



Strategies to Survive in Post-COVID 19 Pandemic Era: A Case Study on a Service Provider

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Abstract: COVID 19 has caused a lot of damage to businesses. MSMEs (Medium, Small, and Micro Enterprises) are the worst hit as they do not have the financial strength to sustain like large business houses. Bablu Hait, an Entrepreneur who has come up from scratch in the last twenty-five years and is handling outsourced functions of cleaning and housekeeping of several hospitals and food supply to a few hospitals is in dilemma about his and his employees' future in the current and Post COVID situation. Being a service provider this Entrepreneur is apprehensive about the financial crisis through which his client organisations are passing and at the same time he is expecting higher Government support in the healthcare sector. During the locked-down period, he and his employees worked tirelessly for the COVID as well as other patients of client hospitals and is continuing. Some plans for dealing with the upcoming crisis have been drawn which needs discussion. Steady growth over the years has prompted the entrepreneur to change organisational structure and is trying to change the culture of his organisation from Proprietor driven to Management driven. Dealing with routine problems is hampering his work and disturbing his objective to be more business and expansion focused; delegation of authority and responsibility to the managers is not yielding results as the clients and employees always seek intervention of Hait in the context of routine problems. Evaluation of this problem needs to be undertaken.

Keywords: COVID 19; Entrepreneur; Outsourcing; Co-creation; Trust; Patient Satisfaction

INTRODUCTION

A one-cell virus named COVID 19 is harming almost all trade, commerce, and industry. Government of India declared nationwide locked down on 24th March, 2020 and as result all economic activities almost came to standstill and complete locked down continued till 30th May, 2020. To revive the economic activities and to save people from difficulty withdrawal of locked down is going on phase wise in India. Businesses in the MSME (Medium, Small, and Micro Enterprises) are the worst hit as they do not have resources like large business houses to sustain months of locked down or locked down like situation. In India enterprises with investment up to INR 1 crore and Turnover up to INR 5 crore is classified as Micro; investment up to INR 10 Crore and Turnover up to

50 Crore as Small; Investment up to INR 20 Crore and Turnover up to 100 Crore comes within the purview of Medium Enterprises (Financial Express, 30th June, 2020). The Hindu (March 16, 2020) reported that as per survey of 5000 MSMEs conducted by the All India Manufacturers' Organization, it was found that 71% of them could not pay salaries to their employees in the month of March and 43 percent will shut shop if the locked down extends beyond eight weeks. COVID 19 infected cases, though started slowly and was under control due to nationwide locked down, is now increasing fast in India as in phased manner economic activities and movement of people is opening up. World Health Organization reported as of 14th September 2020, out of 54, 75,657 confirmed COVID cases and 93,649 deaths due to COVID in South-East Asia, 47, 54, 356 confirmed cases and 78,586 deaths have happened only in India. Experts are of the view that these figures may increase in geometric progression in a short time due to mobility of people. Thus, the country is facing trouble from two ends i.e. if economic activities and mobility of people allowed the pandemic is going to increase in a situation when confirmed drugs and vaccine is yet to be found and if it continues with nationwide locked down the economy is going to be devastated. As per Business Today GDP of June quarter has gone down by 23.9 percent.

Bablu Hait, an Entrepreneur and Director of Ritu Hospitality Services Pvt. Ltd (previously known as Ritu Enterprises) engaged in the outsourced functions of several hospitals for the last twenty-five years is in dilemma about the future of his business. Employees of the company are diligently serving COVID infected patients now in different hospitals of Kolkata as they were looking after cleaning and housekeeping functions of those hospitals for quite some time. Businesses dealing with outsourced functions are dependent on the financial health of the organisation for which they are working. For keeping the business intact and employment of employees, Hait has designed some strategies for future which warrants evaluation.

