



सत्यमेव जयते

Ministry of Health  
and Family Welfare  
Government of India

# SENTINELS OF THE SOIL

A tribute to Frontline and Healthcare Workers in India's fight against COVID-19



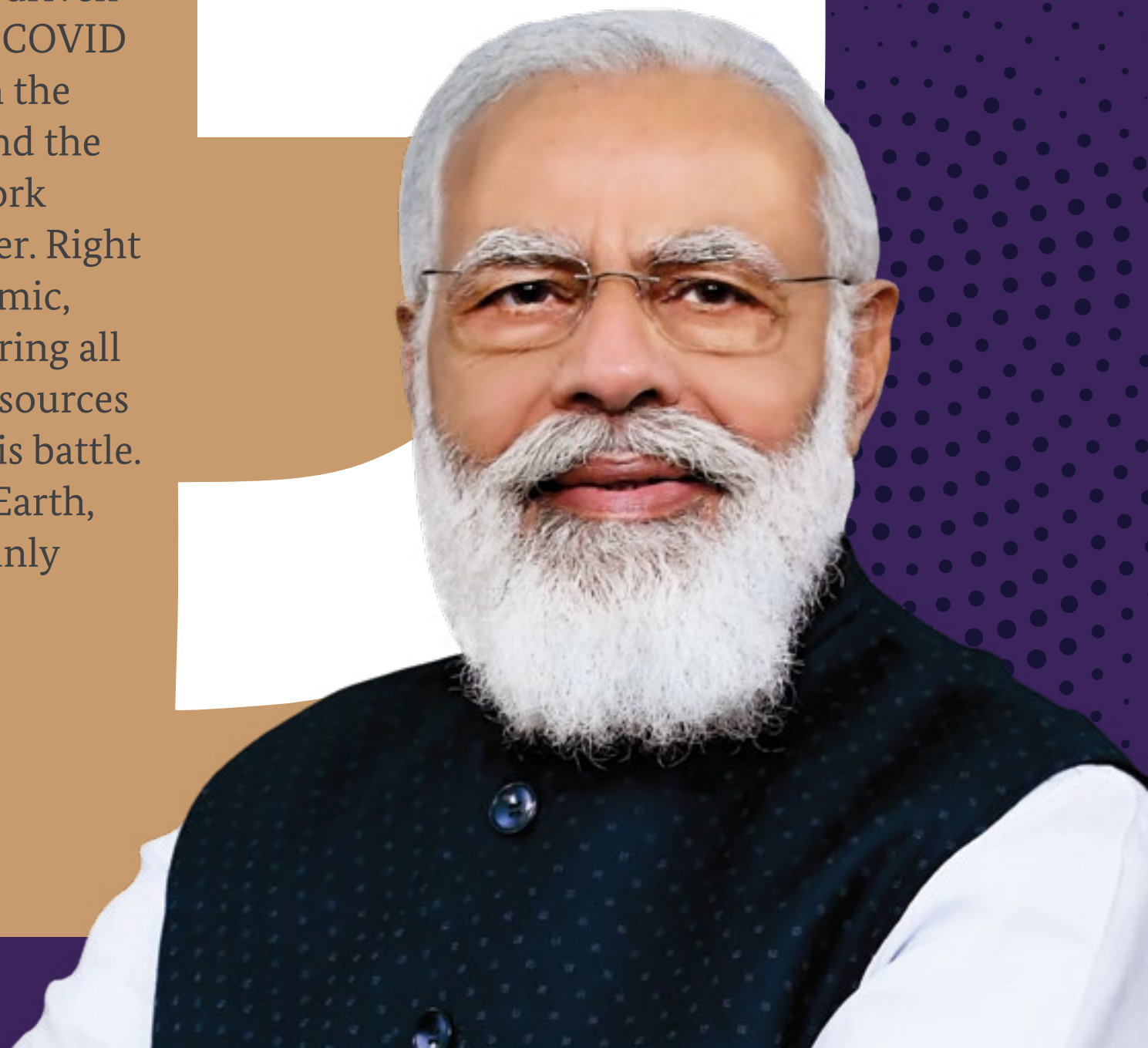






“ India’s COVID-19 fight is people-driven and gets great strength from our COVID warriors. The biggest lesson from the pandemic is that for humanity and the human cause, nations need to work together and move ahead together. Right from the beginning of the pandemic, India has been committed to sharing all our experiences, expertise and resources with the global community in this battle. Guided by the approach of ‘One Earth, One Health’, humanity will certainly overcome this pandemic. ”

**Shri Narendra Modi**  
Hon’ble Prime Minister of India







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**Mansukh Mandaviya**  
Union Minister  
Ministry of Health and Family Welfare  
Government of India

## Message

2020 and 2021 have been challenging years for all. The unforeseen events that accompanied the global pandemic caught everyone by surprise. India too had a fair share of challenges. At that point of time it was the people from different walks of life who emerged from all corners of the country and rallied behind the Government to combat the pandemic. These were India's brave hearts!

I feel privileged to pay tribute to these Frontline Workers and Healthcare Workers who through their spirit of service at this critical time have earned the title of 'COVID Warriors'. Their selfless and tireless efforts contributed in a big way in the successful management of COVID-19. This photobook will offer the reader a glimpse of the sheer grit and bravado of these COVID warriors that led them to accomplish extraordinary tasks.

On the release of this photobook, I express my deepest gratitude to the Hon'ble Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi for his visionary leadership and for steering the country through these troubled times, for being the beacon of hope and courage and for inspiring millions of COVID warriors from taking on the battle from the front. I am sure the readers will find this photobook a compelling read about the battle waged bravely by our COVID warriors.

**Mansukh Mandaviya**







Ministry of Health  
and Family Welfare  
Government of India



**Dr. Bharati Pravin Pawar**  
Minister of State  
Ministry of Health and Family Welfare  
Government of India

## Message

The outbreak of the global pandemic in early 2020 took the world by surprise. Covid-19 was a new disease of which little was known and humanity was totally unprepared to deal with it. At such a time even with risk to their lives several people across the country rallied behind the Government to combat the pandemic.

