

India reports the highest number of COVID-19 cases ever seen during the pandemic

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Yesterday, India, a country with a population of 1.366 billion people, reported the highest number of COVID-19 cases ever seen across the globe by a single nation. The United States had set the previous record on January 8, 2021, with 307,581 COVID cases during its horrific winter surge. After a low of fewer than 10,000 cases on February 11, India confirmed 315,728 cases on April 21, 2021. The country's epidemiologic curve of new COVID cases continues to spiral upwards.

Worldwide, 144.4 million cases of COVID-19 have been reported, with over 3 million deaths. This accounts for less than 2 percent of the world's population having been infected. Still, given that most infections are asymptomatic, the true extent of the disease remains unknown. The World Health Organization made an estimate back in October 2020 that roughly 10 percent of the world's population may have been infected with the coronavirus. One could surmise that perhaps the actual figure is double but remains far from any meaningful herd immunity.

As rich nations have rapidly deployed their COVID-19 vaccines to immunize their populations, aside from the present tally of cases, the brunt of the pandemic has shifted to South Asia, specifically in India where access to vaccines and health care remains for the millions upon millions of the impoverished and destitute a hopeless matter. Less than 8 percent of its population have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine.

Globally, a new one-day high of more than 871,000 new COVID-19 cases was also reported. The seven-day moving average of new COVID cases has reached a new high with over 790,000 infections each day and

continues to climb. For comparison, the winter peak of the last global surge came close to 746,000 on January 12, 2021. Last week saw 5.27 million confirmed cases, a 15 percent increase from the previous week. Cases have been climbing for eight consecutive weeks. At this pace, daily COVID cases could easily reach 1 million before next month.

The moving average for the death toll is now over 12,000 fatalities per day and soaring. The peak of the last surge had reached 14,408 deaths per day on January 27, as death is a lagging indicator of COVID infections. It has been predicted that this high will soon be surpassed.

India's official COVID cases are fast approaching 16 million, with more than 184,000 people having thus far perished from their infections. Yesterday, 2,100 more died. The seven-day average of deaths has surpassed the first wave as it continues to soar.

Despite these horrific figures, data obtained by the *Financial Times* on the number of cremations of COVID-19 victims over the same period indicate that the death toll may be 10 times higher than what public health officials are reporting to the media. Yet, senior health officials have attempted to play down these figures, stating that the increase in numbers was "due to cremations being done using COVID protocols."

Dr. Bhramar Mukherjee, professor of biostatistics and epidemiology at the University of Michigan, told *Reuters* that officials were in a state of "data denial." "Everything is so muddy. It feels like nobody understands the situation very clearly, and that's very irksome."

John Burn-Murdoch, the *Financial Times* senior data-visualization journalist, explained on his Twitter

account: “I collated news reports across seven districts, finding overall, numbers of COVID victims who have been cremated are ten times larger than official COVID death counts in the same areas.” In the capital city of the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, the number of cremations for COVID-19 was 24 times higher than the official death count. In Vadodara, the third-largest city in Gujarat state, it was 21 times.

Given these confirmations, on a per capita basis, this places India’s death toll on par with the worst period of the United States experience with the pandemic. But for India, this is just the beginning of the present surge.

The furnaces at the crematoriums in Gujarat have been running so intensely and non-stop that the metal supports have begun to melt. Kamlesh Sailor, the president of the trust that runs the crematorium in Surat known for diamond polishing, told *Reuters* that “we are working around the clock at 100 percent capacity to cremate bodies on time.” He added that six gas furnaces at their crematorium have been running 24 hours a day.

Prashant Kabrawala, who manages the Ashwinikumar crematorium, told *Reuters* that cremations have more than tripled in the last few weeks. He noted, “I have been regularly going to the crematorium since 1987 and been involved in its day-to-day functioning since 2005, but I haven’t seen so many dead bodies coming for cremation in all these years.”

In what has become familiar news stories, it was just reported that a medicinal oxygen tank leak at the 150-bed Dr. Zakir Hussain Hospital, a civic-run hospital in the ancient city of Nashik in the state of Maharashtra, led to the death of 24 COVID-19 patients who were on ventilators.

Oxygen supply suddenly ceased after a malfunction in the hospital’s main storage tanks leading to the asphyxiation of the patients. Eleven of them were between the ages of 33 and 60. According to the *Indian Express*, the 13-kiloliter oxygen tanks had only recently been made operational.

“As per preliminary information, the socket of the...oxygen tank broke, which led to leakage in the tank and affected oxygen supply. The hospital used jumbo cylinders to help patients. Some patients who could be moved were taken to other hospitals. However, 22 patients died as supply was cut off suddenly.” Two more died later in the evening.

Many of the patients who eventually come to the hospitals are in extremely critical condition and die before medical treatments can be rendered. Many are brought there already dead by their families. Most are untested, leading to the disparities between official figures and what is transpiring. Fewer than a quarter of deaths in India are officially certified by a medical examiner, which implies that the extent of the pandemic may be challenging to ascertain.

Two days ago, India’s capital, Delhi, announced a week-long lockdown, allowing government offices and essential services to remain open, which amounts to a meaningless measure. The chief minister of the city, Arvind Kejriwal, speaking at a virtual press conference, admitted that the intensive care units are at capacity and medicinal oxygen was in critical shortage. But he then added, “I have always been against lockdowns, but this one will help us amplify the number of hospital beds in Delhi.” These are political stunts that have been repeated by politicians alike throughout every continent where the pandemic has wrought devastation. Little will be achieved with short-term half-hearted measures.

India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi, beholden to the interests of major corporations, has been adamant that he will not impose a nationwide lockdown. Like Trump, he declared that India must be “saved” not from the scourge but from the catastrophe a lockdown would bring to the country’s economy. According to Oxfam, the year before the pandemic hit, India’s wealthiest 1 percent held 73 percent of its wealth, while 670 million people, who make up the poorest half, saw their wealth decline 60 percent.



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