Hait started the organization with a capital of Five Thousand INR and a Vacuum Cleaner, its current annual turnover is INR 48 crore and 2800 employees are working in the organisation. Leadership of Hait has endeared him to the employees who are working with the organisation for years; trust in him made them render dedicated service to COVID patients. To cope with growth of the organization, Hait has altered its organizational structure from time to time and has hired experienced managers, but despite delegation of authority and responsibility often the Director needs to solve routine problems. Hait attributes this to his previous involvement in day-to-day issues when the organization was small and there were no such people to take care of these issues. This has served as a hindrance in the expansion of the company as the Entrepreneur needs to devote a lot of time to solve day to day issues. This case invites discussion as to how this problem can be solved for this entrepreneur?

OUTSOURCING OF HOSPITAL OPERATIONS: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Outsourcing of hospital operations started with the objective of reducing operating costs (Sunseri, 1999). Lankford and Parsa (1999) described outsourcing "as the procurement of products or services from sources that are external to the organization". Sanders et al., (2005) viewed that outsourcing of non-core services could enable organizations to concentrate on core services. It has been stated that as the running of hospitals became a complex operation and rising patient expectations have compelled many hospitals to outsource their non-core services. Moschuris and Kondalis (2006) in their study on 100

hospitals in Greece observed that most users were satisfied with the performance of Outsourced Agencies and were of the view that their use is going to increase. Roberts et al., (2013) explained outsourced services showed better efficiency in services like food supply and laundry services to the patients as these are their basic activities. It has been argued by Roberts et al. (2013) that food, cleanliness, and comfort of patients affect patient satisfaction which is delivered efficiently by the outsourced services. They explained that the efficiency of the outsourced services arises from operation in a few specific fields which create competence and as they serve in several identical enterprises they develop richer experience.

OUTSOURCING OF HOSPITAL OPERATIONS IN INDIA: UNLEASHING OF OPPORTUNITY FOR ENTREPRENEURS

Private hospitals in India started outsourcing their non-core activities from mid-nineties. This has opened up opportunities for some multinationals like Sodexo and large Indian Companies like Apollo Sindoori specialised in these non-core functions like housekeeping and patient food to serve in large hospitals. Some smaller hospitals mainly to control cost and reduce liability engaged local agencies for undertaking non-core services of their hospitals. This served as an opportunity for local youths since taking over the function of cleaning and sanitation of a hospital does not require high investment and rich technical expertise. Outsourced functions are assigned based on the contract for a specific period and if no serious problem occurs a steady business prevails for the entrepreneur. During the period of the contract if the entrepreneur performs to the satisfaction of the client they are likely to get an extension again for some number of years.

In India employment of Contractors' employees is governed under the Contract Labour (R&A) Act and there subsists no employer-employee relationship between Contractors' employees and Principal Employer. The liability of the employing hospital is low as the engagement is need-based unlike that of regular workmen protected under the provisions of the Industrial Disputes Act.

Steady Growth of an Entrepreneur

The growth of Bablu Hait as an entrepreneur is steady for the last twenty-five years. He was an unemployed youth in 1995. In the same year, he started his journey with a vacuum cleaner and a loan of Rs.5000/ taken from a friend-. An office in the locality offered him a contract to clean their office space, initially; the name of the enterprise was Ritu Enterprises. At that time some Private hospitals in Kolkata were engaging Contractors to undertake their Cleaning and Sanitation Services. Opportunities were there but constraints were massive as Hait did not have experience and contact and his proposal was rejected on several occasions. In 1999 he got an opportunity, in an immediate neighborhood in Kolkata, a private hospital was not in the proper situation to handle its antagonistic, unionised cleaning and sanitation employees engaged by a Contractor. Local Management was facing a difficult time as these youth was not interested to work under Contractor and was demanding direct employment from the hospital whereas their Head Office at Mumbai was not allowing them to absorb these workers in direct payroll of the company. Existing Contractor confronted by threat and violence discontinued. Bablu Hait approached the management, he said: "at that time no one wanted to give me a contract as I was inexperienced and it was a do-or-die situation

for me. If I get the contract I shall try my best to provide service' and 'this was the oath'. Considering the enthusiasm management gave him opportunity in the troubled time, "I was subjected to a lot of threat and harassment, I sustained through patience. I tried to make sense of the trouble-making employees by taking them into my role and started looking after their welfare. At a point in time, they started trusting me and abandoned their demand of taking them in direct payroll of the hospital". Wheel of the business started rolling from there and today Ritu Hospitality Services Pvt. Ltd., is engaged in several services in different Private and Government Organizations in the states of West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, and Chhattisgarh, though housekeeping and sanitation is his prime business. From 2011 the enterprise has been renamed Ritu Hospitality Services Private Limited. Currently, 2800 employees are on their Payroll serving 18 Establishments. The annual turnover of the Company increased from INR 27 lakh in 2002 to 48.07 Crore in the last year.

