted as per the on-campus timetable. Group discussions and peer learning are taking place through virtual learning

Active Support Groups

The Vice-Chancellor has set-up a technology group, a student support team, and a teaching innovation group to ensure high quality and smooth operations of classes online.

Technology Group

- Migrating faculty to Zoom and Google Meet via Ashoka's institutional accounts
- Creating a dashboard to be used by the VC, OAA, HODs, faculty and Teaching Fellows
- Start evaluating service providers for proctored exams (does not apply to all courses)

Student Support Group

- Reaching out to students to resolve access issues
- Internet dongles sent to students on financial aid
- All classes are recorded so that they can be accessed later by students who could not get real-time access
- MIS developed to track and resolve all student issues

Teaching Innovation Group

- Comprising of younger faculty who are experienced in using technology
- Reaching out to faculty and trying to codify best practices
- Tech-sessions offered for faculty

Student and Faculty Speak

Aicha Fall

Undergraduate, 2021

"The situation was handled quite well at Ashoka, especially for international students. Those who wanted to go home could do so without financial problems since the University funded them. Those who deemed that the campus was safer than travelling, also had the choice to stay. The situation on campus is pretty good right now."

Amita Baviskar

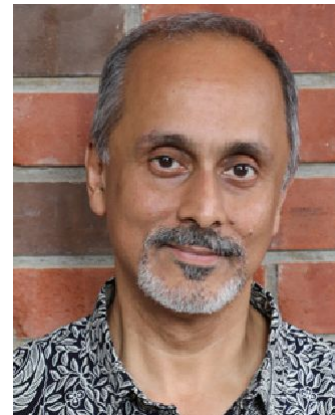Professor of Environmental Studies and Sociology & Anthropology

"The aim has been to try and make sure that online teaching is as smooth a transition as possible. To make sure that the students get the most out of a course under these challenging circumstances. We use Google Meet and we are able to have active participatory classes with upto 60 students. As I lecture the students, they write in via chat."

Shivay Dubey

Young India Fellow, 2020

"The decision making process has been transparent and collaborative. The VC has been very approachable and the administrative staff has been quick to respond. The coordination between departments has been very good. It has instilled a sense of confidence in me. I know I am in safe hands."

Gautam Menon

Professor of Physics and Biology

"My colleagues and I have been using all sorts of electronic means to communicate with our students. The way the Ashoka faculty have stepped up to teach what they would be doing in a classroom under normal circumstances has been inspiring. There has been a lot of back and forth on the best and most effective ways to communicate."

Next Steps

- On campus classes will not resume for the rest of academic year 2019-20. Remaining classes to be held online

- The University's Convocation for undergraduate, YIF, ASP, and Masters students to be postponed

- All graduating students across programmes will receive their degrees, certificates, and transcripts through email at the end of the academic year

- Students currently on campus will be advised at the appropriate time regarding their safe journey home at the end of the academic year

NEW INITIATIVES

Beyond the Classroom

Beyond the Classroom, a bi-weekly interactive virtual seminar series conducted by Ashoka faculty, commenced on 4th April. It is free and open to all.

The series is delivered on Zoom and simulcast on YouTube and Facebook Live. Among the Ashoka faculty who have and will feature in the sessions are Ali Khan Mahmudabad, Amita Baviskar, Ashwini Deshpande, Bittu, Debayan Gupta, Divya Karnad, Jonathan Gil Harris, Kathryn Hardy, Kranti Saran, Madhavi Menon, Mahesh Rangarajan, Maya Saran, Nayanjot Lahiri, Pratap Bhanu Mehta, Rita Kothari, Chancellor Rudrangshu Mukherjee, Upinder Singh and Vinay Sitapati (this is not an exhaustive list).

Scientifically Speaking

The University recently introduced a new online lecture series, Scientifically Speaking, which is open to all. The series will help decode the most pressing scientific questions of our time in a simple, introductory format, while highlighting fresh perspectives grounded in interdisciplinary research.

The topics are drawn from subject areas such as physics, computer science, chemistry, and biology, among others. A unique aspect of this series is that data science is a common theme running across all lectures covering a varied range of subjects.

Through this online lecture series, Ashoka University connects high school students to interdisciplinary scientists.

FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

Blind (Wo)men and the Universe:
Astronomy's data science revolution

Today, astronomers can study the Universe as never before, using electromagnetic waves, high-energy particles, and gravitational waves. New-generation astronomical telescopes provide gigantic amounts of data, much of it unique, but also incomplete and noisy. Join us as we show how big data can be used to uncover the mysteries of an even bigger Universe!

SOMAK RAYCHAUDHURY
Director, IUCAA (Pune)
Ph.D University of Cambridge

Tuesday, April 21, 2020
7:00 - 8:00PM

REGISTER NOW

Summer Programmes

The University will be offering a host of summer programmes online. These include:

Young Scholars Programme

- Young Scholars Programme – a 5-day long summer programme which introduces high school students to a liberal arts & sciences education. It includes faculty presentations, writing sessions, discussion groups, guest speakers and interactive multimedia

- Young Scholars Programme-Advanced – a 10-day programme. In addition to the YSP, students get a deep dive understanding of various real-world scenarios and how solutions from various disciplines converge in addressing global issues

CWC Summer School

The Centre for Writing and Communication is offering two 4-day workshops

- Creative Writing Workshop – The workshop will allow participants exclusive one-on-one sessions with instructors, peer-review sessions as well as discussions on the crucial aspects of short-story writing

- Research Writing Workshop – Focused on developing and revising postgraduate dissertations. The workshop will address different aspects of research writing such as developing a literature review, building an argument, plagiarism and citation

RESEARCH FOR IMPACT

Knowledge Impact

- LS Shashidhara, Dean of Research, and Gautam Menon, Professor of Physics and Biology, have co-founded along with others, Indian Scientists' Response to COVID-19[1]. The group has done a lot of work on science popularisation, busting myths and on mathematical modelling

- As President of the International Union of Biological Sciences[2], Prof. Shashidhara has called for enhanced international collaboration to combat the pandemic and is establishing an international working group on zoonotic diseases

- The Centre for Economic Data and Analysis led by Ashwini Deshpande, Professor of Economics, has published a two-part series *The Coronavirus Pandemic: Are We Ready for the Long Haul?*[3] It helps provide concrete, action-oriented suggestions for policymakers

- Faculty from computer science and biology, along with students and alumni, have built an FAQ site[4], collating official data from across the world. The aim is to fight misinformation surrounding the crisis

THE WIRE

[Coronavirus Pandemic: The Policies We Need to Be Ready for the Long Haul](#)

THE ECONOMIC TIMES

[Coronavirus: Faced with an unprecedented challenge, how is India faring?](#)

BBC NEWS

[Will coronavirus lockdown cause food shortages in India?](#)

Simulation to Solution

INDSCI-SIM

Gautam Menon is one of the developers of INDSCI-SIM[5], an epidemiological model for COVID-19 spread across different states of India. This is being done under the Indian Scientists' Response to COVID-19 group.

- With INDSCI-SIM policymakers can evaluate interventions – including lockdowns, quarantines and expanded testing – and understand how they control the spread of the disease

- The model predicts the number of cases of severe and critical illness, including requirements for hospital beds

