

# From Lockdown to Learning: The Western India Regional Orthopaedic Conference Unlocked Experience

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In March 2021, amidst an atmosphere of uncertainty and cautious optimism, we undertook the monumental task of organizing Western India Regional Orthopaedic Conference (WIROC) 2021 in Mumbai. This was not just another academic gathering – it was a symbol of resilience, scientific progress, and professional solidarity. Occurring in the narrow window between the first and second waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, WIROC 2020 Unlocked (so-named as WIROC 2020 due to it being in financial year 2020-21) emerged as one of the first major medical conferences in India to be held physically after the initial lockdowns and restrictions.

As the Organizing Secretaries, led by our extremely supportive and ever-resilient Organizing chairman (and BOS President) Dr. Shubhranshu Mohanty, we were driven not just by duty, but by a deeper conviction: The orthopaedic community needed to reconnect – not just virtually, but in person. After a long period of webinars and virtual meets, it was very important to have the personal human touch. The pandemic had isolated us, strained hospital systems, and transformed our professional lives. The time was ripe to reignite collaboration, share experiences, and reinvest in learning and teaching.

## Conceptualization: More than Just a Conference

In September 2020, when Dr. Mohanty first proposed the idea of holding a physical in-person WIROC, we were met with a mix of enthusiasm and apprehension (Figure 1). While the desire to resume academic activities was unanimous, the shadow of the pandemic loomed large. The first COVID-19 wave was just subsiding, and the medical fraternity was exhausted. Planning a physical conference felt ambitious – some even called it reckless. We still remember the calls from very senior orthopaedic

surgeons who, in their gentle (and some not-so-gentle words), tried to dissuade us from even thinking of such a thing.

Yet, we believed that with the right precautions, strategic planning, and unwavering commitment, we could pull it off – not just as an event, but as a beacon of revival.

The decision to proceed was not made lightly. We consulted infectious disease experts, epidemiologists, hospital administrators, government officials, and colleagues. What convinced us to move forward was the shared longing among orthopaedic professionals to engage, learn, and connect after a prolonged period of isolation. We named our conference “Unlocked” as we wanted to unlock our lives after the unnerving lockdowns and bring about a sense of normalcy after this devastating period.

## Planning in a Pandemic: Navigating Uncharted Territory

Unlike traditional conference planning, organizing WIROC 2021 demanded that we rethink everything – from venue logistics to travel arrangements, delegate safety to session formats. Every detail required a COVID-aware approach. Our trusted team at VAMA events – Mr. Vikram Patwardhan, Mr. Vaibhav, and others also were supremely helpful in finding and keeping all rules in abeyance for the event – something which most were not aware of.

The second wave of COVID 19 started around February 2021 and almost put a spanner in the works. With the ever-increasing COVID numbers, there was some skepticism in the air, but we had full confidence in our preparations and our ability to pull off this seemingly impossible task. There were some hiccups with the constantly changing governmental and BMC rules just few days before the conference. However, Vikram and team VAMA

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ensured that everything was sorted and all precautions were taken.

We tried to make our conference as “COVID-proof” as possible by the following means:

### Safety protocols

Our first priority was health and safety. We worked closely with local health authorities to design protocols that followed standard government guidelines. This included:

- Reverse transcription-polymerase chain reaction testing and temperature screening for all attendees
- Mandatory mask-wearing and hand sanitization stations across the venue
- Social distancing enforced in lecture halls with reduced seating capacity
- Controlled movement flows to avoid crowding in exhibition areas and dining zones
- We also provided on-site medical assistance and a dedicated isolation room in case of emergencies.

### Hybrid format

WIROC 2020-Unlocked was probably the first conference which utilized the hybrid model of delivering high-quality education from distant parts of the world and coordinating it with live physical lectures. We coordinated with many premier institutes around the world such as the King’s College, London, Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Rady Children’s hospital, San Diego, and many more. This ensured that international faculty and those unable to attend in person could still participate. While this added a layer of logistical complexity, it was essential for inclusivity and safety. Our AV team led by the maverick Mr. Peter Anand was up to the task and ensured a seamless experience both to the overseas faculty as well as the delegates sitting in the auditorium.

### Venue and infrastructure

We selected a venue that offered spacious halls with excellent ventilation, open-air dining arrangements, and advanced tech infrastructure to support live streaming. The Renaissance convention center proved to be a perfect place for this conference and the team really bent over backwards to see to it that all rules and protocols were followed and no mishaps occurred. Collaborating with AV teams, we rehearsed extensively to ensure seamless hybrid delivery, pre-recorded presentations, and real-time interactions with virtual faculty.

### The Day Arrived: The Thrill of Reuniting

Despite the countless hours of planning, nothing could prepare us for the energy that filled the halls on the opening day of WIROC 2020. There was a palpable sense of joy and gratitude among delegates. For many, this was their first in-person meeting in over a year. Old friendships were rekindled, new ideas exchanged, and the communal passion for orthopaedics reignited.

### Highlights included

Keynote lectures from national and international stalwarts in orthopaedics, including live Q&A with overseas speakers joining remotely.

Interactive workshops and symposia conducted with stringent hygiene protocols.