Two years back the Company started a business of serving cooked food to hospital patients. In Kolkata, many small hospitals and nursing homes do not have sufficient kitchen space in their premises. Seeing their satisfactory cleaning and housekeeping services some nursing home and hospital officials asked Hait to set up a kitchen where proper hygienic standard needs to be maintained. Qualified Food and Beverage Personnel with experience of the hospital kitchen has been appointed by Ritu Hospitality Services Pvt. Ltd to look after their foodservice operation and they supply cooked food and beverage to these hospitals and nursing homes daily. These Hospitals and Nursing Homes have deputed their representative for checking the standard of food and hygiene in the base kitchen who visit regularly.

The Company: Ritu Hospitality Services Pvt. Ltd.

Ritu Hospitality Services Pvt. Ltd (formerly known as Ritu Enterprises) is a Private Limited Company registered under the Indian Companies Act from 2011. It is an ISO Certified Company and intends to be a one spot contact of the hospitality service provider and integrated facility Management Company. The Company has a share capital of INR 10,000,00/-, according to the Audited Balance sheet it has registered a profit of INR 1,12,43,935/- in 2015-16; INR 2,84,63,085/- in 2016-17; INR 3,51,64,137/- in 2017-18; and INR 4,55,27,431/- in 2018-19.

Apart from housekeeping, cleaning, and catering services this company is engaged in providing plumbing services, pest control, air-conditioned, refrigeration, and washing machine maintenance and repair, and rendering domestic electrical equipment repair services. They operate in these domains only in the local areas of Kolkata.

Ritu Hospitality Services have recently started a business of providing security services to commercial establishments and are guarding some offices of Electric Supply Company in Kolkata. They have launched their flagship brand Addili in 2016 to offer comprehensive hospitality management and facility management services. Their caption on the website says "From Add to Addili is nothing but wordplay. With the only desire to add ease to your work, we manage the rest and serve you with a sorted environment. Clean work zones, well-guarded walls, steaming cups to energize, some yum food, and lots more are here for you."(<http://www.addili.in/thebrand.php>)

SOCIAL EXCHANGE: TRUST THE DRIVER OF GROWTH

Hait asserted all their activities are aimed at creating patient satisfaction. Patient satisfaction to a good extent depends on the ambiance of the hospital, its cleanliness, and hygiene, food served, etc. Hait said "to create patient satisfaction we continuously try to provide Just-In-Time Service tailored to the Client's direction, needs, and expectations for long; and this has developed trust on us by the client". He always thinks their aim is patient satisfaction which can be co-created with the help and guidance of the client. "I all along communicate my employees that their aim is only patient satisfaction and to achieve it they need to take initiative all through and also perform according to the advice of the client to the best extent possible. Reminding these poor employees how their work makes the patient happy develops a sense of pride as they feel they are doing a job with greater objective though their employment as cleaner is considered low in the organisational and social hierarchy". Hait strictly pays salary to the employees on a fixed date irrespective of the fact whether his bill for services has been cleared by the client organisation or not, also he keeps a tab on his cost so that he can render services to the client at a reasonable price.

Involvement of clients for the creation of values for satisfaction of the ultimate consumer is one of the strategies of Hait. Hait says "I and my men are working for the client hence we need to work in close cooperation with their officials. I have found working with close cooperation with clients enhance their satisfaction as well as that of patients". Some of the workers have learned the usage of different types of equipment and techniques from hospital employees in connection with infection control and preparation of diet for patients. Trainers of the Company inculcate a feeling among employees that officials of hospitals are highly experienced in patient relation and know about patient expectations and effort should be made to implement their advice with seriousness to produce goods and services. Coproduction of services and food based on their advice helps in the co-creation of value for ultimate consumers the patients.