BharatSim

Led by Gautam Menon, Ashoka and ThoughtWorks have formed a research collaboration to develop the first ultra-large-scale agent-based simulation model for the spread of COVID-19 in India.
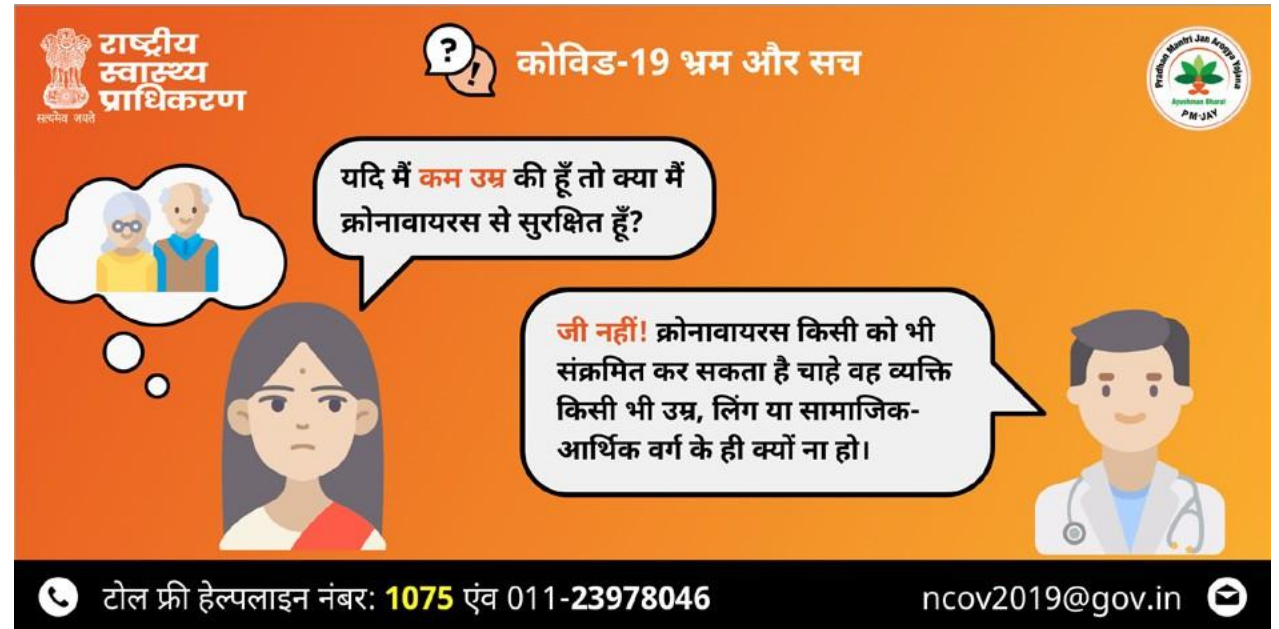
- The model, called BharatSim, builds on EpiRust, an open source framework developed by ThoughtWorks

- The simulations will represent up to 40% of the Indian population in a few months

- The simulation model will help provide information for policy planners at unprecedented levels of detail

- Once completed, BharatSim will be made freely available to the community of researchers and policymakers

Changing Social Behaviour

The Centre for Social and Behaviour Change in partnership with Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), is working with the NITI Aayog, National Health Authority, Government of Bihar, and others. It is providing holistic assistance through mining behaviour insights, designing audience-specific behaviourally informed messages, and testing the efficacy of the content to support the country's response to COVID-19.

In addition to formulation the communication strategy for various stakeholders, their work includes:

- Collating different behavioural insights and recommending interventions from a behaviourally-informed, thematic repository of global literature surrounding COVID-19 and other similar epidemics

- Developing a cross-department message dashboard which will be part of a larger online repository (developed by BMGF) of messages and collaterals that can be used by different stakeholders

- Setting up an online testing mechanism in collaboration with Project Concern International and JEEVIKA, to measure the effectiveness of the messages developed and disseminated

SOCIAL INITIATIVES

Assisting the Government

The Chief Minister's Good Governance Associates (CMGGA) is a collaboration between Ashoka and the Haryana Government. 25 young individuals work in various districts in collaboration with the CM's Office on development programmes every year.

Some of the work being done by the Associates on COVID-19 includes:

Charkhi Dadri
Home delivery of free ration to slum dwellers and ensuring unorganised workers who do not have bank accounts get the benefit of economic assistance. This is done by liaising between administration, NGOs and the beneficiaries. Also liaising with the Post Office for opening bank accounts.

Faridabad
Providing personal protective equipment (PPE) for hospital staff. There is an acute shortage of PPE. The Associates search for funding partners who can support them in getting the best quality PPEs. Rs. 5 lakh has been raised so far.

Jind
Providing sanitary pads for women in shelter homes through Janaushadhi Kendra Stores. The pads are sent to the local police headquarters and then to shelter homes.

Panipat
Communication with home-quarantined individuals to ensure they do not move out of their houses. Special WhatsApp groups have been created. Operators are assigned to the group and queries related to medical needs, groceries, etc resolved in under 10 minutes.

Stakeholder Initiatives

The Ashoka community and stakeholders have been actively involved in helping tackle the crisis. The University's Founders, faculty, and staff are doing their bit.

