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Thank them for their service

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By: S. Giridhar Name some 100-metre Olympic champions? We rattle off – Bolt, Lewis, Owens; some keen followers may even add Valeriy Borzov. Name a marathon gold medallist from the past 60 years? Stumped. Why are marathon champions – dogged and determined, the epitome of endurance, stamina and strength – not celebrated like the sprinters? This will change now, for the COVIDwarriors, the marathon runners of 2020,

When the pandemic struck in early 2020, it brought not only a medical challenge of a virulent virus but also a humanitarian crisis. In front of our eyes, the bottom fell out of the lives

of crores of our brethren who did not know where their next meal would come from, when they would have a roof over their heads or if they would ever see their homes again.



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COVID-19 is like no other crisis in living human memory. When an earthquake, cyclone, flood or outbreak strikes, the damage is limited to a region or time. Relief workers and volunteers rush in with a burst of effort lasting a few days or a few weeks to support victims who may have lost family, property or livelihood. As things settle down and victims pick up the pieces, the warriors get back to their own lives and families.

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No end in sight

But a pandemic is unrelenting. When they began their service, the Covid warriors had no idea when it would end. With each passing week, it became clear that it would stretch longer than they imagined. Come September, the case-numbers were going through the roof and the warriors were still on their daily beat, still laying themselves out, open to the unseen enemy lurking in the air, in the breath of a co-worker, in the inadvertent touch of an object or a fatigued rub of palm over the brow.

The year has been like a marathon with no finish line in sight. A leading gastroenterologist described her punishing daily routine. She had not seen her daughter in days and in the few minutes that she got with her husband, his eyes would only ask, 'Are you okay?' 'My routine is still the same, I am exhausted. I spend a few hours of my

COVID-19 Cases

Confirmed

Deaths

INDIA

10,557,985

152,274

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Taken for granted

We take them for granted - the frontline ASHA workers, the essential service providers, without whom the nation will grind to a halt. Every day, the country is swept and cleaned. Hands hurt by bleach, masks rewashed and worn at all times. A colleague presenting a review of our work, dedicated it to the ASHA workers. All they needed was for someone in a higher office to tell them how valuable their work was; to ask if they had safety gear and if they were taking care of themselves, he said. One of the workers told him, 'Sir, if only we were also seen as warriors'.

The lakhs of labourers who went home on the Shramik trains had a meal on the train because volunteers ensured that no one went hungry. One organization we worked with, added a pouch of dates to the food packets because dates provide energy. For us, this small gesture spoke of a deeper concern and compassion for the travelling migrants. Among administrators too, the selfless were many. An officer who reached home at two every night for the 40 days that the Shramik trains went out, rang me in frustration because he had tested COVID-positive and would not be in the field for some days. As soon as he was declared fit, he was back in the thick of the action.

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Drained out

Countless volunteers whose normal, peacetime jobs are with NGOs for social development, reoriented themselves overnight to join this war. The first few weeks were full of josh. But a marathon is not run on josh alone. Ten months later, many of them are at the frontline; pleading with communities to not let their guard down; to not cast the mask away; to not disregard social distancing. Not just yet. Because the pandemic has not been done away with; the vaccine is months away. Many of these warriors still take home a small salary paid by their organizations or those that fund their relief work. But there are many who joined this fauj for nothing. With no salary coming in, their families must fend for themselves. How long will these warriors last? It became clear by October that many were economically drained. They had gritted it out for seven months and were down to the bone. Will we remember them when we have all been vaccinated?

The pandemic has tested the warriors in many ways. Will they endanger their loved ones, trying to save the lives of others? The hero who went chest-deep into the Chennai floodwaters to rescue, went into the pandemic work with a furrowed brow for he has aged parents at home. Parents with co-morbidities too. There are even some who are doing this work without letting their families know!

They will not show it, but these heroes are tired now. And yet many are keeping a vigil out there.

S Giridhar, a member of the Azim Premji Foundation, was involved in the organization's response to the Covid-19 pandemic

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