

# OPERATION SAMVEDNA: HUMANITARIAN RELIEF OPERATION DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC MANAGEMENT AND RESPONSE



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HARYANA'S RELENTLESS EFFORTS IN ALLEVIATING THE HARDSHIPS OF CITIZEN

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## Introduction

The year 2020 began with a promise of new era of economic and social prosperity for people of Haryana and for the people of India. The state was fresh out of its 5-year cycle of elections, and there was a general air of expectation around things and our way of life in the state. The state and its people were looking at the new and emerging possibilities in numerous fields such as IT, Services, Manufacturing, Farming, Education and Sports. Our most recent gross state domestic product (GSDP) growth rate was 11%, which was well above the national average. There had been broad new initiatives on many important issues such as agro-industries, services and education.

But unknown to everyone, a storm was brewing far away from the state and the country's borders. In China, an unknown and unseen virus was spreading through the community of Wuhan city and as was expected of a respiratory virus of this type and ferocity, the tentacles of this virus were soon spreading far and wide, from East Asia, to Europe, to the Americas and the South of Asia. Although the virus had now been spreading for a couple of months around China and other countries, India was able to shield itself from its first wave, thanks to a slew of countermeasures taken at the entry points into the country. However in spite of the best of surveillance it was not long before cases started cropping up across many states. The rising cases and increased strain on country's healthcare infrastructure eventually forced the central government's hand and it declared a national lockdown period starting from the intervening night of March 24th – 25th.

What followed thereafter was an exemplary tale of how the country and how the state of Haryana, in particular, rallied human resources and material to help the citizens caught up on the wrong side of this nationwide emergency. During this unprecedented phase in our country's history, recent or old, the state of Haryana rewrote the concept of a welfare state by being not just a protector or a caregiver to its citizens, but by also being a trustworthy friend who could be called upon at any time and one that would answer this call without fail.

This relation of care and empathy exactly captures the true spirit of the namesake operation launched by Haryana government – Operation Samvedna. This operation saw and covered all humanitarian relief aspects of pandemic management - from sheltering stranded citizens, feeding the homeless and hungry, medical check-up of vulnerable sections and transporting people to their home districts. Even though there are reams of paper that have been filled with stories of state's

benevolence during these extremely testing times, we shall keep this article focused on Operation Samvedna, providing a concise account on how this operation unfolded.

### **Governance in testing circumstances: Haryana rising to the occasion**

This pandemic's brute impact and its ripple effects, no doubt, were unprecedented and something beyond any reasonable comprehension but the general demeanor of a Haryanvi is never to be cowed down in face of adversity. And it wasn't any different here as well. The state had proactively started bracing itself for all eventualities as the likelihood of a lockdown to arrest the spread of this pandemic became stronger. The CID team of the state had been reading the pulse on the ground and their inputs, along with inputs from the district administrations of all 22 districts, were crucial to these preparedness plans.

In the initial part of the pandemic lockdown, the focus, in addition to the regular administrative effort, was on lockdown curbs, food relief and shelter while in the latter half it was on relief and transportation. The smooth transitioning from one phase to another was made possible by the synchronized working of all state administration wings under the astute and splendid leadership of our Hon'ble Chief Minister Sh. Manohar Lal. His eye for the detail, a calm demeanor and an insistence on visibility of government machinery in every corner of the state – were the ingredients that went into a resolute state response to this pandemic emergency.

On repeated occasions, the state came in for praise from the Hon'ble Prime Minister and also the state governments which benefitted from Haryana's benevolent approach towards all citizens of the state, residents or migrants.

Not just within the state borders, but the able and steady leadership mantle shown by state of Haryana was even evident well beyond its jurisdiction. A case in study would be the decision to provide a fleet of about 800 buses to transport migrants to various districts of Uttar Pradesh from the Anand Vihar Inter State Bus Terminus in Delhi, where they had gathered en masse demanding passage and transportation to their home districts just as Lockdown 1.0 was being implemented.

This pandemic would've been an unwelcome arrival for the state and country on any given day, but by breaking out towards the latter half of March, it couldn't have chosen a much worse time for making its presence felt. The state was just beginning with the Rabi procurement season and any disruption to that could've had serious ramifications for the state's social and administrative structure. A big credit goes to the procurement teams and the farmers, who could finish the process without any glitches even under such testing circumstances. A total of 73 Lakh MT wheat and 8.25 Lakh MT mustard had been procured by May 25th, 2020. Even though CID didn't have a direct role in the agricultural harvest and procurement, its ground operatives were keeping a close watch on the agricultural hubs and the prevailing situation there. Also, the enumeration of agricultural migrants was one of the major tasks performed by CID in the midst of Rabi procurement season.

### **Industrious work by the ground teams: Backbone of Op Samvedna**

When the task of evacuating lakhs of people across the 22 districts of the state and their onward journey to the home districts in different parts of India was being deliberated upon, the

situation looked onerous and unprecedented, to say the least. The cumulative effect of a harsh but necessary lockdown, collateral effect of an economic slowdown and a climate of uncertainty with respect to the pandemic meant that the state had very little space to maneuver and there was virtually none for any errors. But having prepared and activated all resources at its disposal well in advance, especially the brilliant groundwork by the CID and the police teams, they were more than a match to the situation. Unlike many other states that might have seen migrant unrest or displeasure of its residents, Haryana proved to be a shining example of effective intelligence gathering and policing.

