

# Half of India's population could be infected with COVID-19 by next February

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While the Indian government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the media are boasting of a “sharp fall” in the number of COVID-19 infections, a committee appointed by the government warned half of the population of 1.3 billion would be infected by February next year.

As of yesterday, India's tally of coronavirus cases rose to 7.94 million with 36,370 new cases over the previous 24 hours. The total death toll rose to 119,502, with 488 deaths in the last 24 hours.

A week before, the number of daily confirmed cases was 46,790 and at the beginning of October, the number of daily infections was 86,821. The fall has prompted the health ministry to declare that India was “fortunate to have the decline in numbers.”

However, India is currently the second worst impacted country in the world behind only the US. Moreover, the official numbers are highly understated.

Speaking to *Reuters* on October 19, Manindra Agrawal, a professor at the India Institute for Technology, said: “Our mathematical model estimates that around 30 percent of the population is currently infected and it could go up to 50 percent by February.” He is a member of a government-appointed, 10-member committee on the pandemic.

The estimate is much higher than the government's serological surveys which showed that 14 percent of the population had been infected as of September.

The committee, headed by the government's think tank NITI Aayog member V.K. Paul, was appointed to study the progress of the COVID-19 virus in India. Among its findings, it warned: “India may see an exponential increase of 260,000 cases in a month because of the festival season if precautions are not followed.”

Noting that Kerala, Karnataka, Rajasthan,

Chhattisgarh and West Bengal are still seeing a rise in the number of cases, it stated: “A second wave of coronavirus can't be ruled out in winter.”

At the same time, the committee report tried to downplay the disastrous situation for which the government is responsible. It declared that India had reached the peak in COVID-19 cases in September and “now is on the downward slope.”

It also claimed that the COVID-19 curve had “flattened” and the “early lockdown bolstered by better-equipped health care system helped in flattening the curve.” In fact, India's highly under-funded public healthcare system has been overwhelmed by a rapidly increasing number of COVID-19 infections.

Trying to paint a rosy picture, Modi on October 26 tweeted: “We are seeing a decline in the number of cases per day and the growth rate of cases.” He boasted that India has “one of the highest recovery rates of 88 percent” because the country was “one of the first countries to adopt a flexible lockdown.”

Modi's announcement is absurd given the obvious fact that India's two months long lockdown was a disaster for hundreds of millions Indian workers and the oppressed who lost their jobs. Many millions were pushed into extreme poverty without any income and enough food.

Moreover, Modi's lockdown has failed to control the pandemic as it was not implemented with mass testing, contact tracing and, most importantly, a massive financial boost to the public healthcare system. In response to demands from big business, the government eased the restrictions from the end of April leading to an exponential growth of COVID-19 cases and deaths.

Modi, following in the footsteps of his counterparts around world, including US President Donald Trump

and Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, has unofficially adopted the homicidal “herd immunity policy,” allowing the pandemic to run freely across the country.

In a televised address on October 20, Modi reiterated his claims saying that in comparison to the US and Brazil, India’s death rate of 83 per million persons was low. While the figure is lower, it may well be the result of a gross under-reporting of deaths due to COVID-19.

The apparent fall in COVID-19 cases is also likely to be an understatement due to a decrease in the number of tests. India is among the countries with the lowest levels of testing.

An article published in September by the *Hindu* noted: “In at least 10 states there was a sharp fall in the number of tests conducted in the last 10 days despite an increase in the share of people testing positive.” The worst hit is the state of Maharashtra.

According to the *Times of India*, daily testing has fluctuated widely—from a high of over 1.2 million to under 900,000. Ourworldindata.org shows a sharp decline by more than half in the testing rate—from 1.08 per 1,000 people on October 1 to 0.62 per 1,000 people on October 19.

While the government is downplaying the dangers, a BBC article on October 19 wrote: “[M]ost epidemiologists believe that another peak is inevitable and that northern India will likely see a rise in caseloads during a smog-filled winter that begins in November.”

“It is far too soon to say that the pandemic is receding,” Dr. Bhramar Mukherjee, a professor of biostatistics and epidemiology at the University of Michigan, told the BBC. “[There] could be a rise in deaths in the winter due to pollution, which is especially bad for respiratory diseases.”

Exponential growth of infections beginning from May is related to Modi’s unstated policy of “herd immunity”—allowing the virus to run rampant—that will hit the most vulnerable layers of the population, particularly the elderly, the hardest. Acting on the demands of the business elite, Modi has reopened businesses and other institutions exposing many millions to the deadly virus.

Like its counterparts around the world, the Indian ruling elite is prioritising economic activity and corporate profits over the health and lives of workers and rural toilers.



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