

Experts warn India rapidly heading to COVID-19 “third wave”

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As India’s far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government and its counterparts at the state level, whether led by the BJP or the opposition, increasingly abandon even limited COVID-19 restrictions, India continues to record 30,000 to 40,000 new infections and 350-500 deaths, on average, each day. With the virus continuing to circulate across the country at such a high rate, scientific experts warn that a deadly third wave of the pandemic, driven by the far more contagious and lethal Delta variant, could soon strike.

India’s extremely low COVID-19 testing rate will make it difficult to assess the rapidity and extent of the virus’s spread when a third wave hits. The country’s botched vaccine rollout has left the vast majority of India’s 1.39 billion people without any protection from serious illness and death. In addition, the country’s largely rudimentary and depleted health care system, particularly in rural areas where two-thirds of the population live, is in no position to treat another surge of COVID-19 patients comparable to that in April and May. Even then, faced with a tsunami of cases, hospitals in India’s largest urban centres, Delhi and Mumbai, ran out of beds, oxygen, and crucial drugs, resulting in mass death.

On Monday, an expert panel convened under the auspices of the Modi government’s Ministry of Home Affairs warned that the third wave could be as large as the second. If the pace of vaccinations remains slow, the panel predicted that there would be up to 5 lakh (500,000) new cases daily at the expected peak of the third wave in late September or October. Even less dramatic projections based on better vaccine coverage estimated that between 200,000 and 320,000 new infections will be recorded each day.

Pointing to the continuing worldwide spread of COVID-19 fueled by the Delta and other new variants, Dr. Pooja Khosla of Delhi’s Sir Ganga Ram Hospital recently warned, “Infections can increase exponentially at any time.” Speaking to the *Hindustan Times* she added, “I think one should not assume anything and make all efforts to prevent a second wave-like crisis, which was a nightmare. ... Reopening everything is not appropriate.”

In a Reuters snap survey completed in June, 40 health care specialists, doctors, scientists, virologists and epidemiologists from around the world predicted that a third wave of

coronavirus infections is likely to hit India by October. The experts, Reuters reported, “cautioned against an early removal of restrictions, as some states have done.”

These warnings have been further underscored by the results of the fourth and latest serosurvey from the Indian Center of Medical Research (ICMR). Conducted between June 14 and July 6, and based on samples drawn from 29,000 people across 70 districts in 21 states, it concluded that 67.6 percent of the Indian population has developed antibodies to SARS-CoV-2. If the findings are accurate, this would mean that Indian health authorities have “missed” the overwhelming majority of COVID-19 cases—including registering less than 2 percent of all infections in densely populated states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. This speaks to the deplorable state of India’s health care system and the catastrophic failure of the state’s response to the pandemic. It also lends still further credibility to the growing number of scientific studies that place the true number of deaths from the pandemic in India in the millions.

At the same time, the serosurvey highlights the extremely grave threat a third wave poses to the population, the majority of whom either live in teeming slums or in rural areas without ready access to proper medical care. Per the serosurvey’s findings, 450 million Indians—a population larger than that of the United States—lack any immunity to COVID-19, a horrifying prospect in light of the systematic dismantling of all public health measures to contain and suppress the virus.

India’s efforts to sequence genomes to track for emerging variants have also been drastically curtailed. This despite the government having designated a Delta-plus variant as a “Variant of Concern” on June 22. Preliminary research suggests the Delta-plus strain of SARS-CoV-2 is even more contagious and vaccine-resistant than the Delta variant, which having ravaged India is now fueling a global resurgence of the pandemic.

Citing data from the National SARS-CoV-2 Genomic Consortium (INSACOG), a network of the 28 labs in India that are equipped to do genome sequencing of the coronavirus, the *Hindu* reported that in July just 184 genome samples were sequenced. This marked a steep decline from June, when 4,381 were sequenced. In April and May, when the devastating second wave was at its peak, 15,546 and 13,142 samples were

sequenced respectively. A scientist from one of the INSACOG labs complained that many states were not sending enough samples and the “funds available to labs for carrying out sequences” have been “delayed.”

