

# Hello... I am an Entrepreneur! – An Account of Three Indian Female Entrepreneurs during the Pandemic (Digital Media Content-based Study)

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## Abstract

The exogenous shock and aftermath, post the identification and discovery (in Dec. 2019) of SARS CoV-2, the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus, has not only resulted in the loss of innumerable lives, but stretched the healthcare systems across the globe. All this has had a huge impact, economically (Kuckertz & Brandle, 2021). The three perspectives for entrepreneurs during the pandemic have been uncertainty, resilience, and opportunity. On the basis of these perspectives, three highly enterprising and equally successful 'in pandemic' female entrepreneurs to note have been Ms. Vandana Bhagat of 'Vanity Salon', and Ms. Sindhuja Jeyabal and Ms. Sneha Sheth of 'Dost Education'. "There can be no better personal development tool than running one's own business," says Vandana Bhagat. Dost Education's vision is for every child to thrive – regardless of his/her family wealth. The idea is to be a 'Dost' to parents and enable them to make learning for their kids easier and smoother (Sheth, 2021). This paper is an attempt to study the economic impact caused by the pandemic in the lives of these three entrepreneurs in India.

**Keywords:** Entrepreneurs, Entrepreneurship, Pandemic, Uncertainty, Resilience, Opportunity

## Introduction

One early 2020 morning (March 11), MIHIKA woke up to an event unprecedented and unparalleled in history – not experienced since World War II (75 years earlier). This was the day when Coronavirus (COVID-19) was

declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020).

The exogenous shock and aftermath, post the identification and discovery (in Dec. 2019) of SARS CoV-2, the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus, has not only resulted in the loss of innumerable lives, but stretched the healthcare systems across the globe. All this has had a huge impact, economically (Kuckertz & Brandle, 2021).

The situation has even greater implications for the MSMEs (Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises), as well as the new start-ups and incubations (Brown & Rocha, 2020).

In this backdrop, the paper is an attempt to study the economic impact caused by the pandemic in the lives of three entrepreneurs in India.

## Basis of the Study

Just after completing her BBA (Entrepreneurship) course from a leading institute, MIHIKA was excited about the acceptance letter that she had received announcing her selection to the country's premier institute for post-graduation studies (in entrepreneurship). To make it more interesting, at the same time, MIHIKA was also offered the opportunity to take over the very close-to-heart start-up business that her father had started only in the past month, but to which he was unable to devote time. As a child, MIHIKA too had dreamed of heading an entrepreneurial venture – and what a baptism by fire this could be. Going with her heart, rather than her head, MIHIKA decided to take the entrepreneurial plunge. The post-graduation degree could be taken up once she got the hang of the entrepreneurial venture.

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From her childhood, MIHIKA's grandmother always spoke about the sharp mind that she possessed. Maybe it was time to put it to the test.

MIHIKA was a good student. During her BBA (Entrepreneurship) course, she found the lectures of Prof. RK not only practical, but also thought-provoking. She decided to get in touch with Prof. RK and seek his guidance and blessings.

The second phase of the raging pandemic was just on the wane and the (online classes) semester break had just started. Prof. RK was more than happy to receive MIHIKA's call, and as always, was only happy to be of help.

MIHIKA: Hearty greetings of the day, sir. I am very excited to share some important news with you. Is this the right time to talk?

Prof. RK: You're always welcome. MIHIKA. It's always a pleasure to talk to youngsters like you. Anyway, as we have just finished the online semester classes, I can certainly give you some time today. Please tell me what you want to discuss.

MIHIKA (sighing): Many thanks, sir. That's why I called you. I will tell you all. As you're aware, I received the acceptance letter of selection for post-graduation studies (in Entrepreneurship). But at the same time, my father also made an offer which I could not turn down. He offered for me to take over the (very close to my heart) business that he had started only recently, but to which he was not able to devote time.

Prof. RK: This sounds exciting. Also, as I've opined for long, start-ups don't occur incessantly. Post-graduation can always wait – you can take the same up once you get hold of the business at hand.

MIHIKA: That's exactly what I have decided to do. Hope I am taking the right decision, sir.

Prof. RK: Absolutely, MIHIKA. I always knew you had it in you to be the best. Also, once you have taken a decision, you need to stand by it, my child.