It gives me great happiness to know that the Ministry has with the support of UNICEF captured the stories of these brave people from across India. Indeed, these stories offer a glimpse of the lives of simple folks who rose to the occasion when the nation needed them the most. Often when the going gets tough, the tough get going and these stories embody this spirit. It is indeed endearing how such simple people, despite challenging circumstances, came up with such innovative ideas to spread awareness or lend a helping hand during the pandemic.

Hon'ble Prime Minister of India Shri Narendra Modi led the battle against COVID-19 from the front. It was his zeal and his commitment to protect the people that inspired countless corona warriors to join in the service of humanity. I offer my deepest respect to the collective spirit of humanism displayed by our corona warriors. I believe on reading this book the readers will be equally inspired to hold them in the highest regard.

**Dr. Bharati Pravin Pawar**





**Rajesh Bhushan**

Secretary

Ministry of Health and Family Welfare  
Government of India

## Foreword

India responded to the COVID-19 pandemic in a proactive & pre-emptive manner. While the response was steered by the Government, it was a collective and collaborative response. India's Healthcare Workers and Frontline Workers like the Doctors, Nurses, Community Health Workers, Sanitation Workers, Police, Volunteers, Ambulance Drivers among many others valiantly stood behind the Government in the hour of the country's crisis.

The Frontline Workers are a critical link in India's response to COVID-19. From providing COVID care services, to counselling and motivating the patients, ferrying patients, sharing factual information with their communities, to being the face of the vaccination drive and carrying it to the last mile and battling vaccine hesitancy - the Frontline Workers are the ones who have sustained the recovery process.

While the individuals whose stories are captured in this book are unique to the Indian context, I am confident that these stories will inspire people globally. It is the self-belief and zeal of the Frontline Workers that lends credence to the words ***"We shall overcome!"***

I acknowledge the contribution of the Ministry's IEC team and UNICEF India in bringing out this photobook. I believe this effort will document the great sacrifice made by the Healthcare and Frontline Workers and bring for them the applause that they truly deserve.

**Rajesh Bhushan**



## About the Book

*When the global COVID-19 pandemic broke out in early 2020, it was nothing short of an apocalypse, throwing every semblance of human life on earth into a tizzy. At such a time when the world was still grappling with the impact of the new Virus, there arose from amongst the ordinary people, a phalanx of samaritans who staked their all and went out each day, quietly going about their duties, to save us from*

*the scourge. This Photo Book celebrates the indomitable spirit of these people as they joined the country's efforts in fighting the pandemic.*

*This Photobook is a tribute to that ambulance driver, who without waiting for the last rites of his loved ones to be completed, rushed to resume his duties. He knew that every minute behind the wheels could mean another life saved. The sirens heard round the clock at the peak of the pandemic were like lifelines running across the streets. The photo book pays respect to that lab technician, who collected throat and nasal swabs day in and day out, knowing fully well the risk of*



*infection to him and his family. The book salutes the Doctor and his healthcare team who as in charge of a Community Health Centre in a remote tribal area, worked tirelessly to overcome the entrenched hesitancy against vaccination in his community, so that science could prevail over superstition. The book celebrates the young volunteers—‘Sathiyas’ (friends) of Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram for finding ingenious new ways to bust myths and for taking the lead in making their community understand the importance of vaccination in keeping them safe from the pandemic. They proved yet again that children*

*can become the harbingers of a new awakening. This book applauds India’s Frontline and Community Health Workers, who transcended their call of duty, reaching hitherto unreached and far-flung terrains with the spirit of not leaving anyone behind.*


*India’s battle against COVID-19 is indeed a story of such sentinels whose images will remain etched in our minds for eons to come. The book pays tribute to the COVID-19 heroes whose groundswell of support at that critical juncture has become a national legend.*



# 01

*The Government of India steered COVID response efforts on a “mission mode”. **Jan Andolan** – a mass campaign launched by India’s Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi, placed enhanced focus on making India’s response a “People or Community-led movement”. His clarion call imbued every Indian to face the pandemic head-on.*

*The first story is of young volunteers who realized that if their community had to be saved from the pandemic, they would have to generate greater awareness among the community. Racing against time, these volunteers thought of unique ways to articulate the importance of the COVID-19 vaccination.*



Harshali Purohit, a young volunteer under the Government of India's Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram (National Adolescent Health Programme) along with her team take upon themselves to root out misinformation on COVID vaccination and to address the deeply entrenched vaccine hesitancy in their village.





Harshali is a resident of Narsingh Runda, a village in the State of Madhya Pradesh.

Even as the largest vaccination drive gained pace across the country, there was no time to lose. Harshali and her colleagues had a challenging task to accomplish if their community had to be kept safe from COVID-19. The team decided to go door-to-door and talk to each resident of the community to address their apprehensions regarding vaccination.



Harshali and her young brigade seek every opportunity to meet members of the community. Here, her colleague and she are seen acquainting one such member on the necessity to observe COVID appropriate behaviour to keep safe, viz wearing a mask, maintaining physical distance and regularly sanitizing hands.



“We had to convince people in ways they understood”, said Harshali.

“So we adopted a customary tradition practised to invite community members to weddings in which a mixture of rice and turmeric is placed at the door of the guest. Instead, we placed the mixture of rice and turmeric at the door of eligible beneficiaries as an invitation to come for COVID-19 vaccination”, said Harshali.



“People were pleasantly piqued and they agreed to come for the vaccination”, said Harshali.



Today, Harshali and her team have successfully managed to convince most of the eligible members to take the COVID-19 vaccination.



It is because of such untiring efforts of Harshali and her team that the villagers turned up in large numbers at the awareness meets, to learn more about the disease, the vaccination and other preventive measures.



**“I feel proud that I could also do something for my village”, said Harshali beaming with joy.**

# 02

*The Government of India's COVID-19 response efforts were supported by a competent fleet of Frontline Workers, which included among others the ubiquitous ambulance drivers even as they supported the country's emergency medical services 24x7, during these unprecedented times.*

*As thousands of ambulances were pressed into service, they often became the face of a responsive system that successfully reached out to multitudes during the pandemic.*



Ambulance services became critical to combat the pandemic. It was not just one role that they performed during this time. The ambulance drivers ferried and attended to COVID patients, they along with the paramedic staff monitored their condition and even motivated them along the way. They thus became the caretakers and often even confidants.





