

COVID-19 pandemic creating a social disaster in India

Wasantha Rupasinghe
10 November 2020

Despite the attempts by the Indian government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to paint a rosy picture about the coronavirus crisis, the pandemic is continuing to spread throughout cities and villages, having already created a social catastrophe.

For all Modi's talk of "decreasing" COVID-19 cases, every day sees 40,000 to 50,000 officially recorded new infections and 500 deaths, even though these figures are currently about half the most recent peaks in September.

Interviewed by the *Economic Times* on October 29, Modi did not even refer to the more than 127,000 COVID-19 deaths in the country. Instead, he said: "We should assess our coronavirus fight against the metric of how many lives we are able to save." He claimed: "India followed a preemptive, proactive, graded, whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to tackle the pandemic."

In reality, as a result of the failure of Modi's Baratiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government and state governments throughout the country to stop the spread of the virus, India has become the second-worst impacted country in the world. According to the highly understated official figures, reported COVID-19 cases now exceed 8.5 million. More than half a million cases are still active.

India's COVID-19 testing rate is among the lowest in the world and falling. Daily tests have dropped from 0.86 per thousand people on October 26 to 0.75 on November 2. A number of epidemiologists and medical experts have warned of a second surge during the winter and as a result of large social gatherings in the festive season following the easing of government restrictions.

Internal migrant workers

In his *Times* interview, Modi claimed that his "timely" lockdown "helped" to avoid "the rapid spread of the virus with many more deaths." The truth is that the two-month

lockdown was a failure and a disaster for hundreds of millions of people, mostly migrant workers. It was not accompanied by mass testing, contact tracing, the supply of basic necessities for people forced to remain indoors and, most importantly, the huge allocation of resources needed to upgrade the under-funded public health system.

More than 100 million migrant workers lost their livelihoods overnight when Modi declared a nationwide lockdown on March 24 with just four hours' notice. Nearly 1,000 migrant workers died from starvation, exhaustion or accidents as they tried to walk home, often hundreds of kilometers from where they worked. Those unable to walk home were detained in hellish "quarantine" centres without enough food, medical care and COVID testing. When they were finally allowed to leave for their villages amid mounting unrest, many carried the virus to remote areas with virtually non-existent public health facilities.

Modi also boasted of providing "free food grain and pulses to 800 million people for eight months." But according to a *NewsClick* report, which cited a survey by civil society organisations, "nearly 66 percent of rural households fell short of cash for food, nearly 40 percent of the households had reduced their food intake, 41 percent of the returned migrants were not working and only 7 percent of migrants had found work under the MGMNREGA [Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act]".

The survey noted that "a number of households had pawned assets to buy food items, and three out of every four had experienced fear and anxiety." It stated that "only half the returned migrants got free rations three times or more as the Modi government had promised." Quoting a report published by the Stranded Workers Action Network, the article said 84 percent of migrant workers had received no wages from their employers during the lockdown, while 12 percent got partial payment.

Women and children

Millions of children in poor families have been deprived of education as they cannot afford internet facilities to follow online classes during the closure of schools. The *Indian Express* on October 12 revealed increasing child trafficking and other crimes targeting children. It reported: “As the economic distress began to sink in, a more sinister movement of children gathered pace—of those being taken away from their homes for illegal labour, trafficking and forced marriages.”

Between March and August, Childline, a national hotline established by the Ministry for Women and Child Development, received 2.7 million distress calls. Another *Express* article said most of the parents of trafficked children are marginal farm labourers and farmers whose income was severely impacted when they could not sell their perishable vegetables during the lockdown.

Rising other deaths

Due to the disruption of already crippled health facilities, millions of patients suffering from serious diseases like cancer, leukemia and chronic diabetes are in immense danger. An article in the *Wire* on October 20 painted a grim picture of the situation at the Dr Bhubaneswar Borooah Cancer Institute (BBCI) in Guwahati, the sole full-fledged cancer care centre in India’s northeast.

It showed patient visits at the BBCI fell by 50 percent during the lockdown, while the chemotherapies dropped by 42 percent, radiotherapy 56 percent and surgeries 74 percent.

According to a National Cancer Registry Program (NCRP) report, northeast India had the highest national incidence of cancers between 2012 and 2016. Even at normal times, cancer patients in the region had a hard time accessing cancer care and treatment due to the lack of medical care facilities.

It is likewise with patients suffering tuberculosis (TB), the world’s deadliest infectious disease. India accounts for a fourth of global TB cases. Due to the lockdown and reassignment of lab technicians, between January and June, TB notifications in India dipped by 25 percent from the corresponding period in 2019, according to the World Health Organisation’s annual TB report. This will translate into “millions of excess deaths from tuberculosis,” Zarir F. Udawadia, a consultant physician at Mumbai’s Hinduja Hospital, told the *Wire Science*.

The pandemic has adversely affected the mental health of millions of people suffering from anxiety, fear, isolation, distancing, uncertainty and emotional distress. India

accounts for 15 percent of the world’s mental, neurological and substance-use disorders. According to the *Wire*, the health ministry has “admitted a treatment gap of 50-70 percent, and this gap has only been rising. To cater to the needs of patients, there are only 0.3 psychiatrists, 0.12 psychologists and 0.07 social workers for every 100,000 Indians.”

Another *Wire* article, based on data from the Indian government’s Health Management Information System, reported “drastic declines in health services during lockdown, ranging from 20 percent or so for ANC (number of pregnant women registered for antenatal care) registration to 60 percent or so for in-patient headcount and major operations.” It added: “Out-patient attendance during the lockdown was just half of normal levels.”

All these figures show that an even bigger health disaster is on the way, behind the COVID-19 pandemic.

Yet, the government and the Indian ruling class have refused to direct much-needed funds into the healthcare system. In his *Times* interview, Modi insisted that India was becoming a “major producer of PPE and masks” and “we are not only meeting our domestic demand but are also capable of meeting the demand of other countries.” Yet, 87,000 health care workers have been infected and 573 have died due to COVID-19, even according to the government’s own data.

India’s health budget was less than 2 percent of the country’s gross domestic product between 2009 and 2019, one of the lowest levels in the world. India ranks 184 out of 191 countries in public spending on health. An estimated 62.4 percent of the current health expenditure is paid by patients themselves. The government contributes only 16.7 percent, putting India among the countries with highest out-of-pocket expenditures on health.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)