Inauguration by the legendary Padma-Vibhushan Mr. Ratan Tata (Figure 2 and 3).

Presidential guest lecture by famous author, thinker, and social commentator, Mr. Chetan Bhagat.

Masterful orations by Dr. AR Karkhanis (Dr. RJ Katrak Oration) (Figure 4) and Dr. Daryl D’Lima (Dr. KT Dholakia eponymous lecture).

Sessions on telemedicine, mental health, and the future of



**Figure 1:** The first zoom meeting about the concept of Western India Regional Orthopaedic Conference (WIROC) unlocked with Dr. SS Mohanty (BOS President), Dr. Swapnil Keny (BOS General secretary), Dr. Mandar Agashe, and Dr. Satish Mutha (WIROC secretaries).



**Figure 2:** Inauguration ceremony by Padma Vibhushan Mr. Ratan Tata, IOA President Dr. Shivashankar, BOS President and Western India Regional Orthopaedic Conference (WIROC) Organising chairman Dr. SS Mohanty, and WIROC secretaries Dr. Mandar Agashe and Dr. Satish Mutha.





**Figure 3:** Padma Vibhushan Mr. Ratan Tata with Dr. Mandar Agashe and Dr. Satish Mutha.

orthopaedic care in a post-COVID world, which resonated deeply with attendees.

In many ways, the conference became therapeutic – a safe space for the community to reflect, recharge, and move forward together.

### Overcoming Challenges: Grit, Teamwork, and Innovation

The road to WIROC 2021 was anything but smooth. Every phase presented unprecedented challenges, demanding flexibility, rapid problem-solving, and emotional strength.

#### Uncertainty and fear

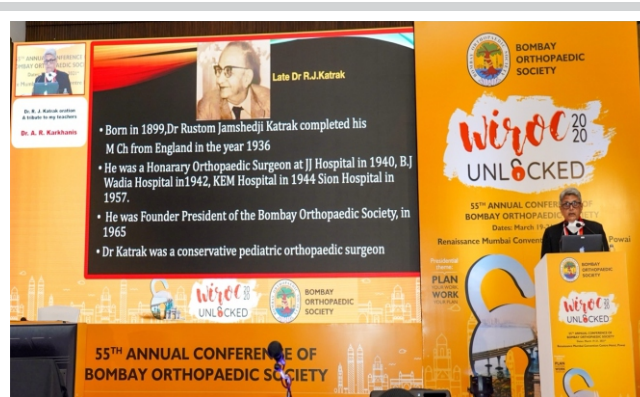
With COVID-19 cases fluctuating and the possibility of a second wave looming, every week brought new anxieties. Hotels, sponsors, and even delegates were hesitant. We had to maintain constant communication, update contingency plans, and assure all stakeholders of our preparedness.

#### Sponsorship and funding

The economic impact of COVID-19 meant that sponsorship budgets were limited, and convincing partners to invest in an uncertain event was challenging. We adopted a lean financial



**Figure 5:** Team VAMA led by Mr. Vikram Patwardhan and ably supported by Mr. Vaibhav Pisal, Mr. Pramesh, and others did a stellar job in making it happen.



**Figure 4:** Dr. AR Karkhanis delivering the prestigious Dr. RJ Katrak oration.

model, reduced frills, and focused on value-driven content. Sponsors who did come on board appreciated the brand visibility in a high-impact, pioneering event.

#### Delegate and team morale and teamwork

Many on our team were frontline workers who had been battling the pandemic first-hand. Balancing conference duties with professional and personal commitments was tough. Yet, the shared purpose gave us strength. The dedication of the team, support staff, and committee members was extraordinary. We were bound by a common belief: this mattered.

#### Legacy and Reflection

WIROC 2021 was not just a successful academic event; it was a symbol of what is possible when purpose, planning, and passion align. It reminded us that even in times of crisis, the medical community can rise, adapt, and lead. Our Chairperson, Dr. SS Mohanty's vision of re-starting and in fact "unlocking" our lives post the pandemic in a safe manner was fulfilled and this served as a template for future conferences to emulate (Figure 5, 6 and 7).

On a personal note, for both of us, WIROC 2021 was one of the



**Figure 6:** The ever-supportive BOS Executive council- (from L to R)- Dr. Mandar Agashe, Dr. Satish Mutha, Dr. Sangeet Gawhale, Dr. SS Mohanty, Dr. Swapnil Keny, Dr. Harshad Argekar, and Dr. Ashish Phadnis (Missing in picture: Dr. Sunil Shahane, Dr. Gautam Zaveri, Dr. Ashok Shyam, Dr. Abhijit Kale and Dr. Vishal Kundnani)



**Figure 6:** And we did it.... The look of relief on our faces at the end of Western India Regional Orthopaedic Conference 2020 Unlocked....The team signing off.....!!.

most challenging yet fulfilling projects of our careers. It demanded everything – vision, stamina, negotiation, humility, and leadership. But the smiles, the gratitude, the shared learning – it made it all worth it.

Looking back, I see not just a conference, but a moment in history. We helped script a new chapter for academic medicine in India, proving that with courage and collaboration, even the impossible can become a reality.

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#### How to Cite this Article

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