MIHIKA: Many thanks, sir. You know sir, during my graduation days, you were the favourite teacher for a few

of us – the go-to person at every beck-and-call. Hence I couldn't wait to speak to you on this development of mine. I request you to please help and guide me.

Prof. RK: Don't worry, MIHIKA. Let me again tell you about a book with which to start your journey. Hope you've been able to go through the book, '*The Start-Up of You*', by Reid Hoffman and Ben Casnocha that I had presented to you.

MIHIKA: I indeed am fortunate to have you as my guiding light, sir. With you as my mentor, I am confident I will certainly be successful in this venture, as well.

Prof. RK (grinning): Hmm... Let's hope that I am of some help. Also, since I am a little less tied up today, why don't you drop by for lunch? It's been some time since my wife too has met you. She talks about you often and would love to have you over.

MIHIKA: Many thanks, sir. It's always a pleasure to meet ma'am. Can't wait to be there!

Obedient and dutiful as she was and unable to control her excitement, in no time she found herself chatting with Prof. RK and Mrs. RK in their living room.

Prof. RK: MIHIKA, to be a successful entrepreneur, you must first read and relate to the entrepreneurial success stories, and the best part is that the pandemic has left us with many to share. Let me take you through a few such stories, which seem to be in our own backyard.

MIHIKA: Sir, I have already started having that familiar feeling that today is going to be yet another highly effective day.

Meanwhile, Mrs. RK comes over with some munchies... "Gobble them up, MIHIKA, before it's too late. There's still some time for lunch."

Thanking Mrs. RK, MIHIKA settles down. "I am all ears, sir."

Munching the savories, Prof. RK continues, "You know MIHIKA, usually entrepreneurs have the sixth sense to jump into opportunities and unearth such enterprises that are likely to benefit. No wonder, 'Agents of Change' (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000) is a term coined for such

entrepreneurs. I would love to see you as an agent of change one day.”

MIHIKA: I am humbled, sir.

Prof. RK: Another recent study (Ratten, 2020) on SARS CoV-2 and its seething impact observed that sports entrepreneurship and/or education entrepreneurship have been the most looked at ventures during the pandemic.

## The Methodology and Perspectives

Going by the above, MIHIKA, you would be well served to note the three perspectives for entrepreneurs during the pandemic. They are:

- The Perspective of ‘Uncertainty’
- The Perspective of ‘Resilience’
- The Perspective of ‘Opportunity’

Interestingly, researchers maintain that these three perspectives leave an indelible ink on the COVID-19 crisis triggered and accentuated by the novel coronavirus, a.k.a. SARS Cov-2 (Kuckertz & Brandle, 2021).

Let me tell you more.



**Fig. 1: The Perspectives**

### The Uncertainty Perspective

The challenges facing the entrepreneurs can be illuminated through qualitative studies (Salamzadeh & Dana, 2020; Kuckertz et al., 2020). First-time entrepreneurs do not only feel the pressure financially, but also need to guide and manage the staff in being proactive to the ever-changing customer needs, thereby devising clearer ways of putting the house in order.

According to a survey (Cepel et al., 2020), yet another major factor on the build-up to the crisis has been the financial uncertainty.

Understandably, among other things, the raging pandemic also resulted in a sharp decline in entrepreneurial activities. However, in April 2020, the entrepreneurial activities in the United States were found to have dropped by 22% (Fairlie, 2020) – a succinct fallout from the first wave. A similar study carried out in Canada (Beland et al., 2020) reported that during the same period (May 2020), the entrepreneurial activity dropped between 10.1 to 14.8%. Interestingly, what both the studies found out was that women, immigrants, less-educated individuals, and minorities were the ones who were adversely affected. Yet another study (Prah & Sibiri, 2020) – a qualitative one from the land of origin of the pandemic, China, also came up with an account of how the infection-controlling measures affected the marginalised masses.

### The Resilience Perspective

This is based on the entrepreneur’s ability to be resilient. The case of Sweden shows that, despite anticipating dramatic effects, most entrepreneurs were late to respond to the crisis, and hence, were found to not take any specific activity or action (Thorgren & Williams, 2020).

The African-Americans, Latinos, and female entrepreneurs demonstrate a case of disproportionateness in the USA (Fairlie, 2020). One of the reasons for this is that most of these entrepreneurs tend to operate in unfavourable industries. Confronted with an exogenous shock, minority group businesses are forced to address the same from a non-resilient position. In a few of the world’s developing economies, female entrepreneurs reeling under extremely patriarchal structures often face threatened resilience (Jaim, 2020).

### The Opportunity Perspective

The uncertain nature of the pandemic made the business models suddenly exposed as non-viable, thereby carrying the added pressure to adapt (Kuckertz et al., 2020).

However, entrepreneurs can overcome this challenge through innovation (Sultan & Sultan, 2020). In fact,

entrepreneurs who are innovative are expected to tide over the crisis and prosper (Zhang et al., 2021).

Considering the pandemic as a harbinger for harnessing entrepreneurship (Davidsson, 2020), the emerging literature on COVID-19 looks at the pandemic as an opportunity for emerging entrepreneurs (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000).

Despite the spread-control measures like lockdowns becoming a hurdle for the otherwise seemingly viable options for a budding entrepreneur, the situation warranted the hitherto unexplored discovery of new and fresh opportunities.

In fact, this forced inactiveness also acted as a stress-buster for some entrepreneurs and enabled them to re-focus and reflect on their lives, values, and identity. All of these resulted in the exploration of newer fields for budding and upcoming entrepreneurial ventures (Nummela et al., 2020).

For women entrepreneurs, who seemed to have been disproportionately suffering from the crisis, this was a positive opportunity-seeking option. Start-ups led predominantly by women entrepreneurs pivoted themselves on dealing with the uncertainty by adopting newer opportunities (Manolova et al., 2020).

Prof. RK (continuing): On the basis of the perspectives, the three highly enterprising and equally successful ‘in pandemic’ female entrepreneurs that made me take note were Ms. Vandana Bhagat of ‘Vanity Salon’, and Ms. Sindhuja Jeyabal and Ms. Sneha Sheth of ‘Dost Education’. I am sure knowing and hearing about them will prepare you better for the job at hand.

MIHIKA: Certainly, sir. This is going to be great.

Prof. RK continues.

Let’s take them – one at a time, MIHIKA. Please hear me out carefully.

## The Analysis and Discussions

### Vanity Salon

Vandana Bhagat founded ‘Vanity Salon’ – a concept unisex salon in the upscale locality of Vasant Vihar at New Delhi. Growing ergonomically, today it has a wide range of both salon and spa services as offerings.

Today, it is not only a go-to place for being pampered from the rigmaroles of one’s busy schedule, it is also a very welcoming place for a luxurious personal experience.

It is also the next-door salon for one’s basic needs and a one-stop solution for beauty care needs, such as hair spa, party makeup, and even diet consultation.

In the words of the budding entrepreneur, “There can be no better personal development tool than running one’s own business”.

Having launched the beauty studio Vanity Salon more than 11 years ago, Ms. Bhagat’s outlet is one of a kind. Being always high on the fashion quotient, the luxury salon is not just fashionable, it is also run very professionally. The 52-year-old salon owner and makeover consultant is also a caring mother of two, a busy homebody running on a tight schedule.

With a spring in her steps, the multi-tasker never shied away from a challenge. She firmly believes that women are no less in any way and can do anything if they are determined. Never hesitate. The mantra, ‘Just believe in yourself’ (Bhagat, 2020), is what keeps her going.

These 12 years of hard work and dedication have not gone in vain. It has brought her many laurels. In this short span of time, Vandana Bhagat has been featured, interviewed, and written about in *e-She*, *atelier diva*, *Money Control*, and so on.

Very image-conscious and professional, she can never remember a single day of walking out of her house without being properly dressed and groomed.

The current rumblings have slowly but certainly made her veer towards and find solace in spirituality, meditation, and pranayama-healing.

### COVID-19 and Vanity Salon

“And yet, our customers have stuck with us,” says Vandana Bhagat. However, while she was able to hold her own amidst competition from international salon chains, she could never foresee the coronavirus lockdown that completely shuttered her business.

