

Indian medical staff indict Modi government, authorities for catastrophic mishandling of pandemic

Yuan Darwin, Nanda Kumar
7 May 2021

India is the global epicentre of the pandemic, with a tsunami of cases and deaths sweeping across the country. On Friday, India's Health Ministry reported a record daily increase of 414,188 cases, with deaths rising by 3,915. There have now been 21.49 million officially registered cases since the beginning of the pandemic, and 234,083 deaths. Both of these figures are widely recognised to be vast undercounts.

India's emergence as the world's COVID-19 epicentre—accounting for more than 45 percent of all new cases worldwide in the past week—is the direct product of the “profits before lives” policy enforced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government. This policy has been supported by state governments throughout the country, including those led by the Congress Party and other opposition parties. Despite warnings from epidemiologists and other medical experts against lifting restrictions, the Modi government abandoned any effort to contain the virus following last year's ill-prepared lockdown.

India's ramshackle health care system is now collapsing, as chronically understaffed hospitals run out of beds, oxygen, and anti-COVID 19 drugs like Remdesivir. Hospitals and morgues throughout the country, including in mega-cities like Delhi and Mumbai, are overwhelmed.

In India and around the world, health care workers are bearing the brunt of the pandemic.

World Socialist Web Site reporters recently spoke to medical staff in India, including doctors, who have been involved in COVID-19 medical duty for the past one year.

* * *

Dr. Prabhu Manoharan, 33, is an orthopaedic Master of surgery and government doctor.

WSWS: As per official reports, as of February 2021, 174 doctors, 116 nurses and 199 medical workers had died from COVID-19 in India. Can we attribute this deadly impact of the pandemic on frontline workers to the criminal herd immunity policy of the ruling class?

Dr. Prabhu Manoharan: First of all, both the cases and deaths of COVID victims are highly underreported by the Indian government and the capitalist media, which is a conscious decision taken by them. When the Indian Medical Association claimed that 106 doctors have died across India, the Modi government denied it, claiming none had died. But when the issue was exposed with adequate proof, it was finally admitted that doctors have died.

WSWS: On October 21, the Central Medical Services Society, an

autonomous institution under the Union Health Ministry, warned about oxygen shortages and floated a tender online calling for bidders to establish 162 Pressure Swing Adsorption (PSA) oxygen plants, which costs just 2.01 billion rupees. The central Health Ministry confirmed in a report that most new oxygen plants are not functional. “Out of 162 PSA Oxygen plants, 33 have been installed,” it said. By the end of April, 2021, 59 were scheduled to be installed.

What is your view about these delays in tender process, which have led to severe oxygen shortages in India and the consequent deaths of many patients?

Dr Prabhu Manoharan: India is the top most producer in oxygen cylinders. The oxygen shortage has occurred only because the infection rate has increased hugely and the number of deaths multiplied rapidly. But the Modi government, based on its criminal “herd immunity” policy and “back to normal” campaign, has not only reopened the economy, conducted state elections and allowed for Kumbha Mela (a Hindu religious festival for which millions gathered), but consciously underreported the deaths and infections. So even the medical experts could not predict such a shortage and crisis. I clearly say that death due to oxygen shortage is not a coronavirus death, but criminal social murder by the Modi government and the ruling class.

WSWS: “The situation is so bad that we had to treat some patients in a cardiac ambulance for 12 hours until they could get an ICU bed,” said Dr. Siddheshwar Shinde, who runs a COVID hospital in Pune, in western India. What is your view on this health care catastrophe?

Dr Prabhu Manoharan: First of all, this medical crisis is not natural but man made. The corporate media initially made a false propaganda that only people older than 50 will get infected. But I practically saw in my own duty 18 deaths in just one week whose age is below 40.

Now, the media is saying that the disaster happened due to the double mutation (COVID-19 variant). But we need to understand scientifically that the antigen (virus) when attacked by antibodies, changes its genetic nature to infiltrate the human body. That's why we call it “strain mutant gene.” It is well known that SARS-coronavirus is highly unstable and changes its genetic nature. So the second wave and its deadly impact were not unpredicted, but were consciously allowed to run rampant by the Modi government, which prioritized profit over lives.

