

Justification for Delaying or Cancelling the 2021 BMM Convention

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I think it is time for me to send you the information I have collected that may be useful to you and to the Risk Assessment Committee in making a decision as to whether the 2021 Convention should be delayed by one year or cancelled and rescheduled at a later date e.g. in 2023. These are strictly my views as I see them at this moment. Right now the entire situation created by the Corona pandemic world over is changing rapidly and has had a very negative impact on almost every facet of human society and how and when the situation will improve no one can correctly guess or predict. In my efforts, I have restricted my comments to the situation in the USA to a major extent and to the situation in India to a minor extent and on the several activities that might have negative impact on the planning efforts necessary for the organization of the 2021 BMM Convention.

I. The Current Status of Corona Virus Pandemic in the World, in the USA, in India and in the State of Maharashtra (as of May 21, 2020)

Since its beginning in China around December 2019, Corona viral infection (COVID-19) has very rapidly spread to more than 200 countries in just less than six months. Currently, the extent of its spread in the world, in the USA, in India and in the state of Maharashtra stands as follows:

(i) World: Total confirmed cases: 5,014,943. Recovered cases: 1,909,701.
Fatal cases: 328,462

(ii) USA: Total confirmed cases: 1,597,755. Recovered cases: 303,367. Fatal cases: 94,629

The rapid growth of the Corona viral infection in certain areas of the USA may be related to the extreme variations in population densities and to the unique organizational structure of the political system. Poor decision making at the federal and by some of the State Governments probably has had significant impact on the rapid spread of the infection also. For example, it is astonishing for our President to publicly announce that the use of ultraviolet light or the administration of disinfectants to the patients could be tried to cure a patient very quickly, and also to state that this Corona virus will just disappear without vaccination!

Just take a look at what happened in the City of New York, where Coronavirus outbreak grew so large by early March that the city became the primary source of new infections in the United States as thousands of infected people traveled from the city and seeded outbreaks around the country. One of the principal reasons for such an explosive growth of Corona infection in the City of New York may be its population density of about 80,000 persons per sq. mile.

The Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME), an independent global health research center at the University of Washington estimates nearly 135,000 coronavirus deaths in the US through the beginning of August, citing the easing of lockdown orders as the main driver of the new number.

(iii) India: Total Confirmed cases: 112,359. Recovered cases: 45,300. Fatal cases: 3,435

The first cases of Corona viral infection in India were reported on February 2, 2020, and since then have shown a relatively rapid but uneven growth. On 24 March 2020, the Government of India under Prime Minister Modi ordered a nationwide lockdown for 21 days, limiting movement of the entire 1.3 billion population of India as a preventive measure against the COVID-19 pandemic in India. These measures had a varied effect on the spread of infection. This may be because of the unique characteristics of social and economic stratification of the Indian population. For example on an average about 80% of the population is rural with only about 20% being urban and suburban. There are a few exceptions such as the State of Maharashtra, where 45% of population lives in the urban/suburban area. Preventing the spread of the corona virus from urban to rural areas will be a key in the country's battle against the COVID-19. What will happen in the next couple of months is anyone's guess.

(iv) State of Maharashtra: Total confirmed cases: 39,297. Recovered cases: 10,318. Fatal cases: 1,390

The growth of Corona viral infection is significant in the areas of very high population density and the high level of people mobility, such as in Mumbai and in Pune.

II. Effects of Corona pandemic on the Social and Economic Life in the USA

To significantly reduce the adverse effects of the rapid spread of this viral infection in the every stratum of the American society the Federal Government and the various State Governments, by executive orders have introduced social distancing (it should be called physical distancing), closed down almost every type of small and large gatherings of the general population, closed down the schools, universities and colleges, restaurants, sport events of all types, and restricted nearly every type of transportation to a major extent. The businesses that were allowed to continue with some or severe restrictions are food stores, pharmacies, hospitals and senior care facilities. Unemployment has reached at levels not imagined only a few weeks ago. It is estimated that close to 40 million workers have already lost their jobs and thousands have to wait for hours in long lines to receive food from community food banks and other charitable organizations for daily survival. This type of disruption was caused to some extent because of no fault of the general public but in my opinion is due to the arrogant negligence of several politicians including the executive branch of the federal government. The constantly shifting position of the Office of the President and his associates and the blame game that has been played is responsible in no small measure for the dire situation the population of the USA finds itself.

III. Factors that might have a significant negative impact on the Planning efforts of the 2021 BMM Convention

(i) Effect on the Fund raising efforts for the convention:

The next topic I would like to address is the fundraising for the convention. If I understand correctly the local Maharashtra Mandal's convention committee uses various means and ideas to raise funds. These include donations of various amounts with the donors receiving various graded benefits. It also seeks donations mostly from Maharashtra businesses in the North America, and donations from a small number of organizations from India, particularly those located in the State of Maharashtra. Several other methods including collection of stratified registration fees, charges for setting up of the exhibition booths are also used to raise the needed funds. In my view, because of the adverse impact of Corona pandemic many of these sources for generating funds will not be able to provide funds at the expected levels. Because the Corona pandemic has affected people across the board it is very likely that the attendance will be significantly reduced thus adversely affecting the income from registration and other fees. So in my opinion the Corona pandemic's overall effect will be a significant reduction in the total funds collected to support the convention.

(ii) Effect on the Entertainment programs, exhibition, food etc.

I have not attended many BMM Conventions. From attending a couple of recent BMM Conventions my guess is that the convention usually runs for two to three days that involves an Opening Ceremony, various types of entertainment events, conferences, serving various types of Maharashtra delicacies, running an exhibition and an elaborate closing ceremony. Participants from India as well as from the North America practice their craft for many months to perform in front of a crowd between 200 and 4000 persons of all ages, including many senior citizens. By comparison with many other events in the USA, and other parts of the World, the size of the BMM Convention is very small. So the economic impact of cancellation will not be significant on the various vendors, but for a small organization like the BMM of America and for the local Maharashtra Mandal the financial loss will be of a significant measure

(iii) Effect of the ever Changing Immigration Regulations on the Foreign Visitors to the Convention

Currently an estimated 250,000 visitors from India (students, relatives of Indian US citizens and permanent residents visiting USA as visitors, Indian businessmen from India and those with exchange visitor's visa etc.) are stranded in the USA while about 25,000 American citizens (mostly of Indian descent) are stranded in India. Efforts for their repatriation are underway, with each stranded person will have to pay their air transport charges. Their original prepaid tickets are not valid for the repatriation travel. These types of situations have created fear of being stranded in a foreign country. It is expected to have a significant impact on those might be invited as guests for the BMM Convention. It may be necessary to go ahead with the organization of the convention without inviting guest speakers, performing artists etc. which might have a negative impact on quality of the program the attendance for the convention.

IV. Current Status of the Medical Treatment against the Corona viral infection

Again based on his hunch, not based on the science, the US President announced that the US will have Covid-19 vaccine by year's end. Wait! The history about vaccine development has shown it is not that easy. Not all attempts to develop vaccines against viral, bacterial and protozoal infections have been successful. For example, various investigators have tried for over 20 years to develop a vaccine against AIDS virus. They have failed. Several other efforts to develop vaccines against infections, not necessarily viral, such as malaria have not been successful either. When they are successful, vaccines have been the safest group of drugs for the prevention of various infections of the world population.

The knowledge we currently have about infective viruses is exceptionally advanced and it is shared among almost all international investigators. So if one is cautiously optimistic we can believe that the efforts of various investigators involved in understanding the molecular biology of the Corona virus is expected to lead to the development of many vaccine candidates that can be clinically tried in human patients and volunteers for their therapeutic effectiveness as well as for their toxicological profile in men, women and children. In addition, chemical stability studies, safe methods of storage, and an easy but safe method of administration need to be standardized also.

Currently some 19 vaccine candidates are at various stages of development and a few have already entered in small sample clinical trials. In the latest development, the University of Oxford announced a partnership today with the biopharmaceutical company AstraZeneca that aims to advance rapidly the manufacture of the coronavirus candidate vaccine ChAdOx1 nCoV-19, subject to its successful testing in ongoing human clinical trials. Previous history of developing vaccines against animal and plant viruses has indicated that it takes at least one year to 18 months get all the necessary tests and clinical trials completed. Then since this Corona virus is infecting humans all over the world one would have to develop effective commercially viable manufacturing process to produce billions of doses. That is a big if, and several countries will have to develop a very complicated infrastructure to manufacture and distribute this vaccine to nearly every country in the world. To be effective, at least 70 to 80 percent of the world's populations will have to be treated. If such a vaccine develops effective long lasting immunity in majority of the world's population then this viral infection can be brought under control. But there are no guarantees. If one takes a very pessimistic view then it is quite possible that this Corona infection would become a cyclical infection world over and it will take several years to develop effective immunity against this infection.

There is an interesting political twist to the effective use of a vaccine against the Corona virus in the USA. Republicans are almost three times as likely to refuse vaccination for coronavirus as Democrats. While only 7 percent of Democrats said they would not be vaccinated against the virus, 20 percent of Republicans have said they would choose not to receive the vaccine. Overall, 64 percent of adults polled said they would get a vaccine, including 61 percent of Republicans. Seventy-one percent of Democrats said they would be vaccinated against the virus. What effect such a political divide would have on the overall effectiveness is anyone's guess!

The other types of therapeutic interventions include developing drugs that will prevent the Corona virus from producing its clinical effects on the pulmonary system in humans or to develop drugs that significantly shorten the duration and severity of the disease caused by this virus. Already efforts are under way to identify such agents. Having success in these efforts also involves undertaking a lot of laboratory based and various levels of clinical investigations to come up with effective chemicals or drugs that can be easily manufactured in very large quantities and distributed worldwide to be effective. One of major problems one can encounter is how all these efforts are going to be funded? It is not an easy task, particularly considering very widespread economic disruptions this Corona pandemic has already created in just a few months. Another problem is the politics that will be involved in all these efforts. Each country in this world has its own political system to govern its population. And it is quite likely that only a few countries will have the political will and the economic resources to make a successful effort to treat this infection.

V. Conclusions and Recommendation:

Currently the status of Corona pandemic world over is constantly evolving. In the USA the infection rate has not returned to a negligible level and it is quite likely that more and more persons will be infected, particularly since for economic reasons there is increasing tendency to open various businesses and resume activities that most likely will result in multiple exposures to the Corona virus. Therefore, the planning of any events such as the BMM convention in 2021 that involves coordination of many activities and functions purely on a voluntary basis will not be successful and feasible. The situation in India, including the in the state of Maharashtra is also in a flux and according to the views of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) the increases in infections are most likely will continue for at least until the end of June.

I consider being a volunteer to support a cause or a mission as one of the greatest attribute of an individual. I fiercely support anyone who volunteers even for a day. So, if this convention is either cancelled or postponed, it will bring big disappointment, particularly to the hundreds of volunteers from the Charlotte (NC) area and to those who had already agreed to be a volunteer. But what has happened is no fault anyone connected with the Charlotte Marathi Mandal or the BMM. So do not feel abandoned or sorry! You will get another opportunity to become a volunteer again!

So, based on the information that is currently available, I would like to recommend that the 2021 BMM Convention should be cancelled and rescheduled a year later in 2022 in Charlotte (NC) or altogether cancelled and the decision deferred indefinitely until the situation in the USA and in India returns to normalcy.
