

‘This social media activism is born purely out of desperation and helplessness’

COVID EMERGENCY: SOCIAL MEDIA STEPS UP TO ANSWER DESPERATE SOS PLEAS 24x7

As medical infrastructure collapses under the strain of the second COVID wave, social media has become the go-to platform as users frantically try to amplify requests and find time-bound solutions for everything from difficult-to-get oxygen cylinders and hospital beds to home-cooked meals

SAPTAPARNA BISWAS

Facing an acute shortage of AB+ plasma units in Hyderabad, IT professional Ramesh B took to Instagram to post about the requirement as a last attempt to save his close friend’s life. With just 300 followers, he had little hope of finding any positive leads. What unfolded in the next four hours left him marvelling at the power of social media in these times. “Within a few minutes, my post was shared by many friends, and in the next four hours we had four plasma donors with the rare blood group. The way my post escalated in those crucial hours helped me save my friend,” shares Ramesh. Many similar responses are a part of everyone’s social media feed right now.

At a time when India is registering a staggering 3 lakh+ new cases in a single day (and many believe the actual numbers to be much higher), the trends on Twitter and Instagram are showing a mirror to the medical crisis unfolding in India. #Covidemergency2021, #SOSCOV21, #Oxygencylinders, #IndiaNeedsOxygen are the trending topics on Twitter. Similarly, Instagram stories of almost all users are splattered with requests like “#Urgent: Need Plasma Donors”, “Help! ICU Bed wanted”, “Need Remdesivir injections urgently, patient critical!” All these posts scream out the reality of the burden the medical system is facing in the second wave of COVID.

ANYONE WITH A SOCIAL MEDIA HANDLE CAN HELP

Whether it is those with big digital followings – celebs like Sonu Sood and Gurmeet Chaudhary, influencers like Kusha Kapila, stand-up comics like Appurv Gupta, political activists like Srinivas BV, Dilip Pandey and Charu Pragma, activists like Tehseen Poonawalla or entrepreneurs like Nikhil Taneja – or those with a more modest number of followers – NGOs, citizens groups and meme pages – everyone is pitching in to help. Especially those with bigger social media reach are being tagged 24/7 on pleas. While some are helping by amplifying requests and sources by reposting information, others are going a step ahead by verifying suppliers of oxygen cylinders, medicines, and hospital bed availability. The most active ones are also providing onground support by making sure supplies reach people in need, dispatching ambulances, bringing across oxygen cylinders, and arranging plasma donation drives. No matter that the challenge of getting a bed, a ventilator or a vial of the elusive Tocilizumab has often proved to be beyond their best efforts.

And no requirement is too small as social media users from different walks of life are volunteering to cook food, fetch groceries, clean houses and even walk the dogs of patients who are either being treated at hospitals or in home quarantine. Faceless strangers are running to get the sought-after Remdesivir, oxygen cylinders, hospital beds and turning up for plasma donation – all in a matter of hours after an appeal for help is issued on social media.

This past week, there has been more to Twitter than toxicity and more to Instagram than vanity as the country struggles yet comes together in an effort to meet the unprecedented shortage of medical resources.

Deblina Halder, a professional writer from Kolkata responded to a query on social media that was seeking an ambulance for a patient. “Incidentally, there are three ambulances at the local club in my locality in Thakurpukur. When I saw that one of my friends’ father was in dire need of an ambulance, I went and requested the club. Within 45 minutes, the ambulance reached my friend’s house,” she says. Meanwhile Madhish Parikh, an Ahmedabad-based youth activist, tells us, “One also needs to verify the information carefully. So, we decided it was our priority to verify each message. We also use relevant hashtags to reach out to the right people for help. We have been able to reach a stage where the maximum turnaround time for responding to a request is 30 minutes.”

Digital content creator Kusha Kapila shares, “This social media activism was born purely out of desperation and helplessness. More than calling it a

movement, it's a cry for help and people who have the mental bandwidth are trying to help each other." The reach or visibility of handles has generally not been relevant to the efforts made; while many handles with a small follower base have been active incessantly, most celebrities with a huge fan base (who may well be doing their bit silently in other ways) have so far been conspicuous by their lack of engagement in this spontaneous social media outreach.

Credit: Jayanto



WHAT'S MOST IN DEMAND

Plasma donors

Oxygen cylinders

Hospital beds

Remdesivir, Tocilizumab and Fabiflu

Ventilators

TIPS FOR SEEKING HELP

Make sure all essential details – name of the patient, date of requirement, location, nature of requirement, contact details or means of contact – are clearly mentioned in the post

Update on the status of the requirement. If the need is met, delete the original post so focus can shift towards other SOS calls

Share the leads that helped you with others (when there is time)

Do not hesitate to seek advice from a medical expert before buying alternatives to any life-saving drug suggested online

TIPS FOR OFFERING HELP

Instead of simply sharing the contacts/leads you get, call the numbers and authenticate the info. This reduces the burden on those who are seeking help

If there are authentic leads/contacts with you, update the post with ‘verified + date and time’ before circulating

Flag off leads that are a dead end, fake or put up without consent

‘STRANGERS ON SOCIAL MEDIA WERE OUR SAVIOURS’

While horror stories of shortage of essentials keep floating in the news, stories of hope and help also emerge. Like Abhishek Singh (name changed on request), a professional from Kolkata who received two units of AB+ plasma for his ailing father within a day of escalating his request on social media says, “A complete stranger came forward to help and saved my father’s life. This is the true power of social media connect.”

Likewise, Garvita Sharma, a content manager from Mumbai received help from Twitter for her brother-in-law within an hour of posting her request for a bed. “I could not believe that reply could be that quick. I’m in love with the way Twitter is being used to help as well as create a platform for handy COVID resources,” she says.

THERE ARE GLITCHES TOO

With so many posts going up every minute and SOS calls landing up in DMs/inboxes, many pages and individuals are struggling to reply quickly. “In many cases, relief has been received, while in others, by the time information reaches the concerned people, it’s too late. Matching demand with supply has been a problem. It tends to be chaotic,” says social development consultant Srini Swaminathan.

Appurv Gupta, stand-up comic, adds, “There are times when we hear that someone no longer needs plasma because the patient is no more. You cannot lose hope and stop because there are more people to help. At the same time, when someone gets help, don’t stop to pat yourself on the back because the work isn’t done.”