Crisis erupted after the news of pandemic due to COVID 19 broke out. Ritu Hospitality Services were looking after the housekeeping and sanitation services of several hospitals for a long, motivating these poor employees to serve COVID patients was an uphill task. Media and other propaganda have made people frightened about the fast contamination of COVID and the attempt of involving workers with no medical knowledge and a little or no formal education was resisted by the workers. Some Hospital officials who tried to motivate these workers by drawing examples of Doctors and Nurses citing their dedicated services to COVID patients did not improve the situation. Workers were of the view that doctors and nurses have been educated to serve patients, they are highly paid and if anything goes wrong to them their family will be looked after by the Hospital Authorities.

Workers were frightened; "I was in a fix as many of them were thinking of leaving the job. I started counseling them", Hait said, "Trust in me worked as most of them are working with me at least for the last ten years. Workers listened considering our long association and now 500 of my cleaners are working in four COVID hospitals of Kolkata". These employees were trained about the safety norms and guidelines required for handling the cleaning and sanitation function of COVID patients and are giving round the clock services to these patients without any extra remuneration. The only additional facility they are getting from the hospitals is food on duty and a space to rest after duty. Every day during locked-down Bablu Hait was busy interacting with his

employees and supervisors, doctors, and nurses of the hospitals mostly on mobile, sometimes through virtual mode and occasionally visited wearing Personal Protective Equipment to these hospitals to find any requirement, and to ensure that the safety needs of his employees were in order. When asked as these are the jobs of his Supervisors and Managers and as Entrepreneur whether he needed to engage in this day to day work, Hait said” in normal time this work is taken care of by my men but my continuous support is required in this abnormal COVID 19 situation”. Even in this Un-lock I situation he is following the same practice- Government of India declared on May 31, 2020, about phase wise opening of mobility of people and in this Un-Lock I phase movement of public transport has been allowed, although rail and air travel has not been allowed. Moreover it has been declared that same locked-in situation shall prevail in containment zones i.e. the areas where COVID cases have been reported. Since the areas of COVID treating hospitals is in containment zone same situation is prevailing. Only respite Hait and his employees are getting is that they are able to avail public transport till walking distance of the hospital.

Many of his employees were not able to go home for weeks together either due to distance and non-availability of transport due to Locked-Down and in some instances fear of neighbors in slums who considered them as a carrier of COVID-19 due to their proximity to the patients, Hait had to take care of their families, same problem is persisting now to a lesser extent as some of the employees are resident of suburbs of Kolkata and non-availability of local trains have forced them to go to their houses sometimes once in a week. Routinely Hait enquires whether the family of these employees received basic needs like food and medicine. Till 1st September 2020, 15 of his employees working in COVID, hospitals have been found infected; Hait is regularly keeping contact with their family.

Hait is of the view that relationship with clients and employees for years is the source of growth of his business. When the client finds that the outsourced agency strives hard for the satisfaction of their patients involving them in the process and also reasonable in charges, they reciprocate by co-creating healthy food and ambiance.. This might be the reason for the continuance of services of Ritu Hospitality Services in different hospitals for years together. Similarly, when employees observe their employer is taking care of their needs even of their family they reciprocate through diligent services to the organization.

Diagrammatic representation of the model of Service Delivery is in Figure I:

