

# Ignoring warnings of a third COVID-19 wave, Indian government eases restrictions

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Just weeks after the devastating second wave of COVID-19 peaked, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government and state governments are easing the already limited restrictions, paving the way for another disaster. These moves are a continuation of the Indian ruling elite's decision, from the outset of the pandemic, to place big business profits above human lives.

India's total COVID-19 cases are now over 30 million with the death toll nearing 400,000. Despite a relative decline, the number of daily cases and deaths is still very high at around 50,000 and just over 1,000 respectively—down from 400,000 and 4,000 at the height of the second wave. Coronavirus infections, however, are expected to surge again with the spread of new Delta and Delta Plus variants. The ministry of health figures are widely regarded as gross underestimates.

The lowering of daily cases and deaths is largely the result of the limited restrictions imposed by the various state governments. The central government and other state governments, however, are rapidly moving to ease restrictions and fully reopen the economy despite warnings from experts that the situation could rapidly worsen.

Dr. A Fathahudeen, who, according to BBC, “has treated thousands of Covid patients,” told the news agency that another wave was “inevitable.” It was possible, he said, that “we can delay and contain it with appropriate measures like sequencing—to keep an eye on mutations—and strictly enforcing safety protocols.... If we don't do all this, then the third wave could sneak up on us faster than we can imagine.”

Confirming this warning, Maharashtra state reported last week that there had been 10,000 daily infections for four consecutive days, with the state accounting for one

fifth of India's COVID-19 cases. The state capital, Mumbai, is India's financial centre.

The worsening situation led Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray to declare that “there should be no hurry in relaxing the coronavirus-induced restrictions.” However, Thackeray's government, like many other state administrations, has already allowed businesses to reopen.

*India Today* reported that a health official had told a meeting with Thackeray last week that “The Delta Plus variant could stoke a third wave in Maharashtra. It could spread at double the rate.”

Local and international media have published videos and photos revealing massive crowds at railway stations, markets and shopping malls failing to observe social distancing, a situation encouraged by the lifting of limited lockdown measures.

This is occurring as the Delta variant of COVID-19, first detected in India, and which created the devastating second wave in the world's second most populous nation, is surging around the world. The Delta variant is reported to be 60 percent more transmissible than the previously dominant variant and shown to be partially resistant to some vaccines.

A June 22 statement by the Indian ministry of health declared that another coronavirus variant—locally named as “Delta Plus,” which is a mutation of the Delta or B1617 variant—was now a “variant of concern.”

The ministry of health said that nearly two dozen cases had been detected in three Indian states, including the worst-impacted Maharashtra. It warned that its characteristics included, “increased transmissibility, stronger binding to receptors of lung cells and potential reduction in monoclonal antibody response.”

According to medical experts, the variant is resistant

to the recently authorised monoclonal antibody cocktail treatment (a potent intravenous infusion of antibodies to neutralise the virus) for COVID-19. On June 24, local media reported that Madhya Pradesh state recorded the first death from the Delta Plus variant.

Although the first Delta variant emerged in India last October, the Modi government failed to invest the necessary resources to investigate and attempt to deal with it.

This criminal negligence, along with its ongoing refusal to enact a national lockdown and other basic measures like properly-funded mass testing, contract tracing and other urgently needed resources to upgrade the rundown public healthcare, led to the second wave of the pandemic, and the latest, even more dangerous variant.

The Modi government is attempting to justify its refusal to establish a national lockdown by claiming that the only way to control the pandemic is through a national vaccination program. But the vaccination program is chaotic and moving at a snail's pace, leaving the overwhelming majority of the country's more than 1.3 billion people vulnerable.

According to a June 22 Reuters report, India had fully vaccinated only 5.5 percent of the 950 million people eligible with about 18 percent having received just one dose.

“Since May vaccinations have averaged fewer than 3 million doses a day, far less than the 10 million health officials say are crucial to protect the millions vulnerable to new surges. Despite India being the world's largest vaccine producer, the maximum daily achievable vaccine supply rate is 4 to 5 million doses,” Chandrakant Lahariya, an expert in public policy and health systems, told Reuters.

The news agency report cited other experts who pointed out that vaccinations in rural areas, where two-thirds of India's population live, have “faltered.” “Maintaining the pace will prove challenging when it comes to injecting younger people in such areas,” Delhi-based epidemiologist Rajab Dasgupta said.

Even in the national capital New Delhi, which was devastated by the second wave, “more than 8 million residents had yet to receive a first dose, and inoculating all adults there would take more than a year at the current pace,” health authorities told Reuters.

Indian news reports also point to huge disparities

across districts in the country's COVID-19 vaccination coverage. The *Scroll.in* web portal revealed on June 7 that areas such as the western Assam district, bordering Bangladesh, had only administered 3.2 doses per 100 people. Mahe districts, in the union state of Puducherry in southern India, had the best coverage with 63 doses per 100 people.

Of the 10 districts with the lowest vaccination coverage, six (ranging between 4.86 doses per 100 people and 5.37 doses per 100 people) were in Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state with over 200 million population.

*Scroll.in* reported that, Chennai, capital of Tamil Nadu, had the highest vaccine coverage of India's largest cities, with over 40 doses per 100 people. Mumbai had 34.14 doses per 100 people, Bengaluru Urban was marginally lower at 32.30 doses and the national capital, New Delhi, had 23 doses per 100 people.

Despite Chennai being the “best performer among all of India's bigger metros, coverage in 34 of Tamil Nadu's 37 districts is less than the national average, *Scroll* said. Northeastern India, as a whole, is reported to have large disparities with coverage in 72 of the region's 115 districts less than the national average.

An article published on June 24 by the *Print* cited warnings by Priyanka Kishore, head of India and South East Asia Economics at Oxford Economics. “States are easing lockdowns based on lower test positivity rates rather than vaccination progress. This risky strategy increases the chances of renewed outbreaks that would further delay the recovery.”



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