Response to COVID-19

Goa

Goa Shows the Way through Will and Trust

When COVID-19 came to paradise, India had to try to act swiftly. Goa is a tiny emerald land on the western coast of the Indian peninsula with a population of 1.8 million. On its north runs the Terekhol River, which separates Goa from Maharashtra, and on the south lies the state of Karnataka. The state has a history of Portuguese rule and the plush beaches, remnants of Portuguese culture and architecture as well as the numerous churches, cathedrals and the famous Basilica, make Goa a favorite destination for national and international tourists.

However, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in India, its flourishing tourist industry became a cause of concern and vulnerability for the state, propelling the state machinery to swing into focused action very early on in the pandemic and take innovative steps to solve critical problems. As of June 30th, Goa has reported 1251 cases and 3 deaths. It is among the least affected states in the country with just 724 active cases. The state has been able to achieve what looked impossible just a few months ago. Some of Goa's achievements are important not only for the state but also for the larger national and global fight against COVID-19. Here we highlight two examples: how the state repurposed its manufacturing capacity to meet the demand for hand sanitizer; and how Goa's thriving pharmaceutical industry managed to minimize disruption and quickly recover its production capacity to pre-COVID levels.

Goa: Overview

As on 30th June

Population
1.8 million

1251
Total cases

3 deaths

724 active cases

Alcohol to Hand Sanitizer

Turning alcohol into hand sanitizer was one such success story. As COVID-19 emerged in Goa, people panicked and started hoarding hand sanitizers. The administration received numerous complaints related to a shortage of the latter, and as an initial response, Goa Food and Drug Administration took steps to prevent black-marketing and hoarding of hand sanitizers and masks. But there was a need to tackle the shortage of supply, and to calm the nerves of the public pertaining to the same. The government of Goa then decided to permit liquor manufacturing units to manufacture sanitizers off ethyl alcohol, commonly used to manufacture various types of liquor.

When the national lockdown was announced, the administration started issuing permissions to liquor manufacturing units; to manufacture hand sanitizer with effect from 24th March. Within a few days, a total of 16 liquor manufacturing plants produced 950,000 litres of hand sanitizer.

After meeting the local demand, these producers exported the sanitizer out of the state. The administration motivated these manufacturers to provide about 40,000 liters of sanitizers to government departments such as health, disaster management, police, etc, who have had active public interaction even during the lockdown.

Revival of Pharma Industry

Another case of innovation is that of the revival of the pharma industry in Goa post lockdown. Goa is a hub of pharmaceutical companies with specialized and advanced drug manufacturing facilities producing allopathic and ayurvedic drugs, medical devices, in-vitro diagnostics equipment and cosmetics. About 61 of such pharmaceutical companies, including MNCs of different scales, have a turnover of approximately USD 2.3 billion– about 20 percent of the state's GDP and make up more than 10% of the total pharmaceutical exports of India. Once the lockdown was declared, to combat COVID-19 infection, the activities of these units came to a standstill even though they were not directly banned. Returning these units to normalcy became an issue of immediate national importance.

The first task was to bring the employees back to the manufacturing plant. The sheer magnitude of the number of employees of such manufacturing units was substantial. Initially, permitting the movement of such staff was assigned to the local administration, but associations of many residential societies had restricted the movement of their residents. Anyone leaving these societies was facing social ostracization.

Taking the domestic as well as international commitments of the pharma industry into account, the government set up a separate focus group to find ways to bring pharma production back to normalcy. The power to issue travel permits was delegated directly to the authorized signatories of these manufacturing units. Based on the recommendation of the focus group, the government adopted a trust-based approach, and authorized these units to issue travel passes for their staff. The local authorities worked hard to issue these authorization letters the same day. While this proactive approach was the turning point, this step resolved only the administrative hurdles.