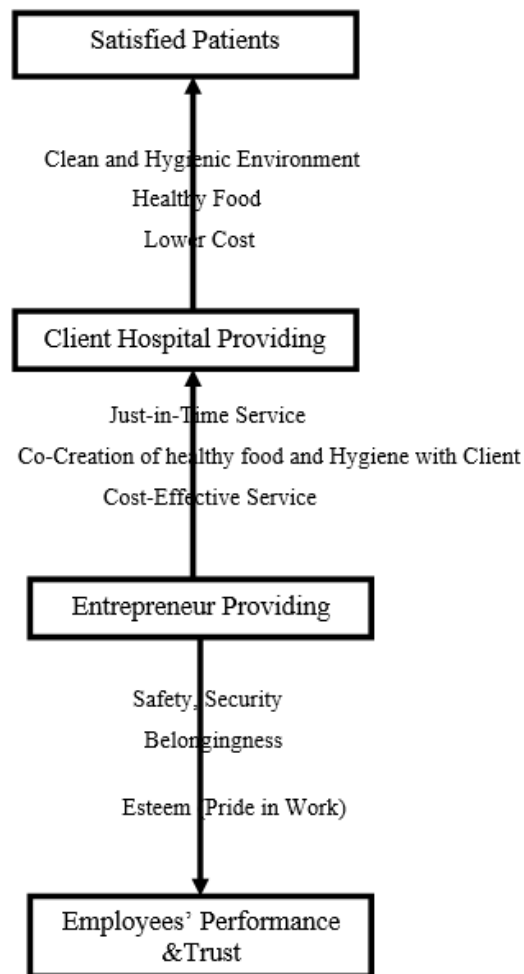


Figure I: Model of Service Delivery of Ritu Hospitality Services Pvt. Ltd

Patient Satisfaction, Co-creation & Trust: Views from Literature

Donabedian (1980; 1982) explained patients, in general, cannot evaluate the technical part of the treatment and most of their evaluation arises from functional part of the hospital such as the behaviour of the Doctors, Nurses, and attending staffs of the hospital, cleanliness, food, waiting time for admission or in OPD. Observation of Donabedian has been supported even in recent studies (e.g., Harnagle et al, 2014; AIRyalat, 2018).

Lusch and Vargo (2006) termed coproduction as the means and process customer shares in creating the core service through cooperation and co-design. Lusch et al. (2007) opined participation in the process of coproduction may lead to a satisfactory outcome which improves performance and customer satisfaction.

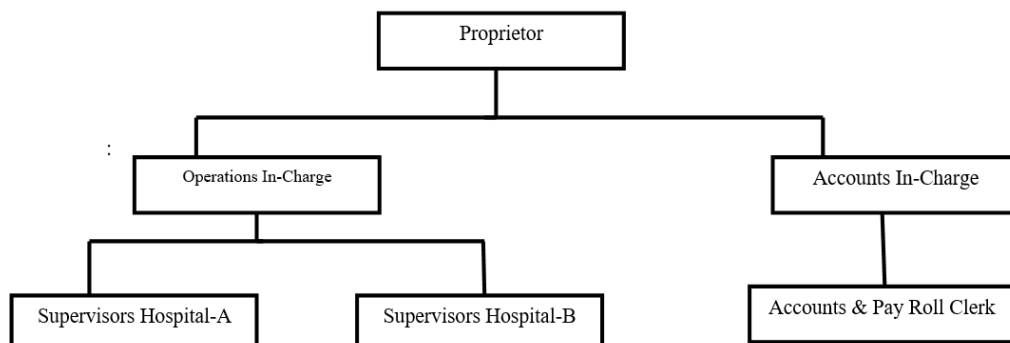
Mayer et al. (1995: 712) conceptualized trust as "the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of other parties, based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the truster, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control other parties." Exchange of benefits by Employer and dedicated service by

the Employees culminate in a trusting relationship. One of the basic tenets of Social Exchange Theory is that exchange relationship evolves into trusting, loyal and mutual commitments (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005) and reciprocity or repayment in kind is probably the best exchange rule.

