

PADMA AWARDS

Years back artists of some standing would often move their base from Mumbai to Delhi to lobby for a Padma award. After years of lobbying with power brokers, many would be delighted to receive the prestigious national award for their contribution in their field. It was given that one may deserve it but the Padma award and the recognition that comes with it has to be canvassed for. No wonder all the Padma Awards would go to the persons who were close to the powers that be; the real sons and daughters of the soil who worked on the ground to change things without expecting any reward were nowhere in the reckoning. From J&K, people like Brij Lal Bhat, who worked quietly to integrate society, Poet Shafi Shauk or many artisans whose claims had earlier been rejected since they never lobbied for the recognition.

All this changed with the Narendra Modi government. For the first time, barefoot environmental activists, selfless cleaners of cities, a man who repaired cycles and yet performed the last rights of bodies not claimed by anyone and many more, walked into the ornate Ashoka Hall of the Rashtrapati Bhawan to received the Padma Awards in recognition of their altruistic mission without seeking awards. The Padma awards have really become people's awards.

AMARNATH PILGRIMAGE
Organising the annual Amarnath yatra is a major challenge and also prestige for the authorities. Security is of course important but equally important is the smooth conduct of this pilgrimage to the holy cave for people coming from all over the country and ensuring there is no impact on the lives of locals. The authorities have been refining their preparations with each passing year and this time too, surely they would show innovations. First of all, the pilgrimage maintains the tradition of communal amity. The pilgrimage is not only a boost for the local economy but also a month of joy in the hills.

India's food safety crisis: Time for bold, systemic reform

Subhash Chandra Agrawal

India's food supply chain is sending out distress signals that can no longer be ignored. From children falling ill after mid-day school meals to honey samples failing international purity tests, the warning signs point to one conclusion: India needs a structural overhaul of how it produces, certifies, and serves food - not piecemeal fixes.

The Mid-Day Meal Problem

Reports of insects, lizards, frogs, and rodents turning up in school lunches, alongside complaints about poor-quality rice and pulses, have become a recurring and troubling feature of the Mid-Day Meal Scheme. A practical fix worth serious consideration is shifting toward packaged, preferably baked, food for school meals. This would sidestep many hygiene risks tied to on-site cooking and would also accommodate children whose families avoid specific ingredients like onion and garlic for cultural or religious reasons. Notably, a group of Members of Parliament once pushed for exactly this - sourcing packaged biscuits from established manufacturers vetted by the Mumbai-based Biscuit Manufacturers' Welfare Association, to replace freshly cooked meals altogether.

There's also a funding angle here. Large food manufacturers could be incentivised to sponsor the programme in exchange for brand visibility, while corporates could route their mandatory Corporate Social Responsibility spending into supplying packaged meals - a win for children's health and a way to ease the financial burden on the state.

IRCTC: An Underused Asset

The Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation already has the infrastructure and expertise to produce packaged food at scale. Expanding its footprint to every district - including baked goods - could serve two purposes simultaneously: supplying safer meals to both



schoolchildren and train passengers (where complaints about freshly cooked food are equally frequent), and creating a public-sector competitor that keeps private food companies honest on quality and pricing.

Such expansion need not strain public finances. Long-term, tax-free bonds could fund the initial buildout, and - in a more ambitious version - these bonds could even be structured to encourage disclosure of undeclared wealth. Beyond food safety, the ripple effect on employment could be significant: district-level IRCTC units would create rural jobs and potentially slow the steady migration of youth toward overcrowded cities.

FSSAI is Moving, But Needs to Go Further

Credit is due to the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India for mandating hygiene-rating displays at eateries. But ratings that focus only on dining-area aesthetics miss the point - kitchens and storage areas, where rodent infestations and unsanitary conditions are most common, deserve equal scrutiny.

FSSAI's move to regulate the repeated frying and reuse of cooking oil - a known health hazard - is similarly welcome. The next logical steps would be mandating RO water purifiers in all eateries, however small, with visible signage confirming installation, and requiring separate kitchen equipment for vegetarian and non-vege-

tarian food preparation, with that separation clearly displayed for customers who care about it.

The Honey and Sugar Problem

In April 2021, the Supreme Court sought government responses to reports that imported adulterated sugar syrups were being blended into honey - including in well-known brands - in ways that slip past FSSAI's existing tests. A study by the Centre for Science and Environment found that only a handful of dozens of honey samples tested passed the internationally recognised NMR spectroscopy standard. Given that diabetics often consume honey precisely because it's considered a safer sweetener, this is a serious public health concern. FSSAI should adopt NMR spectroscopy as the standard testing protocol before granting sale approvals.