Pravin S Baria- an ambulance driver from Gujarat lost both his parents to the deadly COVID-19. Even as the family attended to the last rites, they spurred him to go on and attend to his duties.



“There were non-stop calls for help”, recalls Pravin when talking about the patient load during the pandemic.



Nisar Malik, another ambulance driver from Gujarat reminisces how families handed over their loved ones with choked voices. It was such moments that made him realize the significance of his profession.

These ambulance drivers, even at the risk of infection to themselves and their families, put duty above all and worked round the clock.



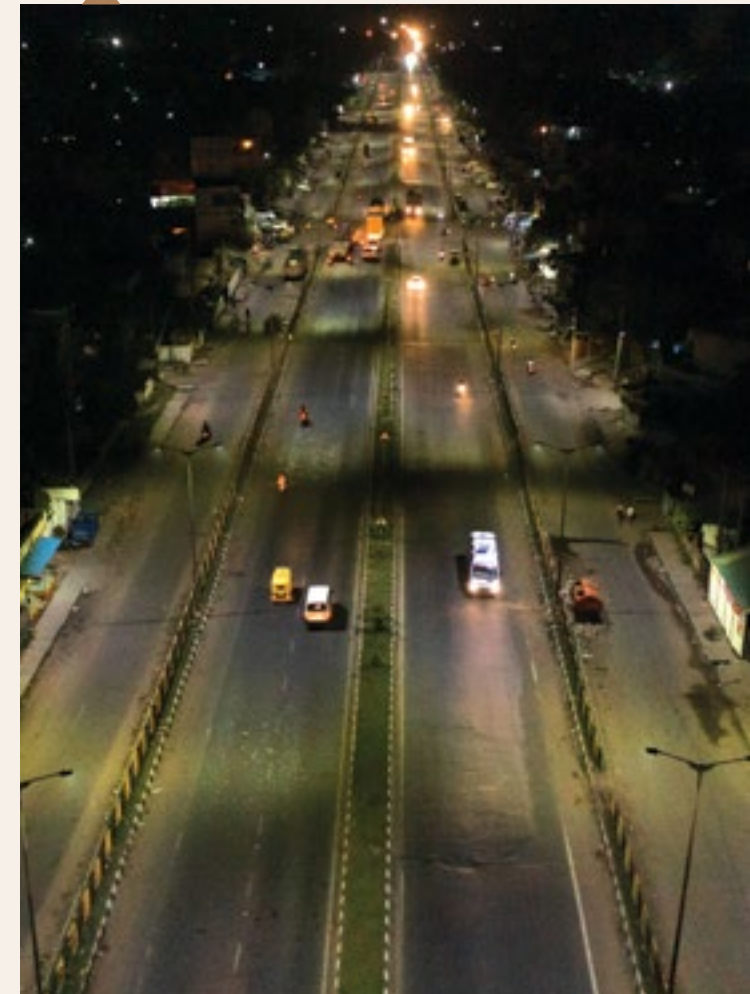


The rush to ferry patients to hospitals, often going without meals and the need for constant vigil became a way of life for the ambulance drivers. Here, Nisar is seen getting ready for another mission as he puts on the personal protection equipment.

For many patients, it was the first such experience and they were overwhelmed at the thought of their separation from families. The patients had to be consoled and persuaded to be hopeful of quick recovery.




Miles and miles were covered even as the streets echoed the sound of sirens during the pandemic. Indeed, without these ambulance drivers behind the wheels, the reach to critical care would have been longer for most.





**“The Government is working round the clock to save lives. Why should I not support the country in our greatest hour of need”, said Nisar Malik.**



“I wanted humanity to win the war against the pandemic”, says Nisar Malik, who works with 108 Emergency Service of the State.

# 03

*With the opening up of commercial activities post the first lockdown in 2020, a Chennai resident is concerned about the spread of the virus. He takes it upon himself to spread awareness about COVID Appropriate Behaviour. Taking inspiration from what he watches on T.V. he decides to do what he can in the best way he can to save lives. This despite all his personal challenges. The third story is not only of the indomitable spirit of P. K. Perumal but also of his ingenuity in utilizing his tools to reach out.*

*India gave rise to many such Perumals – fearless, compassionate and determined to be of help to their community during the pandemic. Their contributions are indeed commendable.*

Lane after lane in the bustling fish markets of Chennai, a voice beseeches over the microphone - "Coronavirus isn't over yet. We must not let our guard down".







“When COVID happened, I saw on TV how people were dying. That made me cry too. I wanted to do something about it”, P. K. Perumal recalls of how he got inspired for his mission.



“I was constantly thinking of what I could do. Then I bought a loudspeaker and went to crowded places and using the mic, I urged people to wear mask and follow preventive measures, because the virus was spreading fast and people were dying”, reminisces P. K. Perumal.

Perumal took to the busy markets of Chennai on his customized two wheeler fitted with loudspeaker and mic, cautioning people against the virus.



Right from delivering medicines to the ill, to groceries at people's doorsteps, P. K. Perumal did all to support his community members. He exults as he talks about his experiences and how he never charged for his petrol expenses.



Perumal meets a police constable, who dissuades him from carrying on with his activities and also reasons with him that if something were to happen to him, who would take care of his family. However, seeing Perumal's persistence, he not only relents but also offers help.

