

Amid warnings of potential catastrophic loss of life from COVID-19

# Modi places India's 1.3 billion people under lockdown

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In a televised speech to the nation Tuesday evening, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that the entire country, home to more than 1.3 billion people, would be placed under lockdown for 21 days, starting at midnight.

Until very recently Modi and his Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government were crowing about India's "success" in stopping the spread of the coronavirus in the world's second most populous country. However, health experts have been warning for weeks that India's relatively low number of confirmed COVID-19 cases—as of last night there were 519 cases and 10 deaths—was in all likelihood due to the very limited number of tests administered by authorities.

In his Tuesday address and subsequent comments on his Twitter account, Modi presented the need for draconian action to combat the spread of the coronavirus in the starker terms.

Modi stated: "There will be a total ban of coming out of your homes. Every state, every district, every lane, every village will be under lockdown.

"If you can't handle these 21 days, this country and your family will go back 21 years. If we are not able to manage the next 21 days, then many families will be destroyed forever."

Modi claimed that the three-week shutdown was based on the experience of other countries. He said this had demonstrated that only vigorous "social distancing" measures can halt the spread of the coronavirus.

What he conspicuously omitted to add was that the experience of the countries most successful in countering the virus, such as South Korea, Singapore

and China, has shown that the ultimate utility and success of quarantines and shutdowns in combating COVID-19 is entirely dependent upon coupling them with systematic mass testing of the population.

As in the US and many other countries now engulfed by the pandemic, India has been severely rationing testing. To date India has conducted just 17,000 COVID-19 tests, but claims authorities are monitoring 1.8 million people who may have come into contact with the virus.

India is especially vulnerable to the pandemic and to a potential catastrophic loss of life, should community transmission become entrenched.

The public health care facilities in the cities and towns are dilapidated, whilst across much of rural India, where more than 60 percent of the population lives, they are virtually non-existent. India is one of the most densely populated countries in the world, with tuberculosis—much of it resistant to standard antibiotics—and other social diseases rampant in the teeming slums of its cities. Last but not least, as a result of grinding poverty, hunger stalks India, weakening the population's ability to resist disease. A recent study found 90 percent of children under five lacked sufficient nutrients.

This week, a group of scientists, most of them based in the US, published a study that warned that number of COVID-19 cases in India could explode to 1.3 million by mid-May. One of the authors of the study, University of Michigan Professor of biostatistics and epidemiology Bhramar Mukherjee, said: "Even with the best-case scenarios, probably, you are in a very painful crisis."

Modi's speech was remarkable for the complete

absence of any details about basic questions, such as how the population would be able to procure food, and, in India's villages, even water. He did not explain how people would be able to pay for their food if they are confined to their homes for the next three weeks.

Modi merely acknowledged the lockdown would constitute "a very difficult time for poor people" and claimed an aid package would be forthcoming. For the hundreds of millions who survive on the equivalent of \$2 per day this could hardly have been reassuring, to say the least. All the more in that it is coming from a government that has implemented savage austerity to please Indian and international investors, including starving funding to the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Program—which is meant to provide one member of any rural family that wants it with 100 days of manual minimum-wage work per year.

Even prior to the economic dislocation caused by COVID-19 facility closures ordered by New Delhi and the various state governments over the past two weeks, India was in the midst of a severe economic downturn, with unemployment at a 45-year high.

In his Tuesday evening speech, Modi did announce a 15 crore-rupee (\$US1.97 billion) investment in coronavirus testing, personal protection equipment (PPEs), ICUs, ventilators, and training medical workers.

For years, India, under BJP and Congress Party-led governments alike, has devoted just 1.5 percent of GDP or even less to health care. According to press reports, India currently has only 40,000 ventilators, critical for the treatment of severe COVID-19 cases, and just one isolation bed per 84,000 people.

Just three days ago, the heads of two associations of PPE manufacturers in India—the Preventive Wear Manufacturer Association of India and the Association of Indian Medical Device Industry, that represent nearly 150 Indian medical PPE makers—told *Scroll.in* that the Modi government had not placed any substantial orders with their members.

The manner in which the Modi government has announced the lockdown, without warning or answers to the most rudimentary questions as to how ordinary people will obtain life's necessities, has produced a chaotic situation, which can only hamper efforts to contain the spread of the coronavirus.

Already the loss of work due to earlier shutdowns had created what Indian economist Jean Drèze called an "economic tsunami," with suddenly jobless migrant workers attempting to make their way back to their villages. The government ordered the suspension of passenger rail service last weekend. Now, millions of truckers have been ordered to stay put for the next three weeks, wherever they happen to be.

"This situation is worse than war," Arun Kumar, an economics professor at the Institute of Social Sciences in New Delhi, told the *New York Times*. "If we are not able to provide essentials to the bottom 50 percent of the population, then there will be social revolt."

The coronavirus is a real threat to the Indian people that requires urgent action, including quarantines and restrictions on free movement. However, the working class must recognize that everything the BJP government and Indian elite do is infused with their class outlook and interests. The Indian bourgeoisie is determined to place the full burden for the economic fallout of the pandemic on the working class and rural toilers.

Moreover, the BJP government will undoubtedly seek to use the lockdown to regain the political initiative, after being roiled by the mass opposition to its anti-Muslim Citizenship Amendment Act and growing worker resistance to privatization, poverty wages, and the spread of precarious labour.

On Tuesday morning, police cited a coronavirus lockdown in Delhi to forcibly break up a 101-day long anti-CAA street occupation in the Shaheen Bagh district of India's capital, which had been led by working-class Muslim women, arresting at least nine protesters.



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