Founders

- A team of venture capitalists led by Mohit Bhatnagar, Managing Director of Sequoia India, and Founder, Ashoka, have formed Action COVID-19 Team (ACT) Fund, a Rs 100 cr fund to back ideas through grants. ACT is supported by Ashish Dhawan, Chairman, Board of Trustees, and Deep Kalra, Founder, Makemytrip.com, among others. The fund will be used for startups/social incubation for the prevention of COVId-19 spread, scale testing, management of critically-ill patients, enhancing support for medical staff and hospitals as well as amplifying local and state government initiatives

- The ATE Chandra Foundation led by Archana and Amit Chandra, along with the Marico Innovation Foundation, has established Innovate@BeatCOVID, a fund to support cost-effective ventilators, respiratory solutions and PPE

- Bajaj Group has pledged Rs 100 cr to support upgradation of healthcare infrastructure, and for food and shelter in rural areas

- Dr. Reddy's Laboratories has made monetary donations to the Government of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. It has also collaborated with Akshay Patra to sponsor 25,000 meals a day for those facing financial hardships

- Sun Pharma has committed Rs 25 cr worth of drugs and sanitisers

Faculty and Staff

- Most of Ashoka's academic and non-academic (Assistant Manager and above) staff have voluntarily donated a day's salary to the PM CARES Fund

Social Impact

The Centre for Social Impact and Philanthropy (CSIP) has partnered with GiveIndia, a non-profit online donation platform, in support of their India COVID Response Fund[6]. The fund will focus on preventing the spread of COVID-19, providing humanitarian aid, supporting health workers and enabling the COVID-hit families to rebuild their livelihoods.

CSIP's Director Ingrid Srinath serves on the fund's advisory committee, helping oversee governance and disbursement structures. The crowdfunding effort has raised Rs 75 cr so far. The fund is supported by the Gates Foundation, ATE Chandra Foundation, Google, Omidyar Network, Uber, and UBS.

- CSIP has also been working with its network partners (Bridgespan, Dasra, Samhita) to discuss COVID-19 responses and potential areas of collaboration

- CSIP and the Indian School of Development Management are working together on a case study of how Indian NGOs are responding to the crisis

- The Centre is working towards the creation of a Nonprofit Leaders Network (NPLN), as the crisis has highlighted the need for cross-sector collaboration to address urgent gaps

Community Initiatives

At Asawarpur village, adjoining the campus, 389 construction workers (including their family members) are living in temporary camps. They are being provided with food and money by their contractors. Ashoka is supervising this daily, providing additional food and medical supplies where needed.

All operations are under the direct supervision of senior administration.

- Workers at Asawarpur village are being provided with food and money. Ashoka is also regularly spraying their camp with disinfectant
- A group of stranded migrant labourers whose employer had abandoned them were provided with packets of food and accommodation
- A woman security guard whose husband needed blood transfusion, was helped by Ashoka

Alumni Efforts

Parushya is an alumnus of the Young India Fellowship, Class of 2014. Since March, he has made significant contributions towards COVID-19 relief measures by working with the Delhi Government. The team's efforts have helped establish over 400 relief centres which have provided ration to nearly 10 lakh people.

They have also worked on a collaboration with Google to release a customised map with the locations of relief centres across Delhi. Their work includes:

- Mapping public data sources. The map helps streamline last-mile delivery of cooked food

- Using data to model future relief work. This involves creating a list of facilities available for the expansion of emergency relief measure, such as providing dry ration to non-ration cardholders

- Tackling nutrition problems in children from socio-economically weaker backgrounds with another taskforce. The team is now working to ensure that government-approved NGOs have the necessary funds and resources to tackle this gap
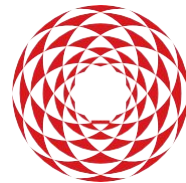
Links and Resources

[1] https://indscicov.in/

[2] http://www.iubs.org/

[3] https://ashoka.edu.in/welcome/stories/welcome-490

[4] https://ncovindia.com/

[5] https://indscicov.in/for-scientists-healthcare-professionals/mathematical-modelling/indscisim/

[6] https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/company/corporate-trends/giveindia-starts-india-covid-response-fund-with-rs-75-cr-in-initial-donations/articleshow/75141389.cms

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