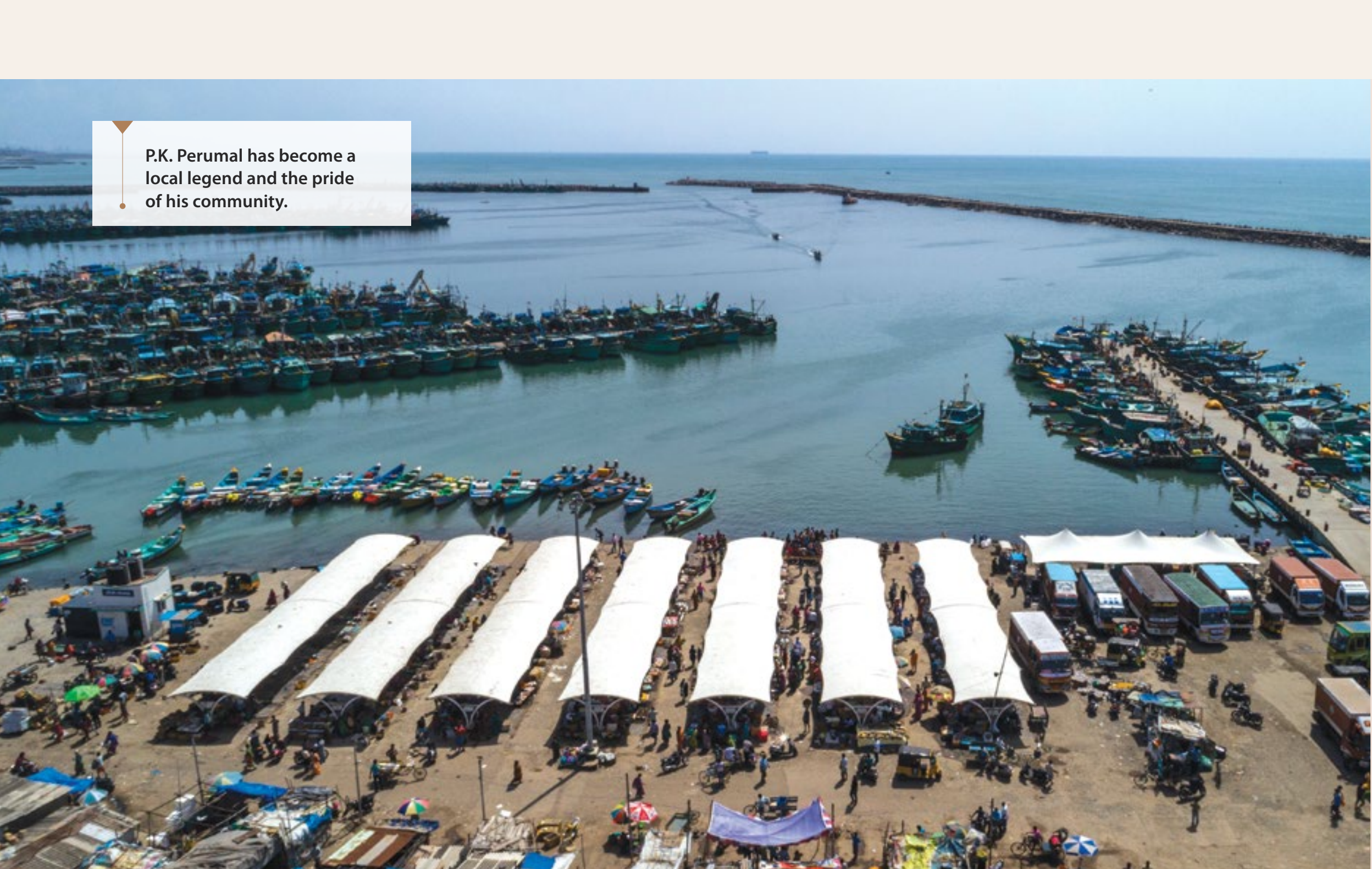


P. Sveta, his daughter recalls with pride how he would leave early in the mornings and return by 3 pm. As soon as Perumal reached home, he would wash his hands, feet and face. He would then plan for the next day in the night itself.



P. Sveta, his daughter says, "the family was apprehensive at first but gave way as he was adamant to help people in any way he could".





P.K. Perumal has become a local legend and the pride of his community.

# 04

*Ever since the COVID-19 pandemic hit the country, doctors have led from the front, with tremendous professionalism and alacrity. At a time when people were being advised to stay indoors, doctors, despite the risk to their lives, showed courage to carry out their duties. They have shown remarkable fortitude throughout the pandemic and continue to be symbols of hope, resilience and a never-say-die attitude. From attending to patients without a break, to providing online consultation services for the last mile, the doctors ensured 24 x 7 care for COVID patients in their quest to save lives.*

*The fourth story in the series celebrates the doctors for their role and shows how dressed in their PPE kits they became synonymous with hope in these dire times.*



Dr. Devashish Desai, is a senior resident in Infectious Diseases in the Department of Medicine in All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi. He and numerous health workers like him were at the absolute frontline, fighting day and night to save people from becoming casualty to COVID-19.





“In the month of April, during the second wave of the pandemic, we sometimes had to be on duty continuously for multiple shifts, without having anyone to relieve us”, recalls Dr. Devashish as he mulls over the intensity of the pandemic.



“When life gets tough, the tough get going”, recalls Dr. Desai with a smile. “It was essential to maintain some semblance of discipline in personal routine so that one could withstand the long haul in the hospitals.”

“As medical students we read about how devastating the pandemics in the past were. I never thought I would be living through one myself, and so soon in my career”, says Dr. Desai.



“I am astonished when I see people without masks, organising big gatherings. Do they not know how devastating their complacency and carelessness can be for them and their families”, says Desai, who himself has painstakingly followed COVID Appropriate Behaviour for over a year now. “Please don’t let your guard down even for a moment and get yourself vaccinated”, he appeals to people.



“There were doctors from all specialties — physicians, surgeons, orthopedists, gynaecologists. You name it and they were all there, working together as a part of one big team to provide care to COVID patients. They were all aware of the difficult situation, yet leaving their families behind, they were here to look after other people’s families”, said Dr. Desai.



"When patients get admitted, their relatives cannot accompany them. So when they are all alone in a COVID ward, we are the only ones to take care of them and their emotional wellness." Indeed doctors donned in their PPE kits became a symbol of hope for patients during the pandemic.





“Whatever little time I get off duty, I try and connect with my family who live in the State of Maharashtra”, said Dr. Desai. “My wife is a doctor. She is an anesthesiologist. She too works in the COVID ICU. My family has been my biggest support.”

