

# Travel management holds the key to covid containment

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the detailed data of India's six busiest airports would show heavy passenger pressure in Delhi and Mumbai in terms of coverage of destinations, volume of passengers, tourist arrivals and departures from India to international destinations. Given the high levels of traffic they have, these airports cannot be closed down to control the spread of the virus. The health ministry has been issuing travel advisories for passengers since February 2020, but not much effort has gone into the preparation of guidelines for airlines and airport staff, let alone those who work at commercial outlets in airport terminals. Some of these workers have been cited in news reports saying that they have not been given priority vaccinations. This is worrisome, as the complete immunization of all staff working at major hubs of travel, from where people fan out in various directions, is essential for covid containment. In the absence of an official programme for them, airlines must take responsibility for their staff vaccination. While temperature checks are easily done when boarding cards are scanned before flights, we also require high-performance equipment that would eliminate interpersonal contact during the often-elaborate process of passenger security checks and luggage scrutiny.

During the last 20 years, the infectious diseases and epidemics that India has suffered have originated mostly from beyond the country's borders. The coronavirus outbreak in India also has an external source. This disease is very contagious and more than 200 countries currently have cases of covid, the spread of which needs to be contained on an urgent basis by means of better management. One of the main factors that need attention is the travel of people from one city to another, whether their destinations are international or domestic, and people's daily commute for work. For a clearer understanding of the association between travel and covid, various travel components need to be analysed.

In the first wave of covid, particularly in the pandemic's early phase, we found covid cases reported mostly from states with metropolitan cities and international airports. India's air connectivity with global destinations is high, with as many as 30 airports catering to international flights. A look at

We have 53 metropolitan cities in India, all of which are well linked via the country's railway network to other urban centres, big and small, within and outside the state. However, it remains unclear if the railway staff who engage with travellers have been vaccinated. The same goes for those who work at commercial units on platforms or in food courts. As with airports, this risk of contagion must be minimized. Also, facilities for rapid antigen tests at stations and aboard trains could be made available for the convenience of long-distance travellers.

To maintain distancing, middle berths in sleeper compartments could be left vacant. Routine office commutes account for a significant share of urban mobility. Not everyone can work from home. Most people who work in offices need to travel daily, and given the long distances that must be covered in most large cities from homes to the workplace, public transport systems are a com-

mon preference. According to Census 2011 data, there were 200 million people in India using various modes of transport to reach their place of work. Of this total, around 30 million were using public transport, and 24.1 million were travelling on public buses and trains for more than 5km. Those counts must have risen since then. However, when people travel for over 5km on congested buses and trains, they are typically exposed to the same air for more than 30 minutes, which sharply raises the chance of coronavirus transmission.

State-wise data is available on how many people depend on public transport for work travel, but we do not have such statistics on students and others who use the same modes to get around.

A newspaper report of 6 February 2021 said that 3.7 million people were estimated to be using local trains in Mumbai, even during its lockdown, around 2 million were reported to have used this conveyance on 19 April

On their part, perhaps organizations should arrange for chartered buses for their staff to reach the required places of work. Many school buses remain underutilized and could be hired for the purpose.

It is ultimately the task of policymakers and programme implementers to control the spread of covid and put an end to a pandemic that has caused so much misery. To break the chain of infections, they need to think innovatively and focus on high-risk activity, such as travel. The country can't be expected to endure frequent lockdowns and other restrictions for years on end.

## QUICK READ

Covid's infectivity patterns have made it amply clear that human mobility plays a significant role in its spread and this necessitates special attention devoted to all lengths and modes of travel.

We require risk-minimizing protocols at all hubs from where people fan out and also priority vaccination for everyone in passenger contact before we can put an end to this pandemic.

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