

10 minutes' delivery, sanitary pads, and our disjoined lives

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Representative image. Credit: DH Photo

Supply chains influence a country in very definite ways. To say that supply chains characterise or define the state of a nation won't be too big an exaggeration. The speed and regularity with which something reaches (or doesn't) households and the ease with which people get these products and services influences their well-being, their preparedness to respond to emerging realities and their ability to think about larger questions in life.

Supply chains in India don't just deal with regular products or services. The simple act of casting a vote also becomes possible after a remarkable sequence of events fall in place coherently and purposefully. Of late, we are breaking new ground in setting up very fine and functional supply chains. An example, which certainly deserves a pat on the back, has been the colossal Covid vaccine rollout across the country. Thanks to vaccine makers, governments, health workers, civil society actors and people, we have managed to avoid a much bigger catastrophe.

Let's get to the point. The pandemic changed things. Many of us experienced loss of loved ones and dealt with the virus first-hand. A significant section of the population faced other disruptions as well. Losing a job, drop in savings, reduction in income, lesser food

intake, resetting of learning levels, facing violence at home etc., are some well documented consequences of Covid.

A particular consequence is the supply of sanitary pads to government schools and anganwadi centres. As the lockdowns started, pads just disappeared. Girls, across large parts of rural India and in pockets in cities were left with two choices, buy pads from local shops or manage somehow. The former wasn't easy, with inaccessible/ overstretched/ understocked medical stores and dwindling household earnings. So, girls resorted to the second option.

Managing in this case meant leaning on local civil society organisations who could distribute sanitary pads or making cloth pads of their own if they had received inputs on this from local NGOs. Managing also meant using old cloth or wearing two skirts or not using any product at all.

While all of this was happening, few innovative minds were at work to make sure we get toothpaste delivered to our homes before we get out of bed and pick up the toothbrush. As one would expect, this breakneck speed of delivery was only promised in a handful of cities. Within a few weeks almost every grocery delivery app was promising delivery in a few minutes. The latest in this series of innovation is a food delivery app promising delivery within 10-30 minutes.

Interestingly this breakdown (of sanitary pad distribution) and breakthrough (super-fast delivery of products) ended up serving the same purpose. They created time for us and kept us confined to our homes. I stayed at home, happily gave up the short walks to nearby grocery stores and wondered what to do with my new-found 'precious' minutes. Rani, in a nondescript habitation, had to limit her mobility during her periods and was left with the additional task of foraging for rags and worrying about her health. These two events are also characterised by the penalties that key actors end up facing. Rani has to miss school, avoid kitchen and places of worship and sometimes sleep outside the house.

Helpless delivery agents in crowded cities end up with a truncated daily allowance if certain number of timely deliveries are not completed in a day. In case you have not seen or heard this yet, menstruation is more than just a biological process that girls and women encounter every month. Across our country, menstruation has always been a complex social phenomenon that creates serious gender disparity. It's considered dirty and a taboo, girls are banished and give up living their normal lives for a few days every month.

Lack of menstrual hygiene products and knowledge keeps girls away from school for significant intervals every year.

A 2014 report by Dasra talks about menstruation being the second biggest reason why girls drop out of schools, after household work. A missing packet of sanitary napkins could mean a missed opportunity. As I write this, supply chains continue to surprise.

While I wait for my next grocery order, marvelling at the achievements of startups, Rani's monthly supply of sanitary pads that might help her get back to school still eludes her.

(The writer works at the Azim Premji Foundation.)

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