

# India hit by tsunami of COVID-19 infections as daily new cases surpass 250,000

**Saman Gunadasa****18 April 2021**

India has reported more than 200,000 COVID-19 cases daily since April 15, more than double the number recorded in any other country in the world. Despite this, India's far-right Narendra Modi-led government has refused to take any measures to curb the spread of the pandemic.

On Saturday, the health ministry reported 234,692 cases during the previous 24 hours. A new daily record was set Sunday with 261,500 new infections, taking the number of active cases to a record 1.8 million. Underscoring the virus' spread across India, the five states with the most new infections were Maharashtra in the west (67,123), Uttar Pradesh (27,734) and Delhi (24,375) in the north, Karnataka in the south (17,489), and Chhattisgarh (16,083) in the center-east.

According to epidemiologist and Public Health Foundation head Giridhara Babu, this dire situation is set to deteriorate still further. He warned the caseload could increase to 300,000-400,000 per day by May 5.

To date, India has had 14.5 million recorded COVID-19 infections, the second-highest number of cases in the world. But by May 1, this total could rise to 18 million.

The official death toll rose Sunday to 177,150 following a record 1,501 fatalities in the previous 24 hours. India's relatively low official death figures have been disputed by medical experts, who say that authorities are vastly undercounting the dead.

An Indian news site, *The Wire* reported on the situation in Madhya Pradesh as an example of the undercounting of deaths: "There were 37 bodies waiting to be cremated on April 12 at Bhopal's Bhadbhada facility whereas the Madhya Pradesh bulletin listed only 37 deaths in the whole state on that day," noted the report. "Similarly, on April 8, 35 bodies had to be cremated in Bhopal alone, but the bulletin specified only 27 deaths; on April 9, it was 35 bodies vs. 23 in the bulletin."

Criminal responsibility for the massive surge of cases lies with the Modi government and the Indian ruling elite as a whole. The Modi government has followed the policy of "herd immunity," refusing to impose necessary lockdown measures or provide India's impoverished masses with the means to shelter at home. After ending last spring's ill-prepared lockdown, which triggered a social calamity due to the absence of assistance for working people, the Modi government and its counterparts at the state level—including those led by the opposition parties—have maintained an open-economy policy while downplaying the deadly risk of the virus raging throughout India and internationally.

Modi repeatedly boasted about India's capability to produce vaccines and said that India was launching the "world's biggest vaccination programme." Authorities even put his photograph on the vaccination certificate issued to those who have been inoculated along with the slogan, "Together, India will defeat COVID-19."

By March 23, at the beginning of the new wave, the Indian government had only vaccinated 39 million people or 2.7 percent of the population. By April 12, the percentage remained below four percent.

States like Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand, and Delhi complain that they are facing a shortage of vaccines. Media reports have also emerged from several other states of vaccine centers shutting early or turning people away due to supplies running out.

To bolster the government's propaganda of normalcy, New Delhi allowed the ongoing mega Hindu religious event Kumbh Mela to go ahead, with millions of Hindu devotees from all over the country congregating at Haridwar on the shores of the Ganges. However, yesterday Modi hypocritically told religious leaders the festival should be "symbolic." At least 2,000 people, including religious leaders, are already reported as infected in the city of Haridwar alone.

The Modi government has also launched mass election propaganda campaigns in the state of West Bengal along with other political parties, without paying attention to public health rules, including social distancing. More than seven candidates, including candidates from Modi's Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party, have reportedly tested positive for COVID-19.

Fourteen states have reported their highest number of daily infections during the last few days. Among them, five states including Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, and Kerala have 68 percent of the active cases nationwide.

The UK variant of the coronavirus is reported in 18 to 19 states or 70 to 80 districts in India, while the South African and Brazilian variants are also found in a lesser number of districts. Double mutant variants, which may be more infectious or reduce vaccine effectiveness, have been found in Maharashtra, Delhi, West Bengal, Gujarat, Karnataka, and Madhya Pradesh.

Feigning concern at the raging pandemic, India's health minister, Harsh Vardhan, said on April 16: "The number of cases is rising across the country. That is why we are visiting various hospitals to assess the situation and also talking to doctors and

everyone for further preparations."