* * *

Dr. Anu Rathna is the chief doctor at the Ponneri Taluk Government hospital in the Thiruvallur District of Tamil Nadu.

WSWS: Dr. Jalil Parkar, a top pulmonologist in Mumbai's Lilavati

Hospital said in an interview: “We have collapsed, Maharashtra is sinking and other states will follow and this is worse than World War Two.” As shortages of hospital beds, including oxygen-equipped and intensive care unit beds, have been reported from around the country, Modi had proclaimed that the “country must be saved from lockdown,” not the virus. In this situation, can you explain how the pandemic is affecting frontline workers?

Dr. Anu Rathna: Yes, the frontline workers are pushed to work on a war footing. We are mentally stressed and emotionally exhausted due to the heavy workload. Medical workers are demanding eight hours of work per day, which has still not been achieved in many places. But in a pandemic situation, the duration should be reduced not only to avoid work stress but also to avoid infections. Many frontline workers have lost their lives in this battle. The ruling class, although well aware the pandemic is international and that the second wave was possible, has consciously neglected preventive measures in favour of big business.

WSWS: “It’s a complete massacre of data,” said Bhramar Mukherjee, an epidemiologist at the University of Michigan who has been following India closely. He added: “From all the modelling we’ve done, we believe the true number of deaths is two to five times what is being reported.”

Could you comment on this criticism that deaths are underreported?

Dr. Anu Rathna: I completely agree with that. We can see mass cremations and bodies of COVID victims are burnt together in videos in social media. This usually happens when there is a natural disaster. But mass cremations and mounting piles of dead bodies at this point make clear that the second wave has reached a point where it is both disastrous and highly dangerous.

WSWS: 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., 900 million people, or up to 65 percent of the country’s population. But the Indian health ministry has given the green light to domestic and international vaccine and drug companies to determine the cost of coronavirus vaccines. What’s your comment on this privatization of vaccines?

Dr. Anu Rathna: This clearly exposes the pro-corporate policies of the Modi government. We are in a highly disastrous situation. To allow private players to produce and distribute vaccines in this situation is really a dangerous move. Already we have lost millions of people (worldwide). So not only vaccines, but all the medicines needed to fight COVID must be immediately brought under control of the public sector and free vaccination should be done. All private hospitals and drug companies involved in COVID treatment should be brought under public control. Lockdown should be implemented immediately with proper social care to people.

* * *

Rakshitha is a COVID-19 nurse at Chengalpattu Medical College Hospital in Tamil Nadu.

WSWS: According to an OXFAM study, India’s more than 100 billionaires increased their wealth by 13 trillion rupees (\$US174 billion), from March 2020 to January 2021. Meanwhile, India’s current health care spending is around just 1.5 percent of its gross domestic product, among the lowest in the world. As the pandemic has surged, the government has not announced 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. How do you see the relationship between the deadly impact of the pandemic

and the privatization of health care and the neo-liberal policy of the Indian government?

Rakshitha: By giving differential prices and allowing private drug companies, the Modi government is acting as a marketing manager to help corporations to utilize this pandemic as a business to enrich their profits. On the contrary, proper safety measures were not taken for frontline workers. Many frontline nurses are infected and have lost their lives, but the real count is hidden from the public.

The Modi government made false propaganda that it would give 200,000 rupees to families of frontline workers who lost their lives. But such an amount was never given. In the name of “back to normalcy,” it reopened the economy and got rid of the contract workers who were involved in frontline COVID duty. Now the real situation of the Indian medical system is exposed in the second wave.

WSWS: The WSWS and ICFI have called for the formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, and also raised a series of demands, including shutting down all non-essential business with complete compensation to those workers who will lose their income, the maintaining of essential services, including health care, with comprehensive safety measures to protect workers from the virus, and the allocation of massive financial resources to upgrade the public health care system. These demands are part of the struggle for the independent political mobilization of the working class against capitalist rule.

Rakshitha: I completely agree with your demands. The Indian army soldiers who kill people are honoured by governments as brave and given huge amounts of compensation. But frontline workers give their lives to save the people. They must be given proper safety measures and equipment.

I will attend your International May Day rally with the demand that all frontline workers involved in fighting COVID should be made permanent staff and that the health sector should be immediately brought under public ownership.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact