As India approaches 1 million COVID-19 cases, Modi government continues to deny community transmission

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Even as India nears the grim milestone of 1 million confirmed COVID-19 infections, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government continue to boast that their efforts to combat the pandemic are proving successful. One of the most grotesque examples of this government propaganda is the repeated declarations from the Health Ministry and India's top epidemiological institution that no significant community transmission of the potentially lethal virus is occurring in the world's second most populous country.

Whether government officials care to admit it or not, the reality is the coronavirus is spreading like wildfire in numerous parts of India, and the influx of infected patients is increasingly overwhelming the country's ramshackle health system.

In terms of COVID-19 cases, India is now the world's third worst impacted country.

As of Thursday, according to data provided by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, COVID-19 cases reached 968,876. In the preceding 24 hours, 32,695 new infections were registered, the biggest single day spike to date. The death toll meanwhile climbed to 24,915, after another 606 fatalities. New infections have remained above 25,000 per day since July 10, with almost every day producing a new record in coronavirus infections.

While it took India 109 days to reach 100,000 COVID-19 cases, total infections grew nine-fold over the following 57 days, as the government's removal of lockdown measures went into high gear. Just four days passed before the total of 800,000 cases had reached 900,000.

The official death toll is suspiciously low in comparison to other severely impacted countries. Indian authorities are notorious for under-reporting death figures even in normal times, making it almost certain that the true number of deaths is much higher Even so, India has reported 500 plus deaths every single day since July 11.

Like US President Donald Trump, Modi trumpets on virtually every occasion crude falsehoods about the supposed effectiveness of his government's response to the pandemic, while showing no concern for the thousands of people who have already lost their lives. India's prime minister has instead become the principal spokesman for the ruling elite's criminal "herd immunity" policy, which one government adviser blithely estimated will result in 2 million deaths. To cover up the horrific cost of this policy, which is aimed at prioritising corporate profit over human lives, Modi and his ministers must resort to outright lies. Chief among these is the claim that no community transmission is taking place in India.

After chairing a meeting on COVID-19 last Saturday, Modi declared, "We also highlighted successful initiatives being undertaken across India to ensure the coronavirus is kept under check."

This was aimed at concealing the fact that the principal purpose of the meeting, which involved Union Home Minister Amit Shah and Health Minister Harsh Vardhan, was to push forward with "reopening" the economy as the virus runs rampant. Rather than outlining new measures to stop the spread of the virus, Modi admonished the public. "We must reiterate," he declared, "the need to observe personal hygiene and social discipline in public places."

In other words, while the government throws open all sectors of the economy, forcing tens of millions of poorly paid workers to return to unsafe workplaces, the responsibility for preventing the spread of the virus is being placed on the individual—and this in a country where hundreds of millions have no ready access to clean water and live in teeming slums where it is impossible to practice social distancing.

Although some states have been forced to re-impose certain limited restrictions due to the upsurge in cases, industrial workplaces and other worksites are being allowed—indeed encouraged—to continue operating; while employers, with government complicity, violate whatever meagre measures workplace safety measures have been officially ordered.

None of the initiatives taken by the Modi government in response to the pandemic have proven "successful." His ill-prepared lockdown, announced with just a few hours' notice in late March, was a disaster. Tens of millions of people were plunged overnight into destitution due to the government's failure to provide financial aid to workers who lost their jobs.

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The period of the lockdown was not used to strengthen India's chronically underfunded health care system, or to put in place a system of mass testing and contact tracing to combat the spread of infections. Instead, the lockdown became the mechanism for spreading COVID-19 into remote areas as the Modi government kept tens of millions of migrant workers in packed unhygienic camps for weeks, then sent them back to their native states without testing them for the virus.

As recently as July 9, the government repeated that India has not reached the community transmission stage of COVID-19. Asked if India has entered the community transmission phase, Rajesh Bhushan, Officer on Special Duty in the Union Health Ministry, told a press briefing, "Even today, the health minister clearly said that India has not reached the state of community transmission. In some geographical areas, there have been localized outbreaks."

Engaging in an unsuccessful attempt to prove his point, Bhushan asserted that just "49 districts (out of 733) alone account for 80 percent of COVID-19 cases." Therefore, "in such a situation in which you can trace and track close contacts of active cases, talking about community transmission is not justified." His claim conveniently ignores the fact that many of the 49 districts cover urban areas such as Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Kolkata, Hyderabad, Pune, and Bengaluru, where tens of millions of people live. Between them, Delhi and Mumbai alone are home to more than 40 million people.

The stupid and ignorant assertions of government officials are not merely a reflection of personal incompetence. Rather, the Modi government and its state counterparts have contemptuously dismissed any scientific approach to combatting the pandemic so they can focus exclusively on defending the profits and wealth of India's millionaires and billionaires. If reopening the economy for big business requires that they cast aside World Health Organisation advice to carry out mass testing, isolate infected people, and trace contacts, so be it!

The reality is that serious scientists have been warning of the dangerous levels of community transmission in India for well over a month. Dr. Jacob John, a prominent virologist, pointed to widespread community transmission in India in an interview with the BBC in early June. Dr. John highlighted the fact that India, according to government data, has tested only 0.3 percent or 0.4 percent of the population. Referring to Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) data, he said that statistics have "shown less than one percent—0.73—of cases across 83 districts showed evidence of past exposure to confirmed cases, and if that was not community transmission how else were they exposed."

In an interview with The Wire on June 16, Professor Ramanan Laxminarayan, Director of the Washington-based Center for Disease Dynamics and a Princeton fellow, stated that community transmission was "absolutely" happening in India. Applying mathematical models used in the US or UK to India, Laxminarayan estimated that India already had tens of millions of cases and that the figure could rise to 200 million by September.

While the Modi government bears chief responsibility for the massive humanitarian crisis triggered by COVID-19, the opposition parties who lead various state governments are also culpable. They have presided over miserable social conditions and continue to starve the health care system of desperately-needed funds.

India's worst impacted state, with 275,649 cases and 10,928 deaths as of Thursday, is Maharashtra, where the far-right Shiv Sena leads a government backed by the nominally secular Congress Party. The southern state of Tamil Nadu, which is the second worst impacted state, with 151,820 cases and a total of 2,167 deaths, is governed by the right-wing All India Anna Dravida Munetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), while Delhi, the National Capital Territory and third worst impacted state (116,993 cases and 3,487 deaths) is governed by the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). For decades, India's political establishment has deliberately run the public health system into the ground—spending 1.5 percent of GDP or less annually on health care—in order to slash corporate taxes and pursue other "pro-investor" policies.

India's criminal ruling elite has totally failed to deal with the health and social disaster produced by the pandemic. The only way that the relentless spread of the coronavirus can be stopped and working people shielded from the pandemic's ruinous economic fallout is if the working class develops its own independent response. As the International Committee of the Fourth International explained in its June 23 statement:

> Control over the response to the pandemic must be taken out of the hands of the capitalist class. Mass action by the working class, coordinated on an international scale, is necessary to bring the pandemic under control and save millions of lives that are now at risk. The fight against the pandemic is not only, or even primarily, a medical issue. It is, above all, a matter of social and political struggle.

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