

# As COVID-19 infections engulf India, Modi government fails to guarantee free vaccines

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30 April 2021

The coronavirus catastrophe continues to worsen across India, with the country reporting 3,645 new fatalities yesterday, a new high in the number of COVID-19 deaths in a single day. India also recorded 379,257 new cases, another world record in daily infections, taking its overall total to more than 18 million confirmed cases.

Hospitals and morgues throughout the country, including in megacities like Delhi and Mumbai, are overwhelmed. Despite these deadly conditions, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has refused to guarantee free coronavirus vaccines.

In his April 20 address to the nation, Modi declared that all people over 18 years would be able to get vaccinated from May 1. Prior to that, the government was inoculating only those aged over 45 years. While Modi boasted that India "has the cheapest vaccine in the world," shots for those in the 18- to 45-year-old group are not free and recipients will have to pay.

An April 19 statement by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare made clear that the Modi government's priority is not protecting human life but the profit interests of private manufacturers and the ruling elite's geo-strategic interests.

"The strength of India's private sector vaccine manufacturing capability," it said, "has been strategically empowered through unprecedented decisive steps, from facilitating public-private collaborative research, trials and product development, to targeted public grants and far-reaching governance reforms in India's regulatory system." The grandiose and cynical statement is of little comfort to millions of Indians confronted with the deadly disease.

The media is dominated by heartbreaking reports about the lack of oxygen, basic medical supplies, urgently needed vaccines and drugs, as well as

problems disposing of the corpses of victims of the pandemic.

*Scroll.in* reported on April 29 that crematoriums are being overwhelmed. It noted that 300 kilograms of wood are needed for a funeral pyre to cremate a body and quoted Ram Pal, a crematorium worker, who said "There are more bodies than wood... bodies after bodies are coming."

Numerous other media reports reveal that the central and state governments are undercounting coronavirus fatalities. Journalists from the NDTV news network visited seven cremation grounds in Delhi, reporting on April 28 that at least 1,150 deaths were not included in the official COVID-19 death list between April 18 and 24. NDTV reporters were told by a worker at one crematorium that people who died at home from the virus were not recorded as COVID-19 fatalities.

Asked by a journalist about one district administration that is allegedly withholding the exact number of COVID deaths, Haryana Chief Minister Manohar Lal Khattar, who is a member of Modi's Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP), contemptuously declared: "There's no point making a noise about the number of people who have died because the dead won't be coming back to life."

The criminal indifference of the ruling elite towards the Indian masses is exposed not just in the mounting piles of dead bodies, but above all in its deliberate refusal to act on the advice of medical experts.

The Indian health ministry has given a green light to domestic and international vaccine and drug companies to determine the cost of coronavirus vaccines. In its April 19 statement, the ministry stated that Phase-III of the country's National Vaccine Strategy "aims at liberalised vaccine pricing" and at making "pricing, procurement, eligibility and administration of vaccines

open and flexible.”

Under this arrangement, the Modi government has granted two indigenous vaccine makers—the Serum Institute of India (SII) and Bharat Biotech—and a third company, which produces the Sputnik vaccine, rights to manufacture in India.

Fifty percent of vaccine doses made by these companies will be supplied to the central government, with the remainder purchased on the open market at a price “transparently” decided by these manufacturers. Ultimately, the cost burden will be imposed on millions of people frantically attempting to get vaccinated.

SII is currently selling the Covishield vaccine at 600 rupees (\$US8.16) per dose for private hospitals, 400 rupees for Indian state governments and 150 rupees for the central government.

The company, however, is attempting to lift the price of shots supplied to the central government to 400 rupees, insisting that vaccines on the export market cost between 1,125 and 1,500 rupees per dose. Meanwhile, Bharat Biotech, which produces Covaxin, an indigenous COVID-19 vaccine, said on April 24 that its shots will be 600 rupees per dose for state governments and 1,200 rupees for private hospitals.

The abandonment of the Indian masses by the Modi government is exposed by recent *Times of India* figures which show that it would only cost \$6.4 billion, or 0.32 percent of India’s GDP, to vaccinate every Indian citizen over 18-years-old—i.e., 800 million people or up to 65 percent of the country’s population.

The media is currently reporting that many Indian states are unsure whether they can begin inoculating all residents over 18 years of age on May 1 because they have still not been provided vaccines from SII and Bharat Biotech.

The *Indian Express* reported on April 27 that “opposition” governments, such as those in Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Punjab and Kerala, said they would have to postpone the next phase of Modi’s vaccination program because “they did not have enough vaccines.”

Tens of thousands of people are anxiously trying to secure a hospital bed, life-saving drugs and oxygen cylinders for loved ones; others are attempting to have the bodies of loved ones cremated. Amidst these horrifying scenes, India’s super rich are able to fly on private jets to safe havens in Europe, luxury resorts in

the Indian Ocean or to the Middle East.

While a one-way commercial flight from Mumbai to Dubai is about 80,000 rupees (about \$1,000) or around 10 times the usual rate, a spokesman for Air Charter Service India said the demand for private jet flights was “absolutely crazy.” As he told the AFP on April 27, “We have 12 flights going to Dubai tomorrow and each flight is completely full.”

The Modi government and its state counterparts are acutely nervous about the rising mass anger over their criminally indifferent reaction to COVID-19. Social media and Twitter in particular, is dominated by angry denunciations of government and health authorities.

In a reactionary attempt to block this outpouring, the Modi government demanded that Twitter delete all postings critical of the government’s response to the pandemic. This week, 26-year-old Shashank Yadav, who posted a desperate appeal on Twitter for oxygen to be given to his dying grandfather, was charged by Uttar Pradesh police with spreading rumours over oxygen shortages. His supposed offense is “intent to cause... fear or alarm.”



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