There were a few stray incidents of inflamed passions and raising of tempers, but the law enforcement arm of the administration dealt with all of it, with great alacrity and empathy. It was understandable for some to lose their patience, but a hard-fisted approach would have proven to be rather ham-handed. Rather, the administration placed a comforting hand on the shoulders of those in despair to reassure that the state was with them, throughout this ordeal. For example, in the case of migrants walking over to Haryana from Punjab-Haryana border, the administration setup shelter homes and reasoned with them on the need to follow a strict protocol of testing, followed by a coordinated evacuation via trains and buses. In another instance, when worshippers from a seminary in Delhi poured into the state in early April, the excellent intelligence gathering of CID and district teams proved crucial in keeping the spread under check, helping isolate those who were infected with CoVid-19. And then, the prelude to eventual evacuations - statewide enumeration work of migrant population was another example of CID teams being in the vanguard of pandemic management. Operation Samvedna is replete with such instances of excellent groundwork by state teams, especially the CID.

### **No procrastination: Decisions taken quickly and pro-actively, with due diligence**

A common thread that emerges from all the stories and accounts of how Haryana dealt with Corona virus pandemic was the pro-active decision making and the speed at which these were implemented. At the time when Shramik Express trains had been initiated by Ministry of Railways, the state of Haryana within no time, wrote to many of the migrant states to ask from them for a NOC – which was a prerequisite for the train indenting process. In fact, such was the due diligence of the CID team that the NOC for the next batch was already asked for even as the previous batch trains were still chugging-off from their designated departure stations within state. To avoid any hiccups during the train indenting process for evacuations, the state of its own volition, deposited an advance train hiring amount with Indian Railways. This precluded any sort of back-and-forth or surplus conversations over monetary matters, between agencies.

For the road evacuations, the state took a decision to fully utilize its vast fleet of Haryana Roadways buses, instead of asking the other home states to send in their fleet for evacuation of their residents. A lot of neighbouring states benefitted from this decision, especially Uttar Pradesh which got a lion's share of these trips. And then there were instances where Haryanvi students were rescued from Kota, Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya students from many of the Deccan states and army men from Kerala. All of it was about quick decision making and coming to the aid of citizens.

The CID team's excellent inter-agency and inter-state coordination for all the evacuation operations was made possible by the great degree of latitude given by Hon'ble Chief Minister Sh.

Manohar Lal. As ADGP CID Sh. Anil K. Rao would later say *“Hon’ble CM’s message was crystal clear – no one should be left stranded and people of all the states of India are our own children. And as fellow Indians, the full might of Haryana State should be with them in this moment of need.”*

SP CID Sh. Pankaj Nain talks about how CID was exceptionally quick in responding to operational exigencies – *“CID team was well aware of the game-changing nature of its operational duties during Operation Samvedna. The gravitas of our role was what kept us going, even if our energies dropped a bit in-between, due to sheer exhaustion from this effort.”*

### **State’s hidden infantry: The role of volunteers**

While much of the focus has remained on state’s role and the operation leadership shown by CID during Operation Samvedna, the role of volunteers in the operation and during this entire pandemic management exercise has been one of grit and determination.

The Co Vid Sangharsh Senani was a brilliant initiative to galvanize the people towards a concerted citizen action, in aid of the administration. Many of the shelter homes for migrants were spaces given out by religious and charitable groups, school administrations and even entrepreneurs. During the migrant departure aboard trains and buses, citizen groups would distribute meal packets, water and even hand sanitizers, masks to the travellers. And it wasn’t only about their help, but more about the effusive helpful deeds that spurred others to come forward as well. Like they say, positive energy is infectious!

### **Samvedna = empathy and concern!**

A hallmark of Haryana’s resolute approach towards CoVid-19 pandemic management has been an empathetic approach towards welfare of its citizenry. And not just a strata or region, but all of its state residents and all 22 districts alike!

In the action of battle, some anecdotes stick to our minds that show the human side of the people in the vanguard of this action. One such instance would be the polite declining of an offer of financial help made by Hon’ble CM of Bihar Sh. Nitish Kumar to the state of Haryana, concerning the welfare of migrants from Bihar within Haryana. Quoting from the reply penned by Hon’ble CM Sh. Manohar Lal – *“In Haryana’s economic, industrial and agricultural progress, migrant workforce has played a pivotal role. We treat them like ours and shall take care of them as ours, in this moment of need and otherwise too. They are as much as our responsibility too.”* When the executive head of the state articulates his thoughts so well and clearly, the motivation it lends to the state to make these words reach fruition is immense.

Since the migrants found themselves in uniquely difficult circumstances, the state walked that extra mile to help alleviate their hardships, but it never lost sight of the in-state residents who also got a large chunk of that compassion and concern.

Whether, it was their need for dry rations or pre-cooked meals, or curfew passes and essential commodities – the civic administration was alert to the situation in all 22 districts of the state. The ‘Haryanvi pride’ too was on full display, as people came ahead to help their neighbours, strangers and the administration.

If someone would've predicted that CoVid-19 would've made a positive impact on the state's psyche, they would've been written off as super optimistic. But this is exactly what happened. The state and its citizenry turned this situation into an opportunity to show to the country and world, that together as one people – we are unconquerable by any adversity!