

Modi government angrily dismisses study showing COVID-19 has killed millions in India

Wasantha Rupasinghe
23 July 2021

India's far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government has angrily dismissed a scientific study that demonstrates the country's real death toll from COVID-19 is up to 10 times higher than the current official count of 419,000 fatalities.

In a statement issued Thursday, the Narendra Modi-led government angrily dismissed the US-based Center for Global Development study as "not based on facts" and "totally fallacious."

In fact, in substantiating that India's death toll is exponentially higher than the official figure, the study, released on July 20, only confirms the findings of multiple previous investigations carried out by epidemiologists, journalists and other researchers.

Based on a comprehensive review of multiple data sets, the study estimates that there were between 1.5 and 3.4 million "excess deaths" during the "first wave" of the pandemic between April 2020 and March 2021. During the second even more devastating wave from April to June—which was driven by the Delta variant, first identified in India last October—COVID-19 killed an estimated 1.4 to 2.4 million. In total, this means that in just 15 months, between 3.4 million and 4.7 million Indians have died from the virus.

"True deaths," the study concludes, "are likely to be in the several millions not hundreds of thousands, making this arguably India's worst human tragedy since partition and independence."

COVID-19 is a natural pathogen, but the catastrophic loss of life in India is the product of state policy and constitutes a veritable crime against humanity. At the behest of India's capitalist elite, the national and state governments, including those led by the ostensible opposition parties, have systematically placed protecting investor wealth and corporate profit ahead of saving human lives. They have refused to mobilize the resources needed to combat the virus and have kept nonessential businesses operating throughout virtually all of the past 15 months.

The only "lockdown" ever imposed by Modi was implemented haphazardly in late March 2020, with less than four hours' notice, no plans for systematic mass testing and contact tracing, and no provision for the tens of millions of Indians left destitute overnight. Within a month the BJP government started dramatically scaling back restrictions on the operation of nonessential production facilities and by early June had declared India to be in "unlockdown," even though COVID-19 cases were

soaring and the daily rate of infections would be on a continuous sharp upward incline through mid-September.

Similarly, the authorities blithely ignored the emergence of the second wave, starting in mid-February of this year. Then in April, with India's health care system collapsing due to an unprecedented tsunami of infections and deaths, Modi took to the airwaves to declare that the aim of his government was to "save India from lockdown," not the virus.

The pandemic has laid bare the reality of India's capitalist "rise," so frequently celebrated in the Western media. While millions of Indians have died and tens of millions have been sickened by COVID-19 and a further 230 million people have been pushed into extreme poverty and are struggling to survive on less than 375 rupees (US \$5) per day, India's billionaires saw their combined wealth nearly double in 2020 to \$597 billion.

If the Modi government has bitterly denounced the Center for Global Development study and the corporate media has given it scant coverage, it is because India's craven elite fears a coming reckoning. It is keenly aware that there is palpable popular outrage over the authorities' criminal mishandling of the pandemic. Autoworkers, transport workers, public sector workers, farmers and many others have waged strikes and protests in recent months to oppose the prioritization of corporate profits over the protection of human lives and to resist the government's pro-big business austerity and deregulation agenda.

The Modi government and its defenders have resorted to clumsy attempts to discredit the Center for Global Development study, including telling outright lies.

"Given the robust and statute-based death registration system in India, missing out on the deaths is unlikely," the government statement on the study asserted. Everyone knows this is nonsense. At the peak of the second wave, crematoriums across the country were processing corpses at a rate many multiples greater than the official death toll. Hundreds of bodies were found buried in makeshift graves on the banks of the Ganges and others floating in it.

Moreover, India has been notorious for years for underreporting fatalities. Even in "normal" times prior to the pandemic, only 22 percent of all deaths were registered. In some states, this rate fell below 10 percent. Citing findings from a report on medical certification of the cause of death (MCCD) in 2019, the *Times of*

India noted that over the preceding 27 years, “progress in the implementation of medical certification of deaths has been slow, rising from 12.7 percent to 22 percent.”

