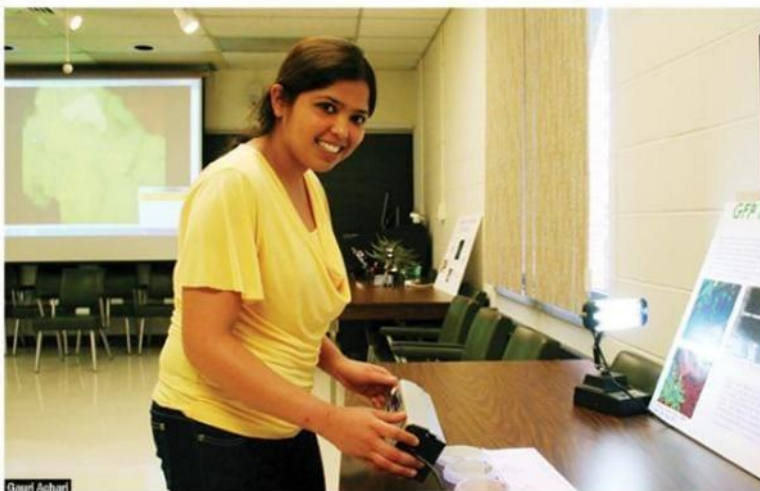




# Warriors for a cause

A faculty member of Dhempe College of Arts & Science, Miramar along with two PhD students from BITS Pilani, KK Birla Goa Campus recently volunteered at the COVID lab at Goa Medical College, Bambolim. They share their experience with **NT KURIOCITY**



Gauri Achari



Roshni Zakane

**RAMANDEEP KAUR | NT KURIOCITY**

As the pandemic outbreak hit the globe, various people have voluntarily come forward to help in the fight against COVID in whatever way they can. Similarly, Gauri Anil Achari who is currently working as assistant professor at DCT's Dhempe College of Arts and Science, Miramar and two PhD students, Roshni Zakane and Prajakta Bhende from BITS Pilani, KK Birla Goa Campus also decided to pitch in by volunteering in the COVID lab at Goa Medical College, Bambolim.

Having done MSc and PhD in Microbiology, Achari says that her postdoctoral research mentor Meenal Kowshik and Srikanth Muthnuri from the department of biological sciences, BITS Pilani KK Birla Goa Campus informed her about the volunteering opportunity at GMC. The principal of DCT's Dhempe College of Arts and Science, Vrinda Borker encouraged her to volunteer even though they were expected to work from home during lockdown. "I decided to volunteer in order to apply my knowledge and skills in microbiology and molecular biology to help in the detection of COVID-19 and also contribute to the service of the state and the nation during the time of crisis," says Achari who believes that it would be really shameful to sit at home with a degree in microbiology and not do anything during a time of crisis. "I was jumping with joy when I was told I could volunteer at GMC and have an opportunity where my education and knowledge can directly benefit the society," she says. Achari got to perform RNA extraction and RT-PCR for detecting the SARS-CoV2.

"The doctors and technician at GMC were extremely supportive, motivating and hardworking and I was very proud to be the part of this team and helping to analyse samples and prevent spread of the virus in the society," she says, adding that she wasn't scared since she has handled microbial samples before and had knowledge about the proper precautions to be taken so as to not get infected. Since she also works out and practices yoga which boosts immunity and



Prajakta Bhende

mental health, this was useful in keeping the stress at bay while working with COVID-19 samples.

Her volunteering work at the lab began on April 3 and continued till April 17 (including Sundays). This was followed by 15 days home quarantine. Her work hours were totally dependent on the number of samples received. And for their safety they wore Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) at all times while handling and processing samples. "After working for the whole day, we used to eagerly wait to see the final results. The day when all the initial seven patients were declared recovered was the happiest day during the volunteering time," says Achari, who is a recipient of the Prestigious Fulbright-Nehru Doctoral and Professional Research fellowship 2011-2012 to Ohio State University, USA.

Of course, such work brought with it an element of risk, but

Achari's parents were supportive of her work. "My dad (Anil Achari) was very supportive of my decision. But my mom (Bharati Achari) was a little apprehensive in the beginning but later was proud that I was able to help in the time of crisis," she says.

This is not the first time that Achari has volunteered for a good cause. Her previous stints include volunteering for surveys conducted by Goa Forest Department and Goa Bird Conservation Network for the bird count in Cotigao Wildlife Sanctuary in 2017. She was also a volunteer for the All Goa Waterfowl Count conducted by Goa Bird Conservation Network in collaboration with Wetlands International in 2017 and 2018. Apart from this, she has also run 5K, 10k and 21K marathons for charity organised by El Shaddai Charitable Trust and I-Help Foundation, Goa.

Zakane and Bhende meanwhile were informed by the head of department of biological sciences BITS Pilani KK Birla Goa, Srikanth Muthnuri, that Goa Medical College was looking for volunteers who have done molecular biology work to help in the testing of samples in the newly set up virology lab. "I volunteered because I thought it was an 'all hands-on deck' situation and my background in microbiology would be useful. It was a situation wherein I could serve my state and nation in these tough times. And I also got good support from home. I was constantly reading research articles on SARS-CoV2 and keeping myself updated," says Bhende. Zakane and Bhende joined the lab from April 2 and returned home on April 18, following which they were home quarantined. The working hours were variable. They would report to the lab at 10 a.m. and they would be allotted work for the day. Bhende says: "We would be in the lab till late in evening. This is not a new thing for us research students. Everyone at the lab was working very hard, giving their 100 per cent, the scientists, doctors, technicians, etc." It was a learning experience for both, says Bhende as they got a chance to work in a virology lab. "We saw and understood the whole process of testing the samples and analysing the results."