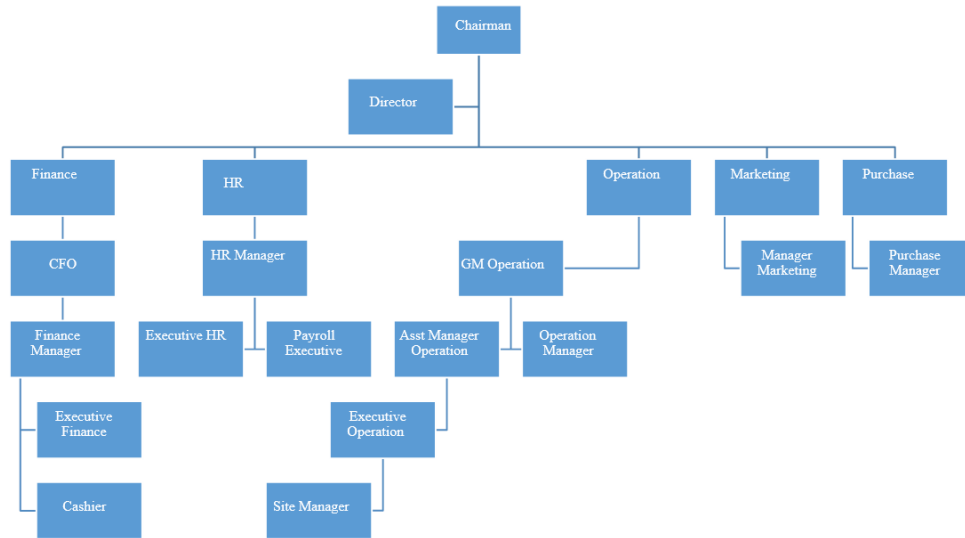
CHANGE IN ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE WITH GROWTH OF THE ENTERPRISE

With time to meet with growth of the organisation Hait has metamorphosed organisational structure of the Company. In the year 2000 Hait along with his wife who was serving as Head of Operations and two office staff used to coordinate all office jobs such as maintaining attendance record of the cleaners, liasioning with the clients, procurement of cleaning materials, all correspondences, and supervision of sites. Two hospitals were their client and in total eight Supervisors were overseeing the job of 170 cleaners. Gradually Hait has developed his organisational hierarchy, in the year 2003 they first appointed a Personnel Officer and Site In-Charges, the Enterprise was handling housekeeping functions of two hospitals and two clinics by that time and there was a requirement of at least one administrative personnel to be stationed in each site. In 2005 a Store and Purchase In-Charge was appointed as the Enterprise was handling cleaning and housekeeping of three hospitals and four Clinics and there was requirement for an experienced person in purchase and distribution of cleaning materials. Only in the year 2014, marketing personnel were appointed as they started operating in places far from Kolkata like Raipur and Bhubaneswar. In 2018 a Qualified Accountant with Finance and Legal background was recruited as Hait intended to handle most of the related issues in-house without much dependence on external Consultants. Hait viewed growth in the size of operations have triggered the need to develop a well-knit hierarchical structure, this has reduced dependence on external consultants and also enhanced their image before existing and prospective clients as they are now considered as a Company with complete set-up. Current Organisational Structure of Ritu Hospitality Services given in figure 2B and that of the year 2000 in figure 2A

Figure 2A: Organisational Chart (Year 2000)



(Source: Ritu Hospitality Services Pvt. Ltd.)



Hait says metamorphosis of the organisational structure from Proprietor driven to Management driven was necessary with the increase in complexity of business in terms of enhancing the number of sites, starting of new services, and increasing the number of manpower. Considering the simpler nature of service Hait believes that each of his employees needs to be restricted in the cleaning of a specific area so that he/she remains responsible for the cleanliness of that area, needs to follow the command of a single individual so there remains no confusion and accordingly has designated his Supervisors as a single point of contact for the workers; his managers are authorised to take decision within the ambit of SOP and Organisation Manual and see that strict discipline is maintained. A similar model has been applied for kitchen operation.

Hait says "after commencing the business I have done some studies of management books and has tried to adopt Fayol's Principles in my style of work". To his views Job of cleaning and kitchen operations is simple and he strictly follows 14 (Fourteen) Principles of Fayol i.e. division of work, authority and responsibility, discipline, unity of command, unity of direction, subordination of individual interest, remuneration, centralization, scalar chain, order, equity, stability, initiative and esprit de corps which indicate that it is the responsibility of the management to motivate the employees and be supportive of each other regularly.

Despite his best effort of transforming from Entrepreneur driven culture to Management driven culture, Hait is facing problem of solving day to day issue of the clients and employees. People approach him with the slightest issues by-passing his managers which is taking away his time to take care of larger issues and the growth of the business. Hait feels his long personal association with clients and employees and growth from scratch is the reason for their dependence on him, he laments saying "this that it is now serving detrimental to the growth of my Company". How can Hait reduce this dependence is a point to be seen?

