

Mounting popular anger in India over Modi government's criminal mishandling of pandemic

Wasantha Rupasinghe**2 May 2021**

With the daily official death toll from COVID-19 now well above 3,000 and new infections averaging more than 370,000 per day, India is now the epicentre of the global pandemic.

Across India, there is mounting popular anger over the failure of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government to contain the virus. People are outraged at the lack of oxygen in hospitals, the absence of critical drugs to treat the sick, and the horrific scenes of crematoriums burning bodies round the clock yet still struggling to deal with the influx of corpses.

"He [Modi] has lit funeral pyres in every house," Neena, a woman mourning the death of her younger brother Praveen, 50, cried in a video posted April 25 on YouTube by India's weekly magazine *Caravan*.

The *Caravan* video, which carries an on-the-spot report from a crematorium at Old Seemapuri, a locality in North-East Delhi, shows bodies of COVID-19 victims being burnt throughout the night as more corpses continue to arrive. Sitting in the crematorium next to the wrapped body of her dead brother, Neena angrily cursed Modi, "He has destroyed the whole country. This Modi, for what does he take our votes? Is he taking votes to kill people?" She added: "Is he going to play his politics on all our funeral pyres? He is watching the spectacle of our pyres."

The weeping woman condemned the lack of health facilities which led to her brother's death, saying, "My younger brother, he couldn't get a bed. We roamed across all of Delhi with him but he couldn't get a bed, he couldn't get oxygen. Who is responsible for this? Modi, the Delhi government—who is responsible?"

Similar grisly tragedies have been playing out on a daily basis as the country's ramshackle healthcare system, particularly in the Delhi National Capital Territory, has been overwhelmed by a tsunami of COVID-19 victims. On May 1, twelve people died at Delhi's Batra hospital after an 80-minute disruption of its medical oxygen supply.

The hospital's executive director, Dr. Sudhanshu Bankata, told NDTV that further deaths could not be ruled out, commenting, "These are patients whose oxygen levels sank

when supply was low... It is hard to revive such patients. The next 24-48 hours are critical ... 220 patients are currently on oxygen support."

"The biggest bottleneck," added Dr. Bankata, in an interview with the *Hindustan Times*, "is that Delhi requires 700MT of oxygen daily but was allocated 490MT, which never comes," "Our requirement (depending on the number of ICU and non-ICU beds) was assessed to be 6.5MT but we are allocated only 4.9MT because of this shortage."

The Batra hospital tragedy is one of many. Last week, 25 COVID-19 patients died at Delhi's Jaipur Golden hospital when its oxygen supply ran out.

According to Delhi Chief Minister and Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) head Arvind Kejriwal, Delhi received only 312MT out of its reduced 380 MT oxygen allotment last Friday.

Over the past two weeks, Kejriwal has made repeated desperate appeals to Modi's central government for help. As early as April 1, the prime minister's office was warned of an impending catastrophic oxygen shortage. However, not until April 22 did it begin diverting oxygen intended for industry to the country's overrun hospitals.

The Modi government and its predecessors, whether led by the BJP or the Congress Party, bear responsibility for the current catastrophe. They never spent more than a pathetic 1.5 percent of GDP on public health care. Kejriwal's AAP administration and the other opposition-led state governments are also criminally culpable for the unfolding disaster. Despite numerous warnings from scientific experts, they refused to pour massive resources into strengthening medical infrastructure during the 16-month long pandemic. And like the central government, the state governments have all vehemently opposed closing non-essential businesses, providing social support to those affected by the crisis, and other urgently needed public health measures even as India's COVID-19 infections surged from mid-February onwards.

All indications are that the spread of the pandemic throughout India will continue to accelerate in the days and weeks to come, fueled by new, more infectious and lethal variants and the authorities' gross and malign negligence.

On Saturday, daily COVID-19 cases surpassed 400,000—for the first time, with India officially registering 401,993 new infections, a world record. Active cases currently stand at a staggering 3.3 million, which represents almost one-sixth of the 19.16 million cases India has recorded since the pandemic began. After 3,689 daily deaths were recorded Saturday, the official death toll stood at 215,542.

