

“I have never been surrounded by such a huge loss of human life”

Young Delhi resident describes India’s COVID-19 catastrophe

Our reporters
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India is submerged in a horrific surge of COVID-19, believed to be driven by a double-mutant strain of the coronavirus. Like the Brazilian and South African variants, this variant appears to reduce vaccine effectiveness and natural immunity acquired from previous infections. India is now the country recording the most cases of COVID-19 in the world, nearly 400,000 per day. Over 220,000 people have died of the virus in India.

Vaibhavi, a youth from Delhi who has been unemployed and is now living with family in nearby Gurgaon since returning to India last year after graduating from college abroad, spoke to the WSWS on the catastrophe unfolding in India.

She said, “I have never been surrounded by such a huge loss of human life. ... It seems COVID and death are everywhere. Every family I know either has or has had COVID in the past few weeks. On my old street in Delhi, every single house has a COVID infection.”

She added, “Last week, my cousin in Kanpur died. He was only 34. Two of my high school friends’ parents have died in the last two days. ... A very close friend messaged me and our other friends two days ago, desperately searching for oxygen because her granddad is very sick in a home ICU. Yesterday, I had to find an oxygen concentrator for my aunt. I was able to find one on Twitter, but it’s cost my family 85,000 rupees (\$1,150).”

Conditions are horrific in hospitals, many of which have no free beds, Vaibhavi said: “Doctors who haven’t slept for days have patients dying due to the lack of basic resources. One video shows doctors and family members desperately trying to resuscitate patients, only for them to die. There’s even been

violence when people can’t find the care their family members need. Many hospitals have just begun locking their gates, leaving people stuck outside with their relatives dying in their arms.”

She added, “All the crematoriums in Delhi are overfilled. Many crematoriums are overflowing into the street or using car parks to burn bodies. There are even makeshift funeral pyres to burn multiple bodies at once. One crematorium with a capacity of 20 bodies had 93 bodies come two days ago. Families are forced to dump their relatives outside crematoriums with no funeral rites or any dignity. Many crematoriums report burning an increased number of children’s bodies, as well.”

Official statistics massively underestimate coronavirus infections and deaths, Vaibhavi noted: “Deaths are only counted as COVID-related if there is a test or a doctor’s report from a hospital. Most who die at home aren’t tested. People see all the images of people choking to death in hospital entrances, so they don’t even try to take their relatives there. There are also no tests in Delhi at the moment. Many labs have closed completely due to the entire staff being infected with the virus.”

“In terms of saving lives, the biggest issue right now is oxygen,” she said. “There are hundreds of posts on hashtags like #SOSLucknow and #SOSDelhi on Twitter with people desperately searching for oxygen, plasma or Remdesivir. ... Lots of these posts are made for people in their 30s and 40s, as well. There are even posts from hospital officials and doctors saying that if they don’t get more oxygen in a few hours, whole wards are going to die.”

Vaibhavi insisted that a scientific lockdown policy can stop the virus: “Australia, or even China, whose

population and demography is more similar to India, show that the virus could have been stopped here. Since the end of the chaotic first lockdown, however, the Modi government insists that the economy must be saved, [arguing] that while lives will be lost to COVID, just as many will be lost due to the lockdown. While this was always false, it's just absurd now."

Vaibhavi blamed the deaths and hardship during India's first lockdown last March on the ruling establishment, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). She said, "During the first lockdown, which was implemented overnight, many people died from starvation and suicides, [due to] a total lack of economic support. This is not only the fault of the BJP central government, which still refuses to implement any lockdown, but also state governments, including those run by other political parties."

This year, the Indian population was aware of the sudden surge due to a variant in Britain in winter, but was nonetheless caught by surprise by the surge in India in spring.

Vaibhavi explained, "India never really got close to zero cases, so it was clear a surge was possible. But the speed of the current surge has just been devastating. Even in the first week of April, schools, restaurants, nightclubs and offices were all open. Modi even declared a great victory over the virus and the triumph of the Indian response earlier in the year. Then almost overnight, the number of people falling ill and dying just exploded. The level of panic and fear among people I know is like the first days of the pandemic."

She added that the oxygen shortage should also have been avoidable, as it "was even an issue before the pandemic. In rural areas, people regularly die from snake bites due to a lack of oxygen for treatment." Spurred on to make greater promises by the pandemic, "the government said it would build 160 oxygen centres, after the first wave. So far, they have only opened 33."

Vaibhavi also pointed to how India's grotesque social inequality means workers and rural toilers are largely denied care. "There are free clinics and government hospitals for the poor, but these were already overwhelmed before the pandemic," she noted, adding: "Even though Delhi and other states are technically in lockdown at the moment, there is no support for

workers or poor farmers, so the majority are still forced to go to work."

Among the affluent and the wealthy, who have a far better chance of obtaining treatment, the pandemic is fuelling speculation and massive self-enrichment.

Vaibhavi said, "There is a black market for every imaginable COVID resource. The only way you get medicine is through 'connections,' and even with them, it's unbelievably expensive. Empty oxygen cylinders are going for 18,000 rupees (\$250). These cost 150-200 rupees before the surge. The cost for a hospital bed entry (excluding cost of treatment) is 1,000,000 rupees (\$13,300) right now. At such prices, 95 percent of people in Delhi have no access whatsoever to them."

"It's really disgusting, as the situation gets worse the profiteering increases," she added, noting: "Serum Institute of India is currently charging Indian hospitals the highest price in the world for the AstraZeneca vaccine, even in the middle of this deadly surge! Its CEO, Adar Poonawalla, is rolling in money. Adar and his father Cyrus are worth \$13.8 billion, up 85 percent through the pandemic. The company just got another \$400 million government grant."

Noting one epidemiologist's prediction that the number of active cases in India would hit 3.5 million by May, Vaibhavi said: "The government has no intention of stopping the spread of the virus, there's no centralized plan in place. ... The recent censorship of 50 Twitter posts criticizing the government's handling of the pandemic shows they intend to let the virus spread and then just silence any criticism."



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