

Publication: Business Standard
Edition: Hyderabad, Kolkata, Mumbai, Delhi
Date: 10 February, 2021

Story of resilience under the Big Top

GETTANALI KRISHNA
 New Delhi, 9 February

The world over, circuses have found it hard to survive the Covid-19 lockdown and the consequent loss in ticketing revenues. Even the famous Canada-based Cirque du Soleil had to file for bankruptcy protection after the pandemic forced the circus operator to cancel shows and lay off artists earlier in 2020. This is what makes the story of the survival of Rambo Circus, a travelling circus in Maharashtra, inspiring.

Stranded in Airoli off the satellite township of Navi Mumbai when the lockdown was declared, Rambo Circus not only survived Covid-19, the lockdown and economic hardship also became one of India's first circuses to perform virtually.

Initially when the lockdown was announced, the 90-odd folk at the Rambo Circus camp thought things would settle down soon. Instead, they went downhill fast when their owner contracted coronavirus and ticket revenues ceased. "We even ran short of drinking water as there was no direct supply," recalls Biju Pushkaran, the 51-year-old clown of Rambo Circus. The senior-most among all the performers, the responsibility of looking after the camp fell on him. "I was not able to

were kind enough to send us ration and drinking water," he says. "While this ensured we didn't starve, none of us was able to send money to our families back home." As a community, they socially distanced in their respective tents and the Big Top started looking forlornly empty and unkempt. Around this time, the circus noticed thousands of migrant workers walk past their camp on their weary trudge towards distant homes. "For 10 days, as a community we decided to forgo one meal a day and cooked our famous circus pulao (it is made with rice, dry fruits, raisins and mome) for

at least 500 migrant workers every day," Pushkaran says. "We gave them drinking water, clean clothes and even footwear that we made out of scrap cardboard and rope." Meanwhile, things began to look up. Rambo Circus's owner, Sujith Dilip, now recovered from the virus, managed to raise over ₹12 lakh for his crew on the giving platform Ketto. Donations, large and small, enabled them to finally send money home. But it was the chance to perform virtually in late September 2020 through online entertainment platform BookMyShow that brought their self-respect back.

Titled *Life in a Circus*, their show was themed around the life of circus artistes, evolution of circus in the changing times and a special performance dedicated to corona warriors. "Normally, it takes a couple of days for us to set up the Big Top," says Pushkaran. "This

time, we were all so charged up at the prospect of finally performing again, that we had it up in a day." The challenge for them was to perform without their audience — something they

had never dreamt of doing. "My act, for example, is always impromptu and based on the response I get from the audience," Pushkaran says. "Consequently, not just I but many of us were nervous about performing without our beloved audience." But who knows better than these circus performers that their show simply has to go on? "We had to perform to survive, and perform we did by treating the camera as our audience," says Pushkaran. Through these virtual shows, most of which were sold out, Rambo Circus has been able to reach audiences far beyond Maharashtra. Which is why, although from January 1, this year, the circus has resumed its offline performances, Pushkaran hopes its virtual avatar will continue.