“India as a country definitely has the capacity to overcome challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic. Everyday patients are recovering and going back home. They are definitely grateful. Our efforts have paid off in saving the lives and smiles on countless faces in the country”, said Dr. Desai



# 05

*During the pandemic one of the most critical aspects was to reach factual information on real-time basis to people. This especially posed a challenge given the country's vast topographical diversity. The Community Radio Stations played a significant role in reaching correct information to people at a time when they were mostly confined to their homes.*

*The fifth story is of Ashwathy Murali, the perky radio jockey from **Radio Mattoli**, Kerala, who enthused the villagers to take the COVID-19 vaccination and walked the talk by being the first to do so herself.*

*Hello, I am Ashwathy Murali via Radio Mattoli in live phone-in programme.*

*Let's see who is joining us today.*

*Caller: Hello, I am Geetha, calling from Mananthavadi. I want to know why do we use masks? What's the need for it?*

*Ashwathy: I will tell you why it is necessary. The virus spreads through saliva. When we talk to someone, we accidentally spit out droplets of our spit and the other person may also spit while talking. The spit carries the virus which causes the infection.*








Ashwathy, a presenter at a Community Radio Station in Wayanad district, Kerala, a State situated near the southern tip of India, helps bust myths and address vaccine related hesitancy by sharing information in her local dialect.

**RECORDING**



18% of the people in Wayanad are tribals. Most of the tribals are from the Paniyar community, one of the most backward communities. Ashwathy acts like a bridge between them and the world outside their community.



**“This terrain does not allow access to multiple sources of information”, says Ashwathy.**

**“The one source of information one would find in every household in my village, is a radio. Therefore, when the vaccination drive started, I knew that this was the only way in which I could reach people to address their misconceptions.”**

“I used to hear the radio since I was in eighth standard. I always liked Radio more than TV. During the pandemic, I listened to programmes that featured doctors. Since they were in English, I wrote down everything they said. Then I translated with the help of Google in a way I could understand, and finally into Paniya language”, says Ashwathy recalling her experience.



“Though often I had to burn the midnight oil, it was all worth it when I was able to address the queries from the community. Every person vaccinated gave me a sense of personal triumph”, she says.

“When a girl from the community tells about certain things, people tend to believe and understand it in a better way. They then act upon things from their heart, and not out of compulsion”, says one of the community members from her village in Wayanad.



Ashwathy’s audience cuts across all age groups and community members are glued to their radio sets when she interacts with them through a live phone-in programme. When the District Collector asked some of them how they were aware of the safety measures, they said they knew everything from *Radio Mattoli*.



“I wanted to get vaccinated first and show my community that it is important to get vaccinated. I made my grandma understand why she should get vaccinated”, says Ashwathy.

When the other people saw that she was fine, others too came forward for the vaccination.



# 06

*The Government of India launched the largest vaccine drive in the world on 16th January 2021, to combat the pandemic. The drive was scaled-up in phases and first covered the Healthcare Workers and Frontline Workers who were most at risk from the pandemic. The challenge was not only demographic but was also in terms of reaching the vaccination across the country, across varied topographies and many a times to hitherto unreached areas. The credit goes to the team of Healthcare Workers who took it upon themselves to ensure that everyone was covered. It was not an easy task as deep rooted hesitancy had to be overcome and rampant myths about vaccination had to be countered.*

*The sixth story of India's COVID warriors is one such story of a team of Community Healthcare Workers covering miles and miles across hills and rivers, to reach remote communities and ensuring that no one was left behind in the vaccination drive.*

Banswara district in Rajasthan, a tribal dominated region posed a huge topographical challenge for the administration even as the Healthcare Workers travelled to the last mile to far flung islands, across Mahi waters.







"I would have never ever thought that one day I will need to ferry vaccines and medicines on my boat to Kotda village, on the other side of the Mahi river. This was extremely difficult, especially when it rained as the village was cut off. This kind of planning by the administration makes us feel extremely confident and proud."  
- Boatman

In Banswara district because of the river dam many villages are waterlocked and can be reached only by boat. Here Dr. Mukesh Maida is seen with his team of Healthcare Workers travelling to Kotda Village, a hilly region across the waters, populated by tribal communities.





“When the COVID vaccination campaign was launched, people had misconceptions about the vaccine efficacy”, says Dr. Maida speaking of their incredulity. “They would ask us, where did we come from? What was our purpose?”



“We went from village to village, door to door and explained to people the risk of exposure to COVID-19 disease and the benefit of vaccination. We told them that we too had taken both the doses of COVID-19 vaccine and were safe”, says Dr. Maida.



Slowly, the vaccination drive picked up. Committees were formed in villages and they started further explaining to the people how it was the best way of protection against the pandemic. Convincing the locals to overcome their hesitancy was an exercise both of patience and reasoning. Gradually, the word spread around.

“And as more and more people, especially women trickled into the vaccination centre, we knew that we had succeeded. Every woman vaccinated meant that their families would soon follow”, says Dr. Maida.



“There was a sense of mission. We did not want to leave even one eligible person in any village without vaccination”, he adds.



“People are understanding the importance of the COVID vaccination now. Sometimes people respond well and appreciate the team for visiting their homes and vaccinating them, even if they could not visit the centre themselves.”



**“I have been vaccinated with my second dose and I am perfectly fine. The Government is providing us with the vaccine free of cost to protect us. I feel safe”, says a village elder.**



# 07

*As COVID-19 took on pandemic proportions, India had to quickly ramp-up the testing capacities. Early identification of cases, followed by isolation and treatment was integral to Government of India's "Test, Track, Treat" strategy to contain the virus from spreading rapidly. This exercise called for quick scaling up of the laboratories and training of lab personnel including technicians. As on date the country has already crossed the half billion mark of total samples tested.*

*The seventh story on COVID warriors pays tribute to lab technicians like Anand Singh who took on the virus, literally with their hands.*

Anand Singh, a lab technician, has been working in the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), in India's capital city New Delhi for years and is accustomed to handling sample collection and testing for infectious diseases including some of the high hazard pathogens. When he took the nasal swab sample of a suspected COVID-19 patient for the first time last year, little did he know that the disease was going to take the shape of a global pandemic.







“My day begins in the wee hours of the morning and goes on till late in the night. Collecting samples day in and day out has been my story for over a year now. Even then at the peak of the pandemic, a certain despondency had set in because the queue of cases never seemed to cease”, says Anand.