On sugar, India's diabetes burden is staggering - estimates put the number of diabetics in the country at over 100 million, with well over 100 million more in the prediabetic range as of 2025-2026. One way to nudge consumption patterns would be mandating brown sugar for commercial and medicinal use in place of refined white sugar. Market signals already point this way - confectioners in places like Delhi's Chandni Chowk have begun introducing diabetic-friendly sweets - and if demand for brown sugar grows, manufacturers are likely to shift production voluntarily.

Stopping Dual Pricing and Adulteration

Branded bottled water and soft drink companies routinely charge more for identical products sold in airports, cinemas, and luxury hotels compared to open-market prices. This practice deserves to be curbed, and expanding IRCTC's Rail Neer bottling plants across the country offers a

public-sector alternative that could help normalise pricing.

Adulteration of ghee and butter - including the use of cheaper oils and animal fats mislabeled as "pure" - remains widespread, particularly at roadside eateries. The episode involving allegedly adulterated ghee in temple prasad offerings at Tirumala Tirupati was a wake-up call. Manufacturers of desi ghee should be required to register their brand and sourcing details with FSSAI, and that information should be displayed prominently at the point of sale so consumers can make informed choices.

Separately, several states have moved to require food outlets to display the names of operators and staff, mandate masks, gloves, and CCTV installation, following incidents of deliberate food contamination. Encouraging consistent adoption of such basic accountability and surveillance measures across all states - regardless of political alignment - would strengthen consumer trust everywhere.

Cutting Waste, Encouraging Choice

Food wastage at large social gatherings, particularly weddings, is a persistent and visible problem in a country where rising vegetable and grocery prices already strain household budgets. Curbing elaborate buffet spreads at such functions - even restricting service to beverages alone - could meaningfully reduce waste and make these events more affordable for ordinary families.

On the question of dietary preference, India's vegetarian culinary tradition is internationally respected, and there's a case for the government promoting a "World Vegetarian Day" on October 1st with the same enthusiasm it has shown for International Yoga Day. Separately, mandating distinct kitchens and cooking equipment for vegetarian and non-vegetarian food at restaurants - clearly signposted - would let vegetarian customers make informed choices, likely growing that customer base for businesses that adopt it.

BEYOND THE NUMBERS: THE SPIRITUAL SECRET OF AGEING WELL

Ajit Kumar Bishnoi

I am invited to attend social functions occasionally, which I turn down due to the fact that I tire easily at my age. Such refusals are met with this saying, but I am not convinced, because my experience is different. My advanced age does make a difference to my physical energy level, but I manage my personal tasks and gentle walks after meals quite well.

Surely, I had to know God's plan to check if what I was experiencing was not unusual. What is God's plan for us? A human body has been designed for longevity, that is hundred years subject to two conditions. The first one has to be appropriateness of all what we do, that is eating, activities, 'vihar' (entertainment) and sleeping. (The Bhagavad-Gita 6.17) The other condition is to connect with God from childhood itself. This part we do quite well by teaching children to pray in schools. Where do we go wrong? In the passion of youth, God is forgotten, whereas prayers for guidance and help are necessary to succeed in life. 'Ahankar' (false ego) comes in the way in middle age when need for God is greater. This results in miseries with advancing age, if not



earlier.

This explains why masses suffer. Inappropriate behaviour harms the human body. Add to it bad karmaphalas brought from previous lives. Life is of shorter duration and has many sicknesses. Age is just a number has a different meaning; one has aged prematurely. Don't we see people unable to do even their du-

ties? Some people suffer from laziness.

Contrast this with a minority who are physically quite active in spite of old age. They give support to the saying that age is just a number. What is the secret of this utter contradiction between the masses and a small percentage? It is 'jeevani shakti' (vital life force), which is due to good

karmaphalas brought from previous lives. The second is appropriate behaviour (6.17), and third is 'kripa' (mercy) of God, who is the source of jeevani shakti. Devotees are beneficiaries of God's kripa, which explains their aura and mental fitness. Even physically, they manage quite well. Don't we need more mental power than physical strength in old age? I have a close relative who has entered the hundredth year and is quite fit; he is a sincere devotee of God.

The purpose of this article is to alert readers to not get swayed by the saying: age is just a number. For masses, one doesn't even have enough energy expected in different ages, and specially mental in advanced age. Therefore, be very appropriate in everything you do, as instructed by Lord Krishna in verse # 6.17. Take shelter of God very actively, definitely by the time going past fifty. God will actively help to meet all challenges as they come due to bad karmaphalas. (18.58) He will also give divine jeevani shakti, which will keep the mind, intelligence and body physically and mentally active even in advanced age. Then and then only, age is just a number will have positive meaning.

