

Our journey to Maharashtra Ophthalmological Society's virtual conference, 2020

Dear Editor,

The four of us, Prof. Sunaina Malik, Dr. Vardhaman Kankariya, Dr. Preetam Samant, and Dr. Santosh Bhide, took over as President, Honorary (Hon.) Secretary, Chairman Scientific Committee and Hon. Treasurer of Maharashtra Ophthalmological Society (MOS) on October 14, 2019. Everything was proceeding well till Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) struck in March 2020 followed by the declaration of a complete lockdown. All our future plans seemed impossible. Obviously, no Continuing Medical Education (CME) sessions could be held. Then we started our series of successful webinars. As there was no end in sight for COVID-19, Nashik team, who were the local organizing society of Maharashtra Ophthalmological Society Annual State Conference (MOSCON) 2020, requested to cancel this year's MOSCON due to COVID-19 situation related suboptimal response from delegates and trade. They requested to postpone it to 2021. We understood their challenges and extraordinary general body meeting approved the same. We were restless, as that meant that this year there will be no MOSCON. Something that has not happened in MOS history. Then the idea of orchestrating at least a one-day Virtual State Conference (VIRCON) came to us.^[1,2] As there was no local organizing committee (LOC) anymore, all four of us decided to become LOC ourselves. There was no other state Society that had planned such a meeting before us, there was no road map and no one to guide us as we embarked on this uncharted territory at least in Indian Ophthalmology. Honestly, we had planned something very small. We initially thought it will be like a day of extended webinar. One multinational event organizer heard about this and gave us a presentation of how a virtual conference could be! After that, there was no looking back—we decided to have a full-fledged one and half days conference on November 7 and 8, 2020, spanning a real look-alike lobby with a help desk, Platinum sponsors stalls, a Photo (Selfie) booth, 3 parallel running halls, 23 scientific

sessions, trade exhibitors area and kiosks for Free papers, E-posters, Videos, and Photo Essay. A virtual and at the same time real experience of conference! As LOC, all four of us started to work on MOS VIRCON [Fig. 1]. We started asking for quotes from vendors, spent hours bargaining with them, and finally zeroed in on Bodhankar Events, Aurangabad. Then the process of asking members to register, sending out Trade appeal letters, and selecting faculty started. Since this was a virtual conference, we had already made up our minds that we should have the best of international and national faculty! And that's exactly what we did. We invited Prof. Ioannis Pallikaris (The Father of modern Refractive Surgery); Prof. William Freeman, San Diego, USA; Dr. Steve Arshinoff, Canada; Dr. Ron Yeoh, Singapore; Dr. Milind Pande, UK and others plus 50 national faculty and 150 state faculty—200 plus speakers, no mean feat in itself! On top of it, registration for MOS members was absolutely free but compulsory and we managed to get 2 MMC credit points too. Initially, we had planned the virtual platform for 1100 delegates, but our registrations kept on increasing. We had stopped registrations on October 25, 2020 but were forced to continue till 5th November. All told, we had 1200+ registered delegates, 2 Platinum sponsors, 2 gold and 1 silver sponsors, and many other companies who participated in sessions. These trade partners were very curious too, as this was first such event that they were a part of and did not know what to expect. The work of formatting the Scientific Programme was begun 6 weeks prior to VIRCON. All the district Secretaries and Presidents from various districts of Maharashtra were asked to short-list names from their respective regions for Faculty. The programme was made on an excel sheet, allowing easy modification and updation. While inviting talks for a virtual conference, it is important to have the mobile contact number and email address of each faculty, and this ought to be done right at the beginning while sending out the faculty invite- the reason being, the link for any faculty to join the virtual platform will be sent by Whatsapp and/or by email.