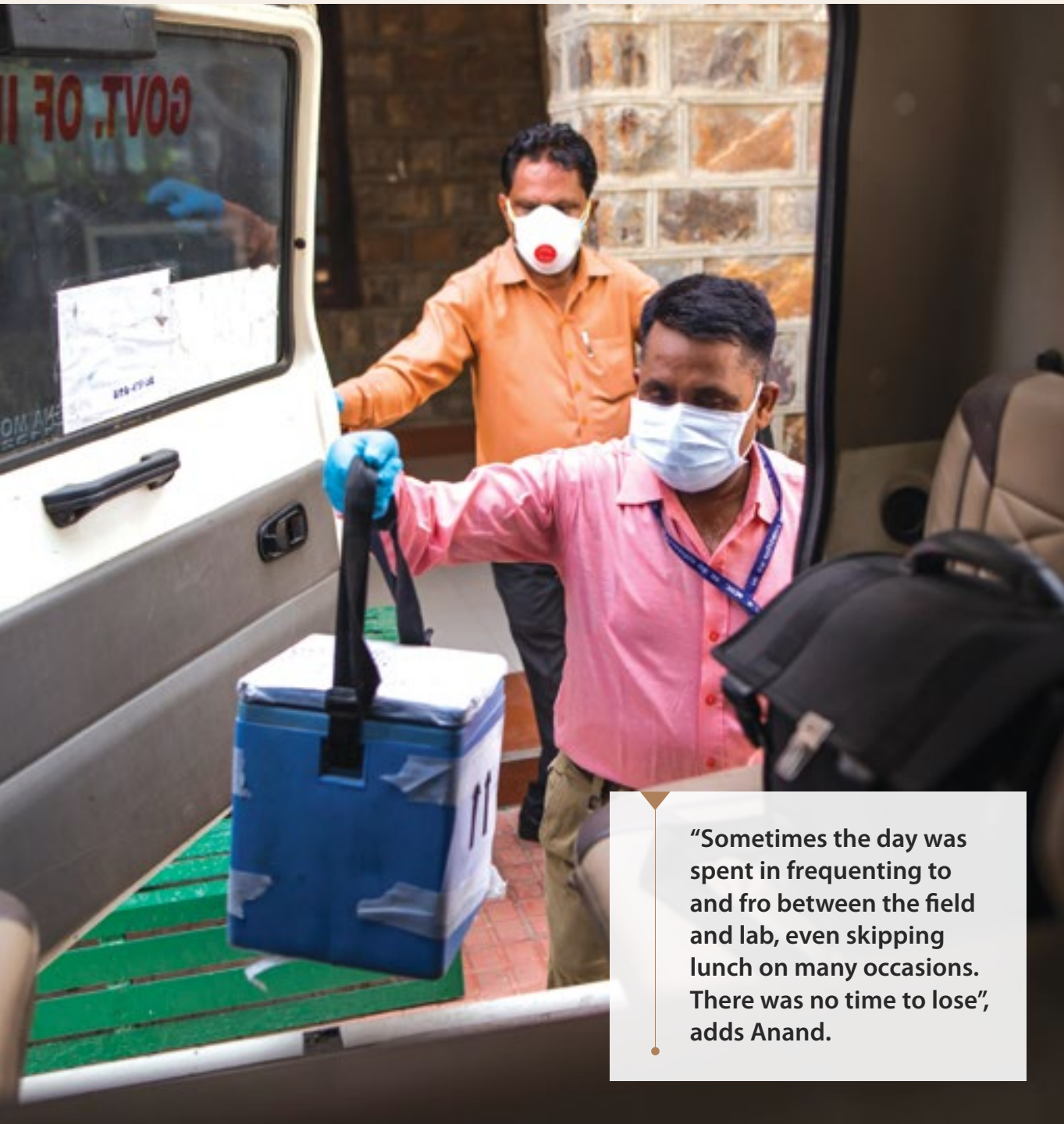
“This was a critical time for the entire country and in this hour of crisis, all health workers needed to work together and support the Government. This was the only way out”, says Anand when recalling the spirit that made him go on.



Anand and his colleagues went through intense training by the Government of India as the country braced for COVID-19. The invisible enemy had yet to show its disturbing face.



As the pandemic spread, its severity too intensified. Anand was shifted to the field, where his responsibility was to collect the samples of the suspected COVID-19 patients. It was also a test of his endurance.



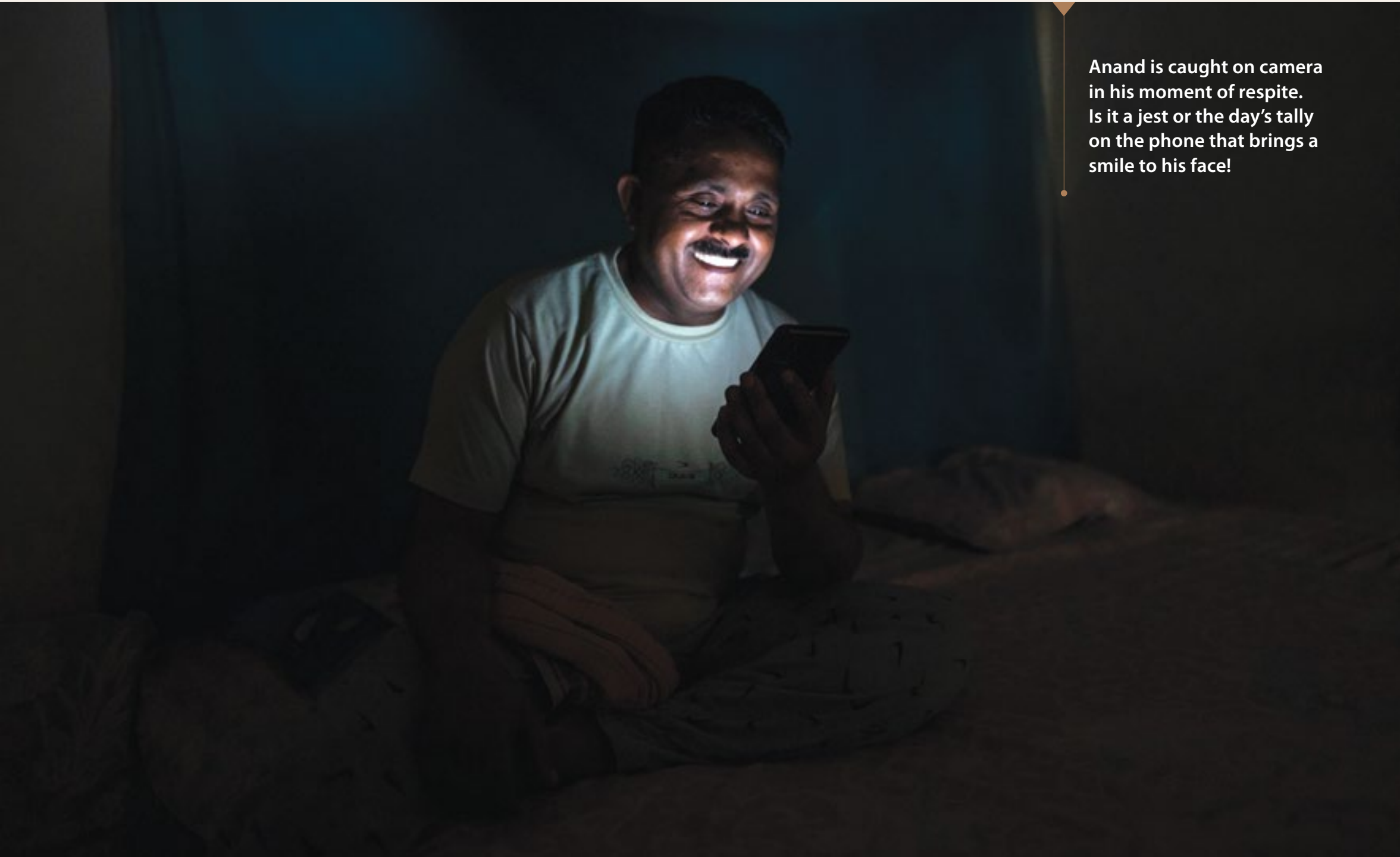
“Sometimes the day was spent in frequenting to and fro between the field and lab, even skipping lunch on many occasions. There was no time to lose”, adds Anand.