According to data from the Civil Registration System from January to May this year, Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh reported excess deaths 42 times and 34 times higher respectively compared to the same period last year. “In comparison, Tamil Nadu reported 6.2 times more deaths from April last year to May 2021 and Karnataka reported five times the reported deaths in 2021,” wrote the *Hindu*. The article continued, “The excess deaths in the four large States have exceeded 0.5 million in the first five months of 2021 as against around 46,000 reported COVID-19 deaths.”

Even if all of these deaths are not directly linked to COVID-19, they can legitimately be described as pandemic-related fatalities. As Chinmay Tumbbe, assistant professor at the Indian Institute of Management (IIM) in Ahmedabad and author of the book *The Age of Pandemics*, explained, “(T)hey are pandemic-related (deaths), in the sense that we would not be seeing them if the pandemic was not around.” Calculating the underreporting factor for these four states (which comprise 21 percent of India’s population) is above 10, the professor estimated that the excess deaths for India as a whole was 1.5 million during the first five months of this year.

After a public outcry over the undercounting of deaths, several states were forced to update some COVID-19 death statistics last month. In one case, Bihar raised its death count by about 4,000 on a single day in early June after a court ordered an audit.

In one of its most grotesque lies, the Modi government sought this week to deny that oxygen shortages at India’s health care facilities led to COVID-19 fatalities during the pandemic’s second wave. In answer to a question about oxygen-related deaths, junior Health Minister Dr. Bharati Pravin Pawar told parliament, “No deaths due to lack of oxygen has been specifically reported by states.” In reality, the world watched in horror during April and May as reports emerged almost daily of patients, sometimes by the dozens, suffocating to death because oxygen supplies had run out, including at major hospitals in the country’s two largest cities, Delhi and Mumbai.

The corporate-controlled media has sprung to the Modi government’s aid by largely blacking out the Center for Global Development study. The *Times of India*, for its part, published an editorial that bemoaned the “politicization” of the debate over COVID-19 fatalities and made a matter-of-fact appeal for further study of the issue. The *Times* has been one of the leading voices railing against lockdowns and any restrictions on the operations of big business. Time and again, it has cynically invoked the desperate plight of the hundreds of millions of workers and toilers left to fend for themselves by the Indian ruling elite and its governments, to insist the economy remain “open.”

Although the Center for Global Development study is far from the first to provide evidence that India’s COVID-19 death toll runs into the millions. It is particularly significant and damning for two reasons.

First, because of its comprehensiveness. Second, because one of its three co-authors, Arvind Subramanian, was the Modi government’s Chief Economic Advisor from 2014-2018 and an

unabashed proponent of its pro-investor policies.

The study used three different approaches to compile information on increased mortality during the pandemic. Firstly, it compared official deaths with information collected by journalists and other researchers of fatalities from crematoriums and burial grounds. Secondly, the authors compared numerous seroprevalence studies in India with world data on infection fatality rates. Thirdly, researchers reviewed countrywide interviews done by the Center for the Monitoring of the Indian Economy, which included information on mortality. Significantly, all three approaches found evidence supporting the same essential conclusion: millions of uncounted COVID-19 deaths.

India’s official daily count of new COVID-19 cases has decreased to around 40,000 from more than 400,000 in early May. But experts point out that infection rates have plateaued at this level for several weeks. In an interview with *The Wire*, Professor Ashish Jha, dean of the Brown University School of Public Health, explained this is because India is “reopening again” and “things are unlocking.” This, he added, will “put pressure on spread,” laying the ground work for a “third wave.” Jha also pointed to the 10 percent positivity rate for COVID-19 testing in some districts as a sign that infections will further increase.

According to the latest countrywide sero survey data released on July 22, two-thirds of India’s population have antibodies against the coronavirus. Some government apologists are suggesting this indicates India is well on the way to “herd immunity.” This is a travesty, entirely in keeping with the government’s homicidal policies. Even if one accepts the survey as accurate and that the antibodies will prove effective in warding off the Delta and other more virulent and lethal variants—which are entirely unwarranted assumptions—this would mean more than 400 million of India’s 1.37 billion people, a population larger than that of the United States, remains at risk of being infected and dying from COVID-19.

To date, less than 7 percent of all Indians are fully inoculated against COVID-19.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact