

Modi promises “free” vaccines for all adults in bid to dampen mass anger over criminal mishandling of pandemic

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Facing mounting popular anger over his government’s criminal mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced last Monday that everyone over the age of 18 will be entitled to free COVID-19 vaccines starting June 21.

In an address to the nation, Modi sought to absolve his far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government of any responsibility for India’s tens of millions of officially recorded infections and hundreds of thousands of deaths—figures which everyone knows are a gross undercount of the true extent of India’s loss of life. He described the pandemic as “the biggest calamity” in 100 years, “not seen nor experienced in the modern world.” This deliberately ignores the fact that leading scientists repeatedly warned for over a decade prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 about the threat of a pandemic, and that once COVID-19 emerged, Modi and his government prioritized keeping the economy open and protecting investor wealth and profits over saving lives.

As of yesterday, 363,079 people in India had officially succumbed to COVID-19, bringing the increase in deaths in the ten weeks since April 1 to more than 200,000. India, which is now the global epicenter of COVID-19, has officially recorded over 29.2 million infections since the pandemic began and currently has 1.12 million active cases.

Daily infections have declined substantially since the peak of the second wave in early May, when there were more than 400,000 new infections per day. However, around 100,000 people are continuing to test positive every day. In a clear example of the undercounting of deaths and infections, India recorded 6,148 daily deaths on Thursday, the highest ever figure globally, after the eastern state of Bihar added 3,951 previously uncounted fatalities to its death toll.

In his June 7 address, Modi said that the central government will buy 75 percent of all vaccines, leaving 25 percent to be purchased and distributed by private sector hospitals. Under the current arrangement that began on May 1, the central government bought 50 percent of vaccines, which were reserved for people aged 45 and over, leaving the states and private hospitals to purchase 25 percent each. The practical effect of this arrangement was that the majority of people aged between 18 and 44 had to pay for their vaccines, which are prohibitively expensive for hundreds of millions of India’s impoverished masses. The vaccine crisis was compounded by a supply shortage that forced several states to suspend their inoculation programmes and compete with each other in trying to procure vaccines.

Modi’s announcement of free vaccines has nothing to do with any concern on the part of the ruling elite for the hundreds of millions of

workers and rural poor who cannot afford to pay for the life-saving drug. On the contrary, in line with the Modi government’s bitter hostility to public health measures that restrict the ability of corporations to turn a profit, he will use the announcement as ammunition against those calling for lockdown measures to bring the virus under control. The claim of imminent “free” vaccinations will also be used by opposition-led governments in states like Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu as a pretext to lift their limited lockdown measures.

Most industries, including export-oriented sectors, have been authorized to force workers to toil throughout India’s devastating second wave, risking their lives and those of their loved ones. This has already led to the deaths of scores of workers, including among those employed by Ford, Renault-Nissan, Maruti Suzuki and other transnational corporations.

The Indian ruling class is now demanding that even the limited restrictions that remain be abolished to accelerate the accumulation of corporate profits. Experts warn that a relaxation of public health restrictions could lead to a third wave, especially under conditions in which the virus is running rampant through rural areas where there is virtually no health care infrastructure to treat patients or track the extent of COVID-19’s spread.

Last week, Indian officials released information from a study carried out by two government bodies—INSACOG, the consortium of labs undertaking genome sequencing in India, and the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC)—that confirmed the Delta variant has been the major factor driving India’s catastrophic second wave. Officials noted the Delta variant is present across India but has been especially prevalent in many of the states hardest hit by the second wave, including Delhi, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Odisha, and Telangana. While serious scientists have known this for some time, the Indian government downplayed the importance of the Delta variant for months. Although it was first identified in India last year, the BJP government refused to devote resources to either tracking its spread or determining its virulence. Even when government advisers issued dire warnings in February and March as infections began to rise, Modi rejected imposing a lockdown and instead permitted the holding of large religious festivals and other mass gatherings.

The study also noted that the Delta variant is 50 percent more transmissible than the Alpha variant, which was first detected in the UK. “The most alarming aspect of the current epidemic in India is the rapidity with which the virus is spreading, including to children,” Chetan Mundada, a pediatrician with the Yashoda group of hospitals in Hyderabad, told *ThePrint* this week. Abdul Ghafur, an infectious

disease physician at the Apollo Hospital in Chennai, southern India's largest city, told the same news website that he was "seeing entire families with COVID symptoms, ... reflecting an increase in household transmission caused by the Delta variant."