APPREHENSION AND EXPECTATION IN POST-COVID SCENARIO

Corona virus (COVID 19 as officially known) was declared as PHEIC (Public Health Emergency of International Concern) by World Health Organization (WHO) at the end of January 2020; and on 11th March 2020, WHO has declared it as a worldwide pandemic. Within the last few months, the disease has spread fast. Although there are reported use of several drugs, no confirmed drug has been detected which could cure the infected patients. Even no vaccine has been found which could create resistance in human body. The only remedy that has been recommended was social distancing and keeping the infected patients quarantined so that these viruses do not spread within people. Government of India to combat the spread of Pandemic declared Locked-Down and restricted movement of the people. Trade, commerce, and industries excepting essential services were closed. Stoppage of all business activities has hit the economy hard and GDP of India declined. Now in phased manner it is opening up human mobility and economic activities.

What is his idea about his business in Post COVID 19 situation?

Bablu Hait expressed his apprehension, “things will not remain the same, revenue of the client organizations have been severely affected, and they will have to cut costs”. With remorse, he said “financial power of people, in general, will decrease and a good percentage of them will not be able to avail services of private hospitals in the same manner as they did in Pre-COVID days”. Hait opined that first hit of cost-cutting exercise will be outsourced employees as they can be removed without any difficulty by the Principal Employer. Majority of the employees of Ritu Hospitality Services are in the cleaning and sanitation of hospitals and this is a service that hospitals cannot ignore, but they might reduce employees. In such a situation, Hait feels that he will have to struggle with those employees as he has to locate new clients for employing these workers. Hait doesn't want to remove such employees if the principal employer throws them out which as a contractor he can do as the Company does not have any establishment where these employees can be engaged but this will affect trust of the employees on him. Another danger he apprehends is less cash-flow might delay the release of their monthly bills for payment for services rendered to clients. If most of the Clients fail to make the payment on time it would be difficult to pay his workers' wages on time.

Bablu Hait emphatically states "as a businessman I am to change faster than the environment otherwise I cannot survive". He is trying to widen his net, till now he was concentrating only in the cities like Kolkata, Bhubaneswar, Ranchi, Raipur, and Patna. Now he is keeping close contact with hospitals located in district towns of West Bengal who might allow him to serve considering his goodwill. He is currently engaged in cleaning and sanitation service of more than 70% of hospitals of Kolkata, thus his scope of further expansion in hospitals of Kolkata is limited.

To see that annual revenue of the company does not suffer he is thinking of concentrating more on his patient catering service as in Post COVID the situation many hospitals may discontinue their full-fledged kitchen arrangement and enhance patient care area. Even if they retain their kitchen they will not continue with expensive catering companies charging heavy service charges, these are the areas where he intends to explore.

Hait did not find the declaration of the package for the MSME Sector by Government of India appealing. Government of India has announced collateral free

loans to the MSMEs which will be totally guaranteed by the central government. Also, there will be a 12 month principal repayment moratorium and there will be capped interest rate and importantly no guarantee fees.

The loan from Banks creates liability and running day to day operations on Bank Loan will lead to a problem. He is unsure about the generation of a huge surplus in near future so he can repay those Bank loans taken for catering to operational costs during and post COVID period. Midst his concern, he is optimistic about Government intervention in the healthcare sector. Currently, less than 2% of the budget of Government of India is spent on healthcare it is expected that the spending will be more in the healthcare sector which will enable more hospitals to come up. In that event, he shall have more opportunities to grow and expand his operations in some Government hospitals.

Whether the apprehension or optimism turns true for Bablu Hait only time can say?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is the Business Plan of Bablu Hait is practical? Can he decide on some other alternatives during and Post-COVID 19 situation?
2. Despite delegation of authority and responsibility to the managers Bablu Hait is finding that he needs to solve routine problems of the company and is unable to bring in a management-driven culture. Discuss the problem and bring out the means of solving it.

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