

Modi boasts about “Indian” vaccines as COVID-19 virus rages through the country

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi has taken to social media to boast that “every Indian is proud that two (COVID-19) vaccines” have been made in the country, even as the virus continues to rage, endangering the lives of millions of workers and poor people.

On January 3, the Drugs Controller General of India (DCGI) authorised two vaccines—one developed by the British-Swedish pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca, with Oxford University (Covishield), and another by a local pharmaceutical company, Bharat Biotech (Covaxin)—for emergency use.

Having indulged in a mud-slinging campaign against each other, just a few days earlier, the two companies issued a joint statement, following the DCGI’s approval, declaring that their current concern was “to ensure a smooth rollout of vaccines.”

Health experts have reportedly questioned the transparency of the authorisation process. Earlier, Adar Poonawalla, chief executive officer of the Serum Institute of India, declared in a TV interview that the rest of the vaccines, other than Pfizer, Moderna and AstraZeneca-Oxford, were as “safe as water.”

The vaccination drive is supposed to begin on January 13 and reach 300 million people—around 20 percent of the population—by August. This timeline indicates that a vast section of the Indian population will continue to be vulnerable to the virus for the rest of this year, and beyond, even if the largest ever Indian vaccination effort is successful.

By January 5, according to government data, India’s coronavirus death toll had exceeded 150,000, while the total number of cases is over ten million. These, however, are grossly understated figures, due to a lack of proper data on deaths and the inadequacy of PCR (Polymerase Chain Reaction) tests. The number of global coronavirus cases has reached 88 million, with close to 1.9 million deaths.

The health minister of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led federal government, Harsh Vardhan, tried to downplay the danger facing India’s working people due to the pandemic, declaring that “India has one of the highest recovery rates in the world, at 95.46 percent.”

Contrary to Vardhan’s statement, the real death toll from COVID-19 must be well above the official figures, given the under-registration of deaths in India. According to the media, even before the pandemic, only 70 percent of India’s deaths were registered and only one fifth of these were medically certified.

By the end of November and early December, PCR testing in the country was reportedly reduced to less than 60 percent of the total, with the rest consisting of rapid antigen tests. These tests, however, are known to fail to detect coronavirus infections in 50 percent of positive cases.

Moreover, India’s total number of tests is around 128,000 per million people, the lowest among the ten countries that currently have the most cases in the world.

According to the second national sero-survey, conducted by the Indian Council of Medical Research, the likely real number of infections is 16 times the official figure, with current cases as high as 160 million. Former professor of clinical virology, CMC Vellore T. John, told the press that “India does not have reliable data on any communicable disease, be it rabies, cholera, tuberculosis or Covid... The Covid statistics derived through the healthcare system, cannot be complete.”

Moreover, by January 6, the Indian government reported 73 cases of the new COVID-19 strain that originated in the UK. This indicates that the pandemic is further intensifying throughout the country, as the new strain is believed to be 70 percent more contagious.

India’s scientists have already expressed fear over the spread of the new variant of the coronavirus. Cardiologist, K. K. Agarwal previously warned that if new variants of

the coronavirus, which have been discovered in the south of England and South Africa arrived in the country, a second peak of infections was possible.

Modi's crisis-ridden government, which faces mounting resistance from workers and farmers, is belittling the suffering being borne by the masses. At the same time, it is campaigning, along with the corporate media, to insist that a second wave would be much lower in number than the first. The government claims that reported daily cases have reduced to around 25,000, from almost 100,000 in September.

Last spring, Modi's BJP government prematurely imposed a "back to work" policy, thereby infecting workers and the broad masses, after an ill-prepared ten-week lockdown. The brief shutdown was organised without any social support being allocated to the tens of millions of internal migrant workers who lost their income overnight.

Around 30,000 Indian Railway workers have contracted the virus over the past several months, and 700 of them died before the end of last year. This was a considerable increase from September, when close to 15,000 railway workers were infected, with 336 deaths.

The government-owned Indian Railways (IR) manages the fourth-largest network in the world with a route length of some 68,155 kilometres. It currently operates more than 1,000 special trains, while major population centres Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai are running their suburban services at 88, 60 and 50 percent capacity respectively, according to Railway Board chairman V. K. Yadav. These high volumes and the absence of adequate health safety measures have exposed workers to the dangers of infection and death.

The Railway Board chairman insisted in a press briefing: "They [railway workers] are frontline workers who have helped the Railways facilitate the movement of migrants by running special trains. They have been on platforms and in areas where contracting the infection was highly probable." He hypocritically added: "They are like the railways' unsung heroes."

Answering a question in the national parliament, representatives of the railway ministry made clear that no compensation would be granted to the families of employees in the sector who died on the job. They stated that there was no provision for ex gratia payments as "death on account of any disease is not included in these guidelines." Nothing could more clearly expose the contemptuous attitude of the Indian ruling class to the workers who have become victims of their pro-business

"reopening" of the economy.

The devastation confronting ordinary people stands in stark contrast to the fortunes of the Indian and global corporate elite, which have grown substantially during the pandemic. The *Economist* recently reported that "Gautam Adani, whose conglomerate sprawls from ports to coal mines to food, has seen his personal wealth more than double, to some \$32bn. Mukesh Ambani's riches, which derive from oil refining, telecoms and retail, among other things, have grown by just 25 percent, albeit to an intimidating \$75bn or so." Ambani has been a beneficiary of the mobile phone market and Adani's wealth has been boosted by government logistics contracts.

The bank balances of the ultra-rich are soaring amid the contraction of the country's economy by ten percent, which has pushed tens of millions of workers into unemployment and poverty.

The pandemic has also adversely affected millions of Indian patients suffering from terminal illnesses such as cancer, leukemia, chronic diabetes, tuberculosis, as well as a variety of mental illnesses, due to the lack of secure health care facilities. According to one paper, published by the *Asia Pacific Journal of Oncology Nursing*:

"Amid the coronavirus pandemic, there are chances of approximately 100,000 cancer cases going undiagnosed per month in India, and the numbers might change depending on travel restrictions and lack of easy availability of transport."

The total unpreparedness of India's public health system has been caused primarily by the miserly budget allocations for the sector by successive governments—led, not only by the current ruling BJP, but also by the main opposition party Congress. Between 2009 and 2019, India's health budget was just two percent of the country's gross domestic product. The Indian government contributes only 16.7 percent of current health expenditure, while Indian patients have to pay the highest portion, i.e., more than 62 percent of their out-of-pocket expenses.



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