“Sample collection could at times become a challenge. While people were anxious about the diagnosis, they would many a time be nervous while taking the nasal or throat swab. At times some people would also get irritated and annoyed. It was nice to see them heave a sigh of relief when the job was done”, says Anand.



Strict protocols had to be observed at all times. Here Anand is seen returning home late at night and sanitising his hands before he enters his home.





Anand is caught on camera in his moment of respite. Is it a jest or the day's tally on the phone that brings a smile to his face!

Lab technicians like Anand who handled samples in thousands in the past year and a half, without worrying about the risk it carried for them and their families are real brave hearts!



08

*Gujarat's Dantiwada town is a glowing example of how an innovative method of leveraging digital technology provided a big push to the COVID-19 vaccination drive. This proved not only easy to use, but was the fastest way and also free of cost. Infact, the use of social media paved the way for community ownership or "Jan Bhaagidaari" which Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi had deeply desired as a means to combat COVID-19.*

*The last story in this series highlights how a simple idea of circulating photos of people getting vaccinated through WhatsApp instilled community trust in the vaccination process.*



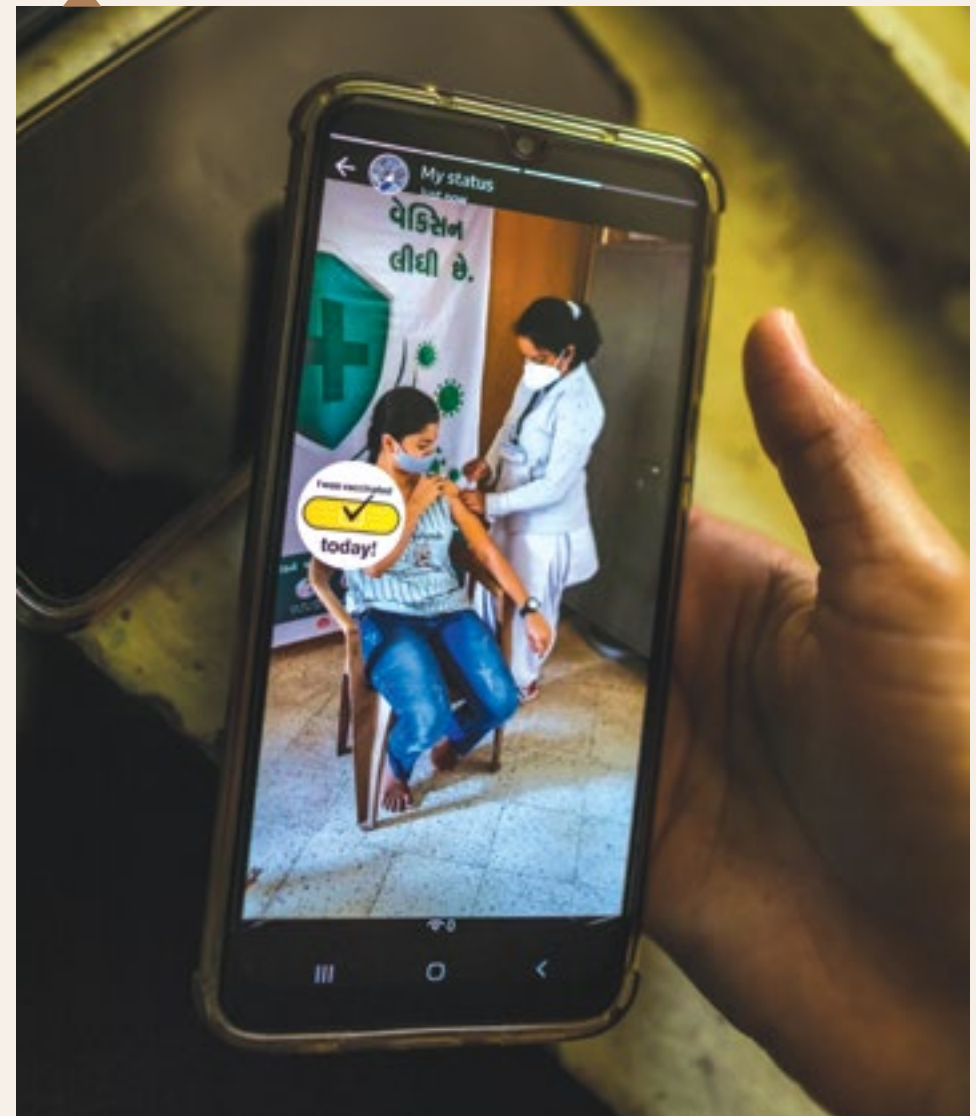
COVID vaccination is going on in full swing in the small town of Dantiwada in the State of Gujarat. The situation however was not the same some time back. Community members were hesitant to take the vaccination due to apprehension of the after-effects of the COVID-19 vaccine. Their transformation was largely due to the efforts of Vellari Kusumben Devjibhai, a Healthcare Worker at the local Community Health Centre, who as is true of her generation, took to digital technology full throttle to spread the message.



“Don’t even start about how scared people were! Nobody was ready to take the vaccine. They were afraid that something might happen to them... I made a list. My target was to vaccinate 100 people. Only six people from that list showed up, that too after a lot of hard work”, says Kusum recalling the initial turnout.



“Then I got an idea. I clicked photos of those six people on my mobile and put those photos as my WhatsApp status for others to see them. I sent these videos to my colleagues. They helped circulate the videos”, she adds.



“I went door-to-door to explain things, but nobody was ready to understand. But on seeing photos of a person taking a vaccine for real, made people feel reassured”, says Kusum.



“A lot can happen through WhatsApp. All these videos and photos have spread like wildfire through that medium”, she affirms.

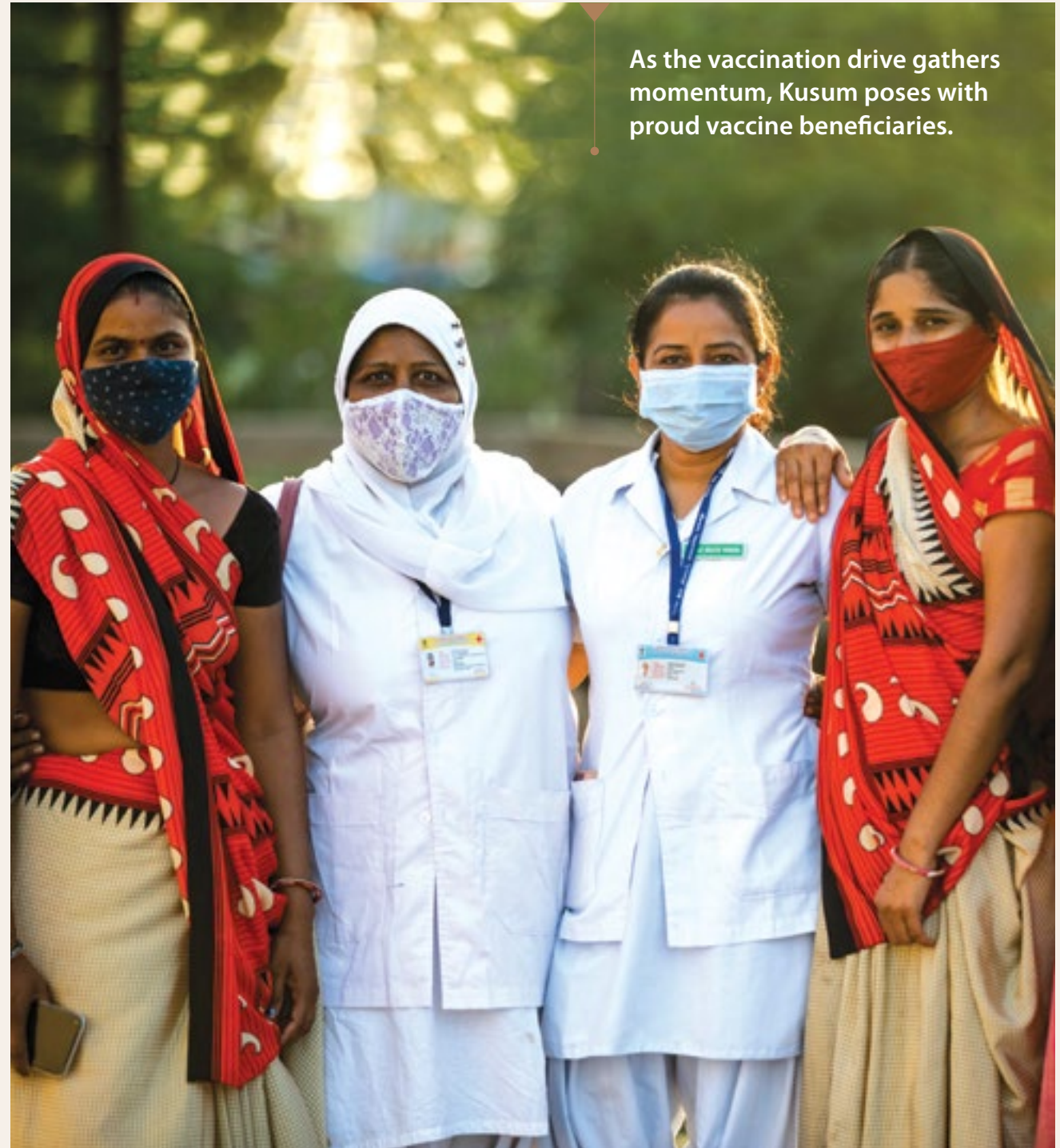


“When I saw videos and photos of other people confidently taking the COVID vaccine, I no longer felt scared and went ahead in getting myself and my family members vaccinated”, says Sukhiben Nagjibhai Rabri, a beneficiary from Dantiwada, Gujarat.



“Seeing photos of family and friends getting vaccinated worked like magic. Suddenly, there was a buzz across homes, walkways and marketplaces. People were eager to learn more about the pandemic and the vaccination”, recalls Kusum.

“People started turning up for vaccination in large numbers. What’s amazing was the transformation from hesitancy to eagerness for the vaccines. They would even caution each other about the minor after-effects post-vaccination”, she recalls.



As the vaccination drive gathers momentum, Kusum poses with proud vaccine beneficiaries.

“Now people call me up asking when can they come for their second dose”, says Kusum brimming with a sense of fulfilment. “My father is very proud of me. Every time I leave for work, he asks me to be careful”, she adds.





This photo book has been developed with the support of UNICEF, India.

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