Starting from 7 days prior to the event, fliers were sent out to all registered delegates "7 days to go for MOS VIRCON 2020" and so on. Fliers highlighting our international speakers were sent. Thus, we kept up the momentum and the hype around the

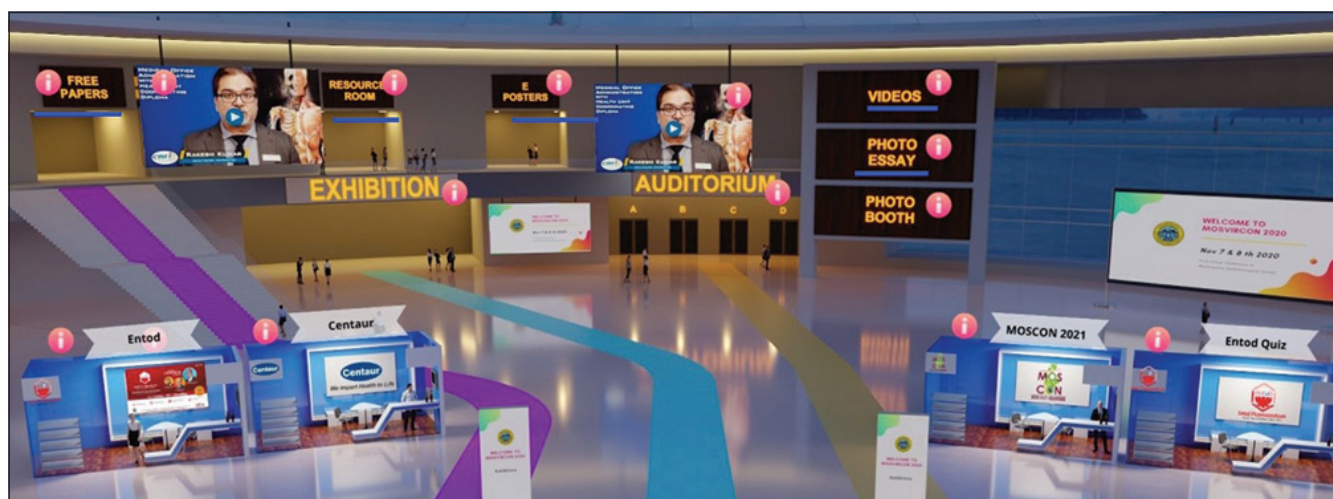


Figure 1: Photograph of the lobby at MOS VIRCON 2020

conference. One day prior, all delegates received an email with a navigation video—how to go about entering the VIRCON and navigating through it. International and National Faculty were registered at the back end and sent links to join the event, which they did very seamlessly. Even the delegates could navigate the VIRCON very nicely. The four of us were, of course, in each hall by turn to supervise things. All in all, we had 23 sessions, starting from 2 pm Indian Standard Time (IST) on Saturday, 7th November till 6.30 pm IST, then from 9 am IST on Sunday morning, 8th November till 5.15 pm IST, with a half hour's break for lunch. Just imagine! From the comfort of your own home, anyone could access any session of their choice and even jump halls at the click of a button. The Beauty of Technology!

Apart from this, we also had a Quiz, managed by one of our members totally online, with substantial cash prizes. The cherry on the cake was—whatever submissions we had received in the form of Free Papers, E-Posters, Videos and Photo Essay were all judged before the main conference and the selected best 10 were allowed to present virtually on 1st November, a week before the VIRCON to finalize the prize winners. This exercise went on for almost the whole day on 1st November from 10 am till 5 pm IST and the prize winners in every category were then allowed to present in one hall in the main VIRCON. What more could anyone ask for!

To top it all, we had a mainly virtual, partly physical Inauguration and Installation Ceremony, which went off fabulously, followed by our annual general body meeting virtually. So, MOS VIRCON became a full-fledged conference with all its annual elements, probably the very first such event in Indian Ophthalmology!

To say that we were happy would be an understatement. We were delirious with joy at having achieved what seemed like a distant dream. The compliments just kept flowing in. The Trade Sponsors were happy, so were the delegates. Many state societies and specialty ophthalmology societies called us for our inputs. They said, they felt inspired by the success of MOS VIRCON and would like to do the same for their own state. Apart from the fact that we were not meeting physically and sharing meals or enjoying the Banquet, we did everything else. With all the constraints of COVID in place, what more could we ask for. According to us, we had lived up to not only everyone else's, but even our own expectations! Three cheers for that!

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Nil.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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