In his June 7 speech, Modi also announced the extension of the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojna program, which has been providing famine-style food rations to 800 million poor people. Bloomberg reported on June 8 that India will need to spend an additional 800 billion rupees (\$US11 billion) to provide free vaccines and food for the hundreds of millions of people devastated by the COVID-19 pandemic until November. However, when Bloomberg contacted a Department of Finance spokesperson to ask about the additional funds for vaccines and food rations to the poor, he "declined to comment"—a clear indication that the government has no roadmap to implement what Modi announced in his speech to the nation.

The reality is that the government's vaccine plan is tailored to ensure access to vaccines for privileged sections of the middle class, while workers and the poor will be left waiting for months and possibly far longer to get inoculated.

It is significant in this regard that the government retained the 25 percent quota for vaccination delivery by private hospitals, which will serve better-off layers of the population at a much faster pace than India's ramshackle public health system will manage to get vaccines into the arms of the poor and oppressed. The retention of the private hospitals as key pillars of India's vaccination program will also allow them and the pharmaceutical giants to make vast amounts of money. The central government has fixed prices for the three approved vaccines, Covishield, Sputnik V and Covaxin, at 780 rupees (\$10), 1,145 rupees (\$16), and 1,410 rupees (\$19), respectively. In addition to this fixed price, people getting vaccinated at a private clinic will have to pay an additional 150 rupees as a "service charge" for each vaccine dose.

According to the Bloomberg Vaccination Tracker, India, with a population of 1.37 billion, has administered 232 million doses so far. Only 3.4 percent of the population has been fully vaccinated. At the current pace, it will take another 22 months to cover 75 percent of the population, Bloomberg noted.

Writing on NewsClick on June 8, Tejal Kanitkar, an associate professor at the National Institute of Advanced Studies in Bengaluru, showed how the government has fallen far short of meeting even its own targets almost 4 months into its vaccination programme. According to Kanitkar, less than half (43 percent) of those above the age of 60 have been partially vaccinated. When it comes to the 45-60 age group, "only 25 percent have got at least one dose," he wrote. Among the 18-44 age group, which the government declared eligible for vaccines as of May 1, only 4 percent has been partially vaccinated.

Kanitkar also pointed to the unrealistic character of the government's repeated claims that India will be able to vaccinate its entire adult population by the end of this year. "(T)o do this, the monthly vaccination rate must increase four fold," he wrote. Some of the biggest states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Tamil Nadu must increase their vaccination rates even more, by seven, six, and five times, respectively. Although the government has reversed gears and is now allowing some public sector units to produce the Covaxin vaccine, a major surge in vaccine production and supply will not be realized in the "near future, i.e., will take at least 6-8 months more," Kanitkar explained. "There is still no clarity on the existing capacity of vaccine production and the actual supply of doses per month," he

added.

This account of the vaccination drive underscores that Modi's free vaccination pledge was little more than a public relations stunt that will do little to change the fact that hundreds of millions of Indians will continue to be exposed to the deadly pandemic for many months to come.

The opposition parties, including the Congress Party and the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, praised Modi for his announcement. The CPM's only major criticism was to lament the 25 percent vaccine quota for private hospitals. The Congress Party tweeted in support of Modi's announcement: "Better late than never, but never late is better Modiji." Senior CPM leader and Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan praised Modi saying it "is the most appropriate response at this hour," while Trinamool Congress leader and West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, a vocal critic of Modi, said he has finally "listened to us," but the delayed decision has "cost many lives."

The rallying of the opposition parties behind Modi should come as no surprise. As representatives of the Indian capitalist class, they are all collectively responsible for the unspeakable disaster created by the COVID-19 pandemic in India. They have all supported Modi's policy of "herd immunity," which allowed the virus to spread across the country by keeping major industries and other sectors of the economy open, and where they hold office, they have joined the BJP central government in refusing to provide workers and their families with social support so they could avoid infection by sheltering at home.

While the opposition parties are desperately trying to take credit for Modi's announcement by hailing it as their victory, it in reality reflects concern within the ruling elite over growing militancy in the Indian working class.

The indifference shown by Modi and the entire Indian ruling elite towards the lives of the population has led to the eruption of militant struggles among health care workers, doctors, auto workers and other oppressed sections of the population. Common demands raised by these struggles have included proper Personal Protective Equipment and access to COVID-19 vaccines. Last month, several major auto plants in southern India, including those owned by Hyundai Motors and Renault-Nissan, were forced to temporarily shut down operations after workers mounted protests and strikes to press for COVID-19 safety measures.



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