As a fallout from the pandemic, Vanity Salon too had to close shop. This happened on March 19, 2020, just five

days before the start of the 21-day nationwide lockdown starting March 24 (later extended to May 3). “We didn’t know when we would open again,” sighed Vandana stoically.

This was a business based on human touch and physical proximity. Hence, it was on the radar of the authorities. “Even if I had invested more on personal protection gear and disposable tools for my staff, it was not a guarantee of protection from the pandemic. Besides, customers stopped visiting salons then” (Bhagat, 2021).

With no revenue, Vandana soon struggled to pay salaries to her staff. This pained her to no end, as some of her staff members had been with her for more than a decade. Every new day only brought more bad news. The proprietor could do nothing but pray for things to improve.

The strategist that she was, Ms. Bhagat started firming up her options – she may have to reduce the salon operations by half and may even have to branch out and take up another venture to survive in the future.

## **Dost Education**

The entrepreneurial urge pushed two UC Berkeley graduate students, Sneha Sheth and Sindhuja Jeyabal, to co-found Dost Education in 2015. In these seven years, CEO Sneha Sheth and CTO Sindhuja Jeyabal have enabled this Unitus Seed Fund StartEdu4 and Next Billion EdTech Prize 2019 London winner, ‘Dost Education’, to certainly create a name for itself.

On graduating, Sheth and Jeyabal were successful in getting accepted as a non-profit Y Combinator and funded by the Mulago Foundation in 2017. They have never looked back since.

Team Dost is a heady mix of entrepreneurs, engineers, and teachers alike – all who share a common passion – get all children ready for school.

Being a non-profit EdTech platform, Dost Education’s aim is to enable low-income parents to provide and teach their children proper growth and healthy development from the early days. Notably, technology comes to the fore of this EdTech start-up in India.

The organisation’s modus operandi is to teach the needy, employing an audio-based medium. Spread over 24 weeks, the course aims to train parents with children from the age of 2-6. The curriculum strives to make everyday moments fun and provide opportunities to grow.

By putting parents at the centre of early childhood development, Dost Education’s vision is for every child to thrive – regardless of his/her family wealth. The idea is to be a ‘Dost’ to parents and enable them to make learning for their kids easier and smoother (Sheth, 2021).

## **Mission and Vision**

Parents are at the centre of the development of every child. Dost Education’s vision is to unlock every child’s full potential, irrespective of his/her origin of birth. Right from its inception, Dost Education’s lookout has been to get every single child ready for school.

Noting the fact that 90% of a child’s brain development occurs due to early learning, Dost Education’s first offering successfully placed the parents at the centre of the learning process. The organisation’s first mobile product reached 10,000 families in the very first year, and the entrepreneurs aim to roll the mobile offering out to one million homes (akin to learning labs) by the end of 2021-22.

## **Scaling Up**

Starting in 2017 with 300 users, from its launchpad at New Delhi, Dost Education today can proudly claim to have touched the lives of over 54,000 parents through its vast and robust network of Dost Champions (and partnerships with foundations/companies/NGOs/schools), in the process raising well above USD400,000 from universal set-ups like USAID, MIT, Australian Aid, and World Vision.

## **Planned Goals and Milestones**

By the end of 2021-22, Dost Education intends to up-sell their flagship “phonecast” product to a targeted one million families, engage with the researchers to refine the model for deeper impact, and try newer, media-rich

prototypes for low-income families who are increasingly gaining smartphone access.

Relying on AI to reduce the counselling costs, Dost Education has also embarked upon a model to transcribe and classify the hotline voicemails, to automate issue resolutions, and to link the right hotline counsellor to the right user, thereby enabling dissemination of critical parent requests in real-time.

### **Dost's Response to COVID-19**

Well before the pandemic had set in, being in touch with 300+ families (since mid-March 2019), Dost Education knew that the low-income families were always worried about their income and health, and were anxious at encountering the increased instances of gender-based violence (GBV) within their family. Such worries and anxieties resulted in heightened levels of stress, which were seen to be affecting not only the parents, but even young children.

To be of help to the families to tide over the crisis, Dost Education designed a six-week-long audio module. Named 'COVID and Mental Wellness', the module was built to address stress and the mental well-being of both adults and young children. It was also successful in recommending (positive) behaviour management techniques for ease in adopting the health routines even at home.

During the pandemic, Dost Education proved to be a saviour to parents wanting to engage their children with quality activities and tasks. To overcome the language barrier, the EdTech platform even passed on information about such activities in Hindi – by means of a one-minute call to the needy parents.

The pandemic has imposed many hardships on blue collar and migrant families, particularly in relation to their mental well-being due to increased anxiety, stress, and aggravation of latent conditions, as well as posing novel challenges to child rearing and development. Dost Education is a tech non-profit in the field of child development and wellness.

It is a one-to-many platform that delivers minute-long podcasts over phone calls (four times a week) to blue collared families, enabled through partnerships with prominent NGOs. Such 'phonecasts' contain both

information and suggestions for tasks, activities, and behaviours that can be easily adopted by the children.

Dost Education has been supporting 50,000 families across four states with timely mental health audio podcasts over phone calls. This enabled an overwhelming response from listeners who solely relied on the phone calls for credible information on practices and resources to handle stress at home. Dost Education is keen to partner with more non-profits and state governments to reach more families in the coming months (Jeyabal, 2021).

Dost Education wants to support as many families as they can and help them address stress and build resilience. In addition to reaching families within Dost's network, they have also joined hands with Child Rights and You (CRY) for mobilising forces on the ground to take the mental well-being calls to 50,000 families across four Hindi-speaking states. This work would not have been possible without the timely support from ACT Grants, MIT Solve, and Omidyar Network India.

The need for mental health support is enormous and the work has just begun at Dost Education. The Pilot Project was flagged off at Bhajanpura, Delhi, with 200 parents joining in. Since then, the entrepreneurial venture has lent its services to more than 54,000 parents in just Delhi and NCR alone. With the 'Center on the Developing Child' at Harvard University coming in as a partner, the entire curriculum has been developed and localised keeping the Indian community in mind. Dost Education is unique, as the focus here is more on the socio-emotional development of the child, and not just on the learning outcomes. Specific socio-emotional activities viz., good touch versus bad touch, conversation, and storytelling are in vogue.

A lot is being done to get the parents involved and the organisation encourages the parents to participate in their child's education in new ways. The organisation constantly reminds the parents of the importance of interacting with the children and guiding them through the tasks. The parents are also counselled to not get angry if a child is not able to nail the task in the first go (Sheth, 2021).

### **The Lockdown with Dost**

Partnering with the World Health Organisation, Dost Education successfully launched a four-week-long

programme to address positive behaviour management and proper hygiene techniques for the children. This is in addition to the existing all-activity-based 24-week-long programmes for the children between three and six years of age. In only one month, they have had 8,000 plus eager and enthusiastic families making the most of their new programme.

Dost's engagement has doubled by introducing the WHO-partnered four-week programme (Wasan, 2021).

For the staple 24-week programme, children and parents are taught how to tackle bullies, knowledge about having a fixed mindset, the art of parenting, general numeracy, and more. Interestingly, one of the on-demand activities was to help ensure that the children go to bed on time. Dost Education today has come a long way from Bhajanpura, and the plan is to expand to five more states and reach out to more people using different social-media platforms like Facebook, TikTok, and others.

## Findings and Conclusion

MIHIKA: Sir, many thanks for being my leading light again, today. Also, from my study on entrepreneurship, what I found out was that entrepreneurship over the ages did not emerge either spontaneously or instinctively.

Rather, it is the energetic outcome of a procedural interaction between environment and the individual. First appearing in the French language in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the term 'entrepreneur' was ascribed to a person engaged in military expedition. The terminology further got extended to cover the civil engineering and construction-based activities in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The economic connotation of entrepreneurship – aligned to activities and view only came up during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when Richard Cantillon, a French banker first applied the term 'entrepreneur' to mean a person who could bear uncertainty and risk.

By economic development, we can essentially mean a process of upward change. It is like the process in which the country's real per capita income increases over a long period of time. Yet another power term is concept entrepreneurship, which is the tendency of a person to

organise the business on his/her own and run it profitably, using the qualities of leadership, decision-making, and managerial ability.

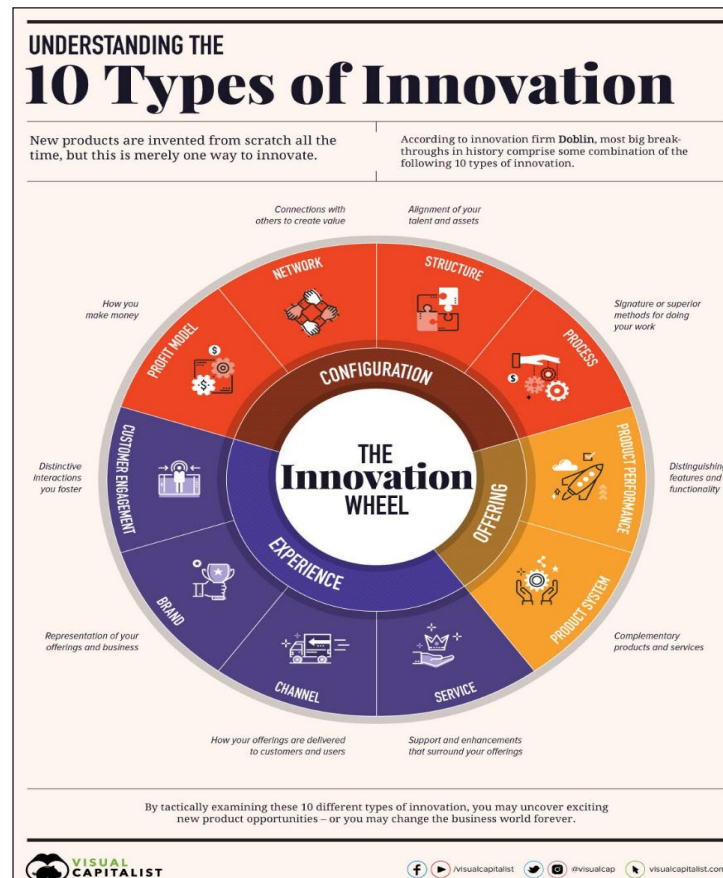
In a way, the term 'entrepreneur' precedes 'entrepreneurship'. While entrepreneurs are tangible personalities, entrepreneurship is an abstraction. Accordingly, entrepreneurship is but a role played by or/and the task performed by the entrepreneur. Well-designed, articulated, and controlled research-based studies on entrepreneurship are few.

Going by the financial motive, every entrepreneur necessarily exploits an opportunity and undertakes moderate risk, to invest money and earn profit. To be successful, an entrepreneur needs to possess enough and more farsightedness so that he/she can perceive an opportunity and exploit it well in time. Entrepreneurship can therefore be defined as the propensity of a mind to take a calculated risk with confidence, to achieve a predetermined business or industrial objective.

Typically meaning to undertake, the term 'entrepreneurship' is primarily attributed to an efficient manager. The sustained success of an entrepreneur also nullifies the contention that an entrepreneur is a rare breed – an elusive character. Entrepreneurship has indeed been successful in engaging the attention of sociologists, psychologists, and economists alike. While the sociologist analyses the characteristics of entrepreneurs in terms of caste, family, and social status, the psychologist analyses the attributes based on personality traits such as the need for achievement, affiliation and power, risk-taking, decision-making, creativity, and leadership. The economist, on the other hand, analyses them on the basis of occupational backgrounds, access to capital, business, and technical expertise.

Prof. RK (smiling): Great, my child. Also, MIHIKA, as you are starting out in your entrepreneurial venture, you may also want to look up the ten types of innovation as prescribed by the innovation firm Doblin.

MIHIKA: Looking through the A4 sheet (containing the ten types) handed over by Prof. RK – "This is excellent, sir. I would love to retain a copy."



**Fig. 2: The Ten Types of Innovation**

Prof. RK: This is yours, MIHIKA. I want you to not only retain a copy, but also refer to it from time to time. This certainly will be of immense help to you, as you venture out.

MIHIKA: What a decision it was to come and meet you, sir. Today has once again been a ‘golden day’ for me. Thanks for constantly being the ‘wind beneath my wings’.

Prof. RK (smiling): That’s what a teacher is for, my child. I was just doing my duty.

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