Modi has assured big business that he will not undermine their profit interests by imposing a national lockdown to contain the rampaging pandemic. In his April 20 “address to the nation,” he vowed, his government would “save the country from lockdown,” not save the population from the ravages of the virus. He similarly urged state governments to consider lockdowns only as a last resort and focus instead on “micro containment” measures, so as to keep the economy “open” and profits rolling in for big business.

Experts, including many of those advising the government, insist that the only way to break the accelerating transmission of the virus is to impose a national lockdown. “Some members of the COVID-19 task force, a technical expert body that advises the Central Government are ‘pushing hard’ for a national lockdown,” reported the *Indian Express* yesterday. The chairperson of this task force, V.K. Paul, reports directly to Prime Minister Modi.

The *Express* quoted a member of the task force, as saying, “The COVID-19 task force is trying to say this very aggressively for the last few weeks. That we should tell the people at the top that we should have a lockdown.” Another member commented, “A nationwide lockdown rather than what we are doing now, in bits and pieces across states, because of the simple fact that it is spreading all over.”

The experts who spoke to the *Express* in support of a national lockdown highlighted three key factors to back their demand. One of them was “growing anger building up” among overwhelmed health professionals and workers. A member said, “They (the doctors) ask why we are not doing anything to contain the spread. We have ambulance after ambulance lined up, patients pleading, perpetual shortage of oxygen cylinders, there is a lot of unrest among doctors. There has to be a pause. Infection among health-care workers is also rising.”

Another critical issue the *Express* reported is “the situation emerging in rural India,” which “needs to be urgently addressed.” A task force member elaborated, “We don’t know what is going to happen there [in rural areas]. Forget critical care infrastructure, small towns and villages aren’t prepared at all. We cannot live in denial.”

The Modi government is doing everything it can to resist demands for a lockdown, which would interrupt the flow of corporate profits to the banks and super-rich to whom it is beholden. This is why it stubbornly ignored weeks of warnings of the calamity now befalling the country. For example, Reuters reported yesterday that the Indian SARS-CoV-2 Genetics Consortium or INSACOG, a forum of scientific advisers set up

by the government, had warned Indian officials in early March that a new and more contagious “double mutant” COVID-19 variant had taken hold in the country. “Despite the warning,” complained four of the five INSACOG scientists who spoke with Reuters, “the federal government did not seek to impose major restrictions to stop the spread of the virus.”

Quoting Ajay Parida, director of the state-run Institute of Life Science and a member of INSACOG, Reuters continued, “INSACOG researchers first detected B.1.617 which is now known as the Indian variant of the virus as early as February.” Emphasizing that the new variant of the virus was of “high concern,” the forum’s findings—that this could more easily enter a human cell and counter a person’s immune response to it—were shared with the Indian health ministry before March 10. However, the health ministry delayed its publication for about two weeks (till March 24), and then omitted the words “high concern” in its media statement, in what can only be described as a deliberate attempt to cover up the danger.

When Reuters asked what lay behind the government’s indifference and hostility towards the INSACOG’s findings, Shahid Jameel, chair of the scientific advisory group, complained, “Authorities were not paying enough attention to the evidence when they set policy.” “Policy,” he added, “has to be based on evidence and not the other way around. I am worried that science was not taken into account to drive policy.”

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has alone forcefully argued from the pandemic’s early stages last spring, the policy that the Modi government and Indian ruling elite and their counterparts across the world have pursued, whatever the official rhetoric, is none other than the murderous, pseudo-scientific policy of “herd immunity.”

In pursuit of this policy Modi, acting on behalf of the profit interests of India’s CEOs and billionaires, has kept the economy open, allowing the deadly virus to spread unchecked throughout the country. Moreover, this has been done with full knowledge that it would lead to mass death. Last May, as the BJP government was aggressively scaling back lockdown measures, one of Modi’s “health” advisors, Jayaprakash Muliyi, cavalierly dismissed the prospect of “at least two million” Indians dying from the pandemic, saying “Mortality is low, let the young go out and work.”



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