

COVID-19 cases surge across India

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Yesterday, India, the third worst-impacted country in the world, reported 53,364 coronavirus infections, the highest number in a single-day in more than five months. Its total caseload is now over 11.73 million with a death toll of more 160, 440, even according to under-reported official records.

The rapidly increasing number of infections exposes repeated claims by Prime Minister Narendra Modi that his government has fought “the most successful battle” against COVID-19.

Rijo John, a health economist and adjunct professor at Rajagiri College of Social Sciences in Kerala, told the *India Spend* website on March 22 that “daily new cases on a seven-day average have risen by 167 percent (from its seven-day average low point in February),” while “deaths have increased by 71 percent in the same period.”

The surge in cases appears to be bound up with new COVID-19 variants. According to the Health Ministry, a new “double mutant variant” (a reference to two mutations, E484Q and L452R) of the coronavirus has been detected in 18 Indian states. This is in addition to other strains or variants of concern (VOCs) that have also been detected in other countries.

A ministry press release on March 24 said: “Since INSACOG [a multi-agency Indian network monitoring genome variations of the virus] initiated its work, 771 VOCs have been detected in a total of 10,787 positive samples shared by States/UTs [Union Territories].”

Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh told the media on March 23 that 81 percent of the 401 samples sent by his government for genome sequencing tested positive for the highly infectious UK variant.

Maharashtra state, home to India’s commercial capital Mumbai, reported its highest-ever daily cases at 31,855 yesterday. On the same day, Mumbai registered its largest daily tally at 5,190, a massive jump from the previous day’s count of 3,514. Despite the surge, the

Brihanmumbai Municipal Cooperation has not recommended a total lockdown.

Dharavi, a large slum area in Mumbai and home to over 650,000 people, with a population density of 227,136 per square kilometre, has recorded a 62 percent increase in COVID-19 cases so far this month compared to February. Maintaining social distancing and hygienic conditions is virtually impossible in the slum where families of eight to ten members live in 10 x10 feet rooms.

Similar or even worse conditions prevail in many other large cities throughout India. Apart from Maharashtra, 19 other states and Union Territories, including Karnataka, Gujarat, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, have reported their highest number of cases since January.

According to an article in the *Indian Express* on March 25, in Mumbai over 50 percent of the 13,083 beds at dedicated COVID-19 healthcare facilities are occupied. “At least 65 percent of ICU beds are occupied, whereas only 281 of 987 ventilator beds are available,” the newspaper reported.

A doctor from the King Edward Memorial government hospital in Mumbai, one of the oldest in the city, told Reuters: “If cases continue to rise like this for a week or so, a crisis is imminent.”

Addressing a March 17 online meeting of state chief ministers, Modi admitted that infections were rising in many previously unaffected areas. “This increase is more than 150 percent in 70 districts of the country in the last few weeks,” he said, warning that this could lead to “a country-wide outbreak.”

Modi did not propose any emergency measures and instead attempted to pass on the responsibility to the state governments, complaining that local administrations were “not showing seriousness on the issue of masks.”

The prime minister, in fact, has pursued a disastrous

herd immunity policy, allowing the virus to spread across the country unchecked. State governments throughout India, taking a lead from Modi, are pursuing the same program.

State governments, Modi cynically declared, need to be “serious on ‘test, trace and treat’ as was being done for the last year.”

Contrary to this assertion that Modi’s government has responded “seriously” to the pandemic, India, which has a population of about 1.37 billion, has only carried out around 235 million sample tests in the past twelve months—i.e., only 5.8 percent of the population have been covered.

Modi, moreover, has ruled out a second national lockdown and only some states have imposed limited restrictions. In Maharashtra, the state government introduced some restrictions in Nagpur city between March 15 and 21, but all shops, apart from those delivering essentials, could stay open till 4 p.m., and restaurants until 7p.m.

Exposing the real situation, a senior Maharashtra state government official told Reuters on March 18: “We have asked industries there to operate with minimum manpower as much as possible.” In other words, there will be no industry closures or any other measures that might harm capitalist profit-making.

While governments and health authorities are attempting to blame ordinary people for the spike in infections, the catastrophe is a direct result of the herd immunity program, as well as meagre health budget allocations over decades by consecutive central and state governments. These policies and the uninterrupted operations of businesses and industries over the past 12 months have benefitted India’s multi-billionaires, major corporations and the capitalist class as a whole.

Modi and Indian health authorities now claim to be conducting the “world’s biggest vaccination program,” including jabs for people over the age of 60.

The *Financial Times* reported on March 22, however, that the program “excludes millions of vulnerable Indians, who often live for years with undiagnosed diabetes and hypertension—conditions which are both indicators for priority vaccine.”

India’s vaccination program, which began in mid-January, has met just 7 percent of its target of administering 500 million doses by July 2021. In order to achieve this target, it must administer 3.65 million

shots per day.

The Modi government’s ill-prepared COVID-19 lockdown in March last year, which gave the population just four-hour’s notice, led to the immediate lay off of over 100 million internal migrant workers, most of them from the so-called unorganised sector. The government provided no social support to these workers and their families.

The lockdown was not combined with mass testing, contact tracing or the allocation of billions of rupees in additional healthcare spending, and failed to achieve its declared aims. Millions of workers were thrown into extreme poverty and hunger and hundreds of thousands of small-businesses collapsed.

An *Indian Express* article on March 24 cited a survey by Azim Premji University (APU) researchers. Based on national data, it revealed that more than half of those who lost their jobs during the pandemic were still unemployed in December. The newspaper also reported that 90 percent of those surveyed reported a “reduction in food consumption during lockdown; of them only 30 percent of respondents reported that food consumption was back to pre-lockdown levels in November.”



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