The refusal of the central and state governments to fund the necessary surveillance mechanisms to monitor the spread of the virus and the potential emergence of new variants is bound up with the Indian ruling elite’s criminal policy of prioritizing corporate profits over saving human lives—a policy that has already resulted in mass death. The Delta variant was first detected in India in October, but for want of resources its progress and potency were not scientifically scrutinized. Then, last February and March as new infections surged, the Narendra Modi-led BJP government pressed forward with India’s “reopening.” On April 20 as daily new COVID-19 infections were reaching 300,000 per day, Modi infamously told the Indian people in a nationwide televised address that it was necessary to “save India from lockdowns,” not COVID-19.

A comprehensive study issued by the US-based Center for Global Development last month substantiated previous reports that estimated the true death toll from India’s April-June 2021 second pandemic wave as five to 10 times higher than the government’s official claim of some 235,000 COVID-19 fatalities. Based on analysis of three separate data sets, the Center for Global Development study concluded that there were between 1.5 and 3.4 million COVID-19-related deaths in those three months, and that India’s total excess fatalities during the pandemic number between 3.4 and 4.9 million.

The Modi government, with the assistance of the corporate media and the opposition parties, has sought to prevent any serious examination of the causes and catastrophic impact of India’s second wave. Instead it has prioritized the rapid dismantling of all remaining anti-COVID measures, based on the lie that the worst is over; insisted that the population must, in any event, learn to live with the virus; and pushed forward with a raft of new pro-investor measures to “revive” the economy.

At least 11 of India’s 28 states have opened schools, and many other states have announced school reopening dates. As in every other country, the rush to reopen schools is not motivated by any concern about the education and well-being of children but rather aimed at freeing up parents for the labour market so they can continue producing profits for big business.

With all those under age 18 currently ineligible for vaccination, a third wave threatens to especially impact children. Dr. Devi Shetty, a cardiologist at Narayana Health and an adviser to the Karnataka state government on pandemic response planning, told Reuters, “If children get infected in large numbers and we are not prepared, there is nothing you can do at the last minute.” She added, “It will be a whole different problem (from the previous two waves) as the country has very, very few pediatric intensive care unit beds, and that is going to be a disaster.”

Just days after reopening schools, a number of students were infected with COVID-19, according to media reports.

The Modi government and its state counterparts are making no serious effort to strengthen the dilapidated health care system as it faces a potential mass influx of patients due to the ruling class’s homicidal policies. India is among the countries with the lowest public health care expenditure as a percentage of GDP in the world, with India’s governments for decades spending the equivalent of 1.5 percent of GDP or less on health care per annum.

The opposition-led state governments are pursuing essentially the same ruinous pandemic policy as Modi and his Hindu supremacist BJP. This includes the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led government in Kerala. For weeks, Kerala has recorded 15,000 to 20,000 new cases per day, as a direct consequence of the government’s decision to reopen the economy, including all export industries, and to allow mass gatherings during recent Muslim and Hindu religious festivals. On Tuesday, Kerala reported 24,296 new cases and a test positivity rate of more than 18 percent. Earlier this month, a six-member team appointed by the central government to study the COVID-19 situation in the state criticized Kerala’s government for limiting testing to those who have symptoms and using the less reliable antigen test rather than RT-PCR tests.

On top of the lifting of almost all COVID-19 restrictions and the failure to test adequately and monitor the spread of the disease, India’s shambolic vaccine campaign threatens to make the looming third wave even worse. According to Our World in Data, as of August 23, just 9.4 percent of Indians had been fully inoculated against COVID-19, with a further 23.4 percent having received one vaccine shot. In other words, well over 60 percent of the population has yet to receive a single dose as the third wave gathers pace. These figures underscore that the Indian government will not come close to fulfilling its goal of vaccinating the country’s adult population of over 900 million people by December. To reach this target, India would need to vaccinate around 8.8 million people per day on average. Currently, around 4 million people are being vaccinated daily.



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