

Experts estimate COVID-19 death toll in India at over one million

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Millions of Indians continue to suffer as COVID-19 takes thousands of lives and new infections are recorded every day. On May 9, the country passed another grim milestone of almost 22.3 million coronavirus cases, after reporting 403,738 new cases in the previous 24 hours. The official death toll climbed by 4,092 to 242,362.

India, which has experienced 10 million new cases in the last four months, now accounts for 20.24 percent of all active cases and 7.12 percent of all deaths globally.

The figures find concrete expression in the grim news reports of frantic scenes at hospitals, overcrowded crematoriums and round-the-clock pyres burning in city after city across the country, including in the national capital, Delhi.

A May 8 editorial in the *Lancet* medical journal, citing statistics from the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, estimates that India will see a staggering one million COVID-19 deaths by August 1.

However, according to Dr. Murad Banaji, a Senior Lecturer in Mathematics at Middlesex University, that catastrophic figure has already been reached.

Banaji told Karan Thapar, a journalist with the *Wire*, on May 8, that “80 percent of deaths” in India “have been missed... [and] for every five deaths which have occurred, only one has been counted.” In other words, he said, “over one million people have already died” from the coronavirus.

Commenting on predictions that the daily death toll could reach 6,800 over the next two weeks, Banaji said the daily death numbers could be even higher because “infections are many times higher than daily cases... but most infections don’t get detected (because of low tests numbers).”

Thapar pointed out that although the Indian government claims that 86 percent of all deaths have

been registered, “only 22 percent have actual doctor’s medical certificates.” He referred to the situation in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, where COVID-19 medical death certificates are just 5 percent and 2.4 percent respectively.

Many of those who fall ill and die from COVID-19 are not recorded as coronavirus victims, Banaji said, because they had no prior access to doctors or were not tested.

On May 6, the *Washington Post* cited examples gross under-counting of coronavirus deaths. In Bhopal, a large city in central India, the official COVID-19 death figure did not exceed 10 for a single day between April 11 and April 24. However, records at the city’s Bhadhada crematorium, the newspaper reported, bore “little resemblance to the official count.”

Analysing Union Health Ministry data, the *Times of India* noted on May 9 that over 40 percent of India’s 741 districts, or 301 of them—mainly in rural areas—recorded a 20 percent or higher test positivity rate between May 1 and May 7. About 15 percent of 741 districts reported a 50 percent, or higher, test positivity rate for the same period.

These catastrophic figures are the direct responsibility of the Modi government and the Indian ruling elite who criminally ignored expert medical advice and imposed its deadly policy of so-called herd immunity, placing the profit interests of big business over human lives.

Prime Minister Modi’s claim in early April that his government is successfully winning the battle against COVID-19 was bogus and has led to a national disaster of catastrophic proportions.

Amid these worsening conditions, the Indian government still refuses to impose a national lockdown or to allocate the necessary financial resources to expand and upgrade the under-funded and

overwhelmed public healthcare system.

Modi continues to falsely insist that his government's vaccination program will contain the pandemic. Last December, the government said it would vaccinate 300 million of its most vulnerable citizens, including healthcare and frontline workers, by July 2021.

The *Indian Express* reported yesterday that, "less than three months from the July deadline, India has so far administered around 15.5 crore [155 million] vaccines or 25 percent of the target." To be fully vaccinated requires two shots, meaning 600 million doses have to be administered to reach the target.

The newspaper also noted that daily vaccinations have been falling because of vaccine shortages—from 3.5 million shots each day in the first week of April; 2.1 million shots in the last week of April; and 1.6 million in May.

According to figures cited by the *New York Times* only 9.7 percent of the population has received one dose of the vaccine and just 2.4 percent two doses.

While masses of people are attempting to deal with the horrific situation, Indian billionaires have further enriched themselves, nearly doubling their total wealth in the past 12 months to \$US596 billion.

In the midst of the tsunami of coronavirus infections, Indian workers and the rural poor are being hit by unemployment, wage cuts and inflation.

The Modi government's short-term national lockdown in April last year, called with less than four hours' notice and no social support, saw mass sackings and plunged millions further into poverty.

India's unemployment rate rose to nearly 8 percent in April, the highest in four months, up from 6.5 percent, with more than seven million jobs lost in April alone.

According to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), the number of employees fell from 398.1 million in March to 390.8 million in April, the third straight monthly decline. In January, the number of people employed in India was 400.70 million.

Workers engaged in the so-called informal sector have been severely affected by the economic downturn. A national survey of 16,900 informal workers in 400 districts in 23 states by the Action Aid Association between August and September last year—the so-called unlock phase—highlights the devastating impact.

"In the absence of adequate State support and secure livelihoods people were becoming extremely reliant on

debt, turning to moneylenders once they have exhausted their network of family and friends," the report states. "They were also being pushed into taking up more and more precarious forms of livelihoods, and there have been several reports indicating that incidences of child labour are rapidly increasing."

The survey found that nearly half of its respondents were unemployed and one in four had zero wages. "Around 42 percent of those who said they were rendered unemployed by the lockdown during the first round of the survey in May last year, remained unemployed nearly four months later in September. The recovery in unemployment has been much slower than expected, especially in urban areas, while the wages have plummeted both in the formal and informal sector."

Wages were also extremely low during the "unlock phase." Almost half of the respondents were earning less than 5,000 rupees (\$US68) per month, while only 8 percent were earning more than 10,000 rupees per month.

The Modi government's reaction to the escalating economic crisis is no different to its murderous "herd-immunity" response to the coronavirus pandemic—i.e., to impose the burden on the working class and step up its free-market, job destruction policies.



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