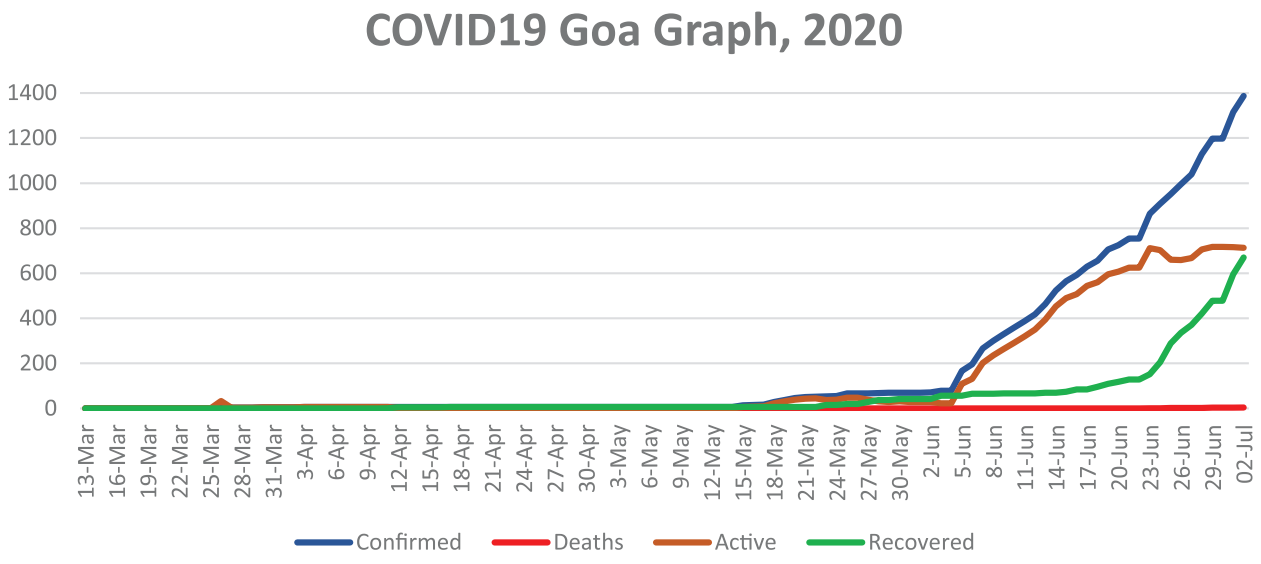
Overcoming the resistance of employees to return to work--due to their apprehensions around contracting the infection--was much more difficult. Also, the authorities recorded an appeal and circulated it in the WhatsApp groups of such employees. Through print and other news media, Goa Food and Drug Administration appealed to the employees of manufacturers of medicines, medical equipment and ancillary products and the entire allied supply chain covering transportation, stockists, distributors and retailers to attend to their duties. The appeals highlighted that these workers were as important as doctors and health workers in the fight against COVID-19. These appeals made an impact and many employees started coming to manufacturing plants, even though they would have received a salary even without going to work.

This appeal received a good response and boosted the morale of the employees; the industry which was running at 15% of capacity on the third day of the lockdown, reached 80% of its capacity within the next ten days.

The last hurdle was societal resistance. Employees were warned against going out by the welfare associations of their residential societies. In many areas, the public had blocked the roads to prevent any movement in their areas, but the local administration used persuasion and enforcement in the right mix to ensure that pharma workers did not face any physical barriers or backlash for attending their duties. Also, WhatsApp groups were formed to ensure an immediate and instant response.

The steps taken by the Goa government ensured that the pharmaceutical industry revived its production to pre-COVID-19 levels, thus contributing to national and international efforts to counter the impact of the pandemic.

Goa's innovative approach to convert existing facilities to manufacture hand sanitizers for COVID-19 response enabled them to tackle shortages and promote sanitary habits. Keeping pharma industry open in spite of lock down led to many benefits including production of essential drugs and continuation of economic activity. While the pandemic rages on, these interventions built resilience in the society and helped it to face it better.



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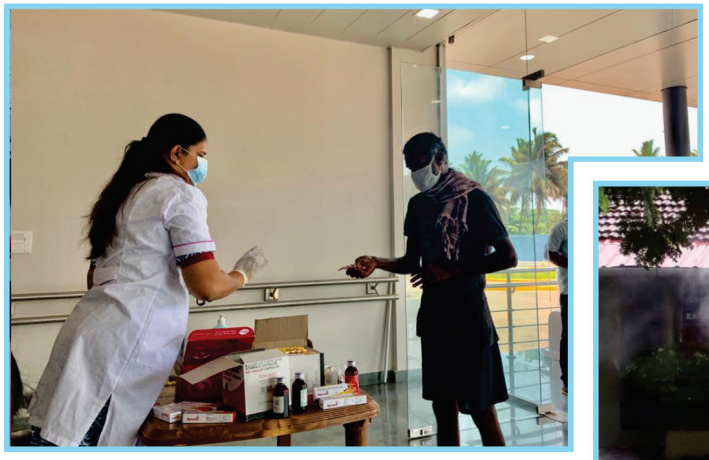

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