From risk to resilience: Lessons from India's devastating second COVID wave

Nitish Dogra

Five years later, the summer of 2021 still evokes a distinct and unsettling memory. There was an eerie feeling, a growing sense that something unprecedented was unfolding, even before its full scale became apparent. This was very different from the first wave. Cases were rising rapidly, but so too was the severity of illness. Hospitals were filling at an alarming pace, oxygen demand was escalating, and mortality was increasing across the country. In terms of deaths occurring over such a short time span, the only comparable event was the tragedy of Partition.

The first indications of the impending crisis emerged through discussions within disaster-response and public-health networks. What initially appeared to be concerns about oxygen availability soon revealed itself as a much broader systems challenge. It became increasingly clear that the crisis would not be defined by a shortage of a single resource, but by cascading failures

across interconnected systems, that is, oxygen supplies, ambulances, hospital beds, referral pathways, health-care personnel, and eventually even funeral services. One enduring lesson from that period is that pandemics are fundamentally systems crises. Failure rarely occurs at a single point; it spreads rapidly across interconnected sectors.

As the situation deteriorated, another reality became apparent. Given the looming oxygen shortages and mounting pressure on hospitals, the safest strategy for many people was simply not to become infected. There was a growing awareness that once healthcare systems became overwhelmed, avoiding exposure might be the only protection available to thousands of individuals. Yet there was also a profound sense of helplessness. The warning signs were visible, but there were limited mechanisms to communicate the urgency of the situation or translate risk into behavioural change. The experience highlighted a central challenge of crisis management: early warning is

useful only if it leads to timely action.

By the end of April, the anticipated pressures had become reality. Hospitals were operating beyond capacity, healthcare workers were exhausted, and information systems struggled to keep pace with rapidly evolving events. Operational realities were often visible long before they appeared in official statistics. The experience reinforced a fundamental emergency-management principle: decision-makers cannot wait for perfect information during fast-moving crises. Data almost always lags behind events, requiring action under conditions of uncertainty.

During this period, a virtual incident command system supported by the European Union brought together a small group of experts to help locate hospital beds, connect patients with healthcare providers, facilitate referrals, and support evacuation planning when local systems became overwhelmed. The experience demonstrated the value of incident-command principles even in virtual settings. Shared situational

awareness, clear communication, defined responsibilities, and rapid coordination proved essential in managing complexity under extraordinary pressure.

One of the most important lessons concerned triage. Triage is often viewed narrowly as a hospital function, but pandemics require triage across the continuum of care. While hospitals attempted to prioritise admissions according to severity, the principle was inconsistently applied elsewhere. Equally significant was the absence of effective discharge triage. During periods of severe bed shortages, every unnecessary day of hospitalisation reduced the system's ability to accommodate critically ill patients.

An even greater gap existed at the community level. Thousands of families were attempting to manage illness at home without clear guidance regarding who required hospital care, who could be safely monitored, and when escalation was necessary. In response, a group of medical college alumni collaborated to develop

simple, evidence-based home-triage guidelines to help families assess severity, identify warning signs, and make informed decisions regarding care-seeking.

These guidelines were disseminated widely through professional and community networks. The experience underscored a critical lesson in public health emergency management: effective triage begins in the community, long before a patient reaches a hospital. Empowering families with clear, accessible guidance can be as important as expanding hospital capacity in reducing avoidable morbidity and mortality during health crises.

One image from that period remains permanently etched in memory: the aerial photograph of countless funeral pyres burning through the night. It conveyed the magnitude of loss more powerfully than any epidemiological curve or mortality statistic ever could. Behind every pyre was a family confronting grief and uncertainty. Across the country, children were orphaned, spouses widowed,

and communities scarred by loss. It was a reminder that pandemics are ultimately human crises, measured not only in numbers but in lives and futures irrevocably altered.

Today, as the world confronts Ebola and Hantavirus, these lessons remain highly relevant. Future pandemics may differ in their epidemiology, but the principles of crisis management remain constant: anticipate cascading failures, communicate risk early, establish incident-command structures, implement triage across the continuum of care, support community decision-making, and build resilience before it is needed.

The next pandemic may be years away, or it may already be emerging. The challenge is to ensure that the lessons learned at such tremendous human cost in 2021 are not forgotten.

The author is an ICRC and WHO-trained disaster management specialist associated with the Pahl India Foundation; Views presented are personal.