However, India's current health care spending is less than 1.5 percent of its gross domestic product, among the lowest in the world. As the pandemic has resurged, the government has not announced any supplementary budgets to improve health care infrastructure or to expedite the manufacturing of vaccinations. By contrast, it is lavishly spending on defence, including allocating an additional \$18.5 billion for weapons procurement in the 2021-22 budget announced on February 1.

Shortages of hospital beds, including oxygen-equipped and intensive care unit beds, have been reported from around the country. The government has been compelled to import 50,000 metric tonnes of medical oxygen due to increased demand.

Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray announced limited lockdown measures last week, after saying the state's active COVID-19 caseload could double in 15 days from the present half a million. However, public transport, including trains and bus services, and the manufacturing sector were all allowed to continue operating at a maximum of 50 percent capacity. Thackeray has requested military help from the central government to tackle medical personnel shortages.

Delhi has become one of the worst-hit cities in India, with close to 50,000 active cases, and infection rates on the rise. Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal announced "a weekend curfew" that will not disrupt big business. Even cinema halls remain open at 30 percent occupancy.

At the end of March as the surge in infections began, Delhi Health Minister Satyendar Jain declared: "Lockdown, not a solution, learn to live with Covid." He went on to say, "It is a recurring disease. Experts said from the beginning, 'Do not believe it will be finished immediately.' We will have to learn to live with it."

In Chhattisgarh hospital beds are no longer available. The press club in Rajnandgaon has been converted into a makeshift hospital and in the same town a garbage truck was reportedly used to ferry away dead bodies.

In Chhattisgarh's state capital Raipur, the main government hospital's freezers have run out of space to store dead bodies. Reports described bodies piling up everywhere, with trucks ferrying them ten at a time to the cremation grounds. According to Umesh Kumar, who watched as his father's body was taken to cremation at a funeral pyre in Naya Raipur, "They are dragging the bodies like animals from the mortuary to the truck and then from the truck onto the funeral pyre."

Under these horrifying conditions, the Modi regime and opposition parties are agreed that business must continue as usual. This policy of placing corporate profits ahead of the protection of human lives amounts to social murder. While hundreds of thousands of lives have been lost and millions are suffering from the pandemic, the number of pandemic profiteers is rising in India as in other countries. According to an OXFAM study, India's more than 100 billionaires increased their wealth by 13 trillion rupees (\$US 174 billion), from March 2020 to January 2021.

Citing domestic demand, the Modi regime suspended vaccine exports during the last week of March, promising to resume them in June. This decision will have a devastating impact on many

middle-income and poor countries which depend on India for cheaper generic drugs and vaccines.

Adar Poonawalla, the CEO of the Serum Institute of India (SII), the world's largest vaccine manufacturer recently complained that since New Delhi pays it less per shot than it earns from exports, it needs 30 billion rupees (\$408 million) from the government to boost its currently "very stretched" production capacity.

At the same time, US imperialism's brutal vaccine-nationalist policy is heavily impacting India. In early February, newly elected US President Joe Biden invoked the Defence Production Act to ban the export of raw materials related to vaccine production.

"The US," said Poonawalla last Friday, "needs to lift its embargo on raw material exports to help ramp up vaccine production." "The US," he continued, "has invoked the Defence Act and banned export of raw materials. This is as good as banning vaccines."

According to the *Washington Post*, the aim of Biden's export ban is to enable Pfizer and Moderna to step up US vaccine production so "mass inoculations against the coronavirus" can be accelerated. In reality, Biden's actions have nothing to do with any concern for saving lives, and everything to do with boosting the profits and market share of these two US-based companies, whose life-saving products will be used by the US ruling elite to advance its predatory geopolitical interests. SII's main customer for COVID-19 vaccines is the British-Swedish company AstraZenika.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global problem, which requires a global solution. It must include a globally coordinated vaccination program, the shutdown of all nonessential production until the pandemic is contained, and the seizure of the wealth of the super-rich in India and the major imperialist powers to provide wages for all workers forced to shelter at home and funding for quality health care for all. It will only be implemented through the mass mobilisation of the working class on the basis of a socialist program.



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