

Modi makes spectacle of India's 1 billionth COVID vaccine shot to cover up his government's culpability for mass death

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Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi delivered an address to the nation on October 22 to mark the country's 1 billionth COVID-19 vaccination shot.

By making a spectacle of this "historic" achievement, Modi sought to cover up and divert attention from his government's responsibility for the tsunami of COVID-19 infections and deaths that have ravaged the country. He also seized on the occasion to promote the lie that the worst of the pandemic is over, thereby bolstering the ruling class's campaign to "reopen" India.

Modi began his speech by boasting that the administration of 1 billion vaccine doses "means that, on one hand, our country performed (its) duty, and, on the other hand, it got great success." The reality is that the vast majority of India's 1.39 billion people are either totally unvaccinated or have received just one dose, providing them only partial protection against COVID-19. According to Our World in Data, as of October 23, India had fully vaccinated just 21.5 percent of its population and 29.75 percent partially.

In both his speech and an op-ed article published in the *Hindu* the same day, Modi blithely ignored the victims of his government's criminal policy of prioritizing corporate profit over human lives. He neither mentioned the 500 people who had lost their lives to COVID-19 in the previous 24 hours nor the 450,000 Indians who have died, according to the government's notorious undercount, since the pandemic began.

The true number of Indian deaths attributable to COVID-19 dwarfs that of any other country. Scientific studies place it at more than 4 million and most likely over 5 million.

Modi also used his address and *Hindu* column for some nationalist tub-thumping, in the hope that some of the glory would fall on him and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government. He declared that the administration of 1 billion vaccine doses was an unequalled achievement. "This is a new chapter in the history of the country, a country that knows how to achieve huge targets." In his *Hindu* opinion piece, the prime minister boasted about "Made in India" vaccines, saying India is among the few countries in the world "truly *Aatmanirbhar* (self-reliant) when it comes to vaccines." "Imagine the situation if India did not have its own vaccine," he wrote. In a subsequent tweet, he claimed that the figure of 1 billion vaccine doses marks "a triumph of Indian science."

In fact, the Covishield vaccine used for about 88 percent of all vaccine shots administered in India was developed by the British-Swedish pharmaceutical concern Astra Zeneca. As for the number of vaccines given to the population, India has achieved less than half of

the 2.2 billion doses administered in neighbouring China, which has successfully pursued an elimination strategy and kept total deaths from the pandemic below 5,000.

The cynicism of Modi's invocation of "Indian science" cannot be allowed to pass without comment. This comes from the leader of a far-right, Hindu supremacist party that promotes astrology and has trumpeted all sorts of unscientific nonsense throughout the pandemic. This includes claims that COVID-19 could be combatted with *thalis* (kitchen items), and Modi's appeals, as the virus began to spread across the country in 2020, for Indians to switch their lights off for nine minutes to "fight the darkness of the coronavirus pandemic."

By rights Modi should be charged—as his Brazilian counterpart, the fascist Jair Bolsonaro, has been—for promoting quackery and presiding over crimes against humanity. However, India's Congress Party and the rest of the opposition parties are so fully on board with the BJP's "herd immunity" policy and so fearful that mass anger over the coronavirus catastrophe will further fuel working-class opposition to grinding poverty, ever deepening social inequality and super-exploitation that they make only the most timid criticism of the BJP government's ruinous response to the pandemic.

Desperate to reverse a plunge in the government's popular support, Modi and his BJP cronies have shamelessly sought to take credit for the vaccine campaign, which has been driven by and dependent on the efforts of millions of poorly paid health care workers, many of whom have been denied proper PPE (personal protective equipment).

A large picture of Modi with a quote from him in English and Hindi is featured on all government-issued vaccination certificates. Earlier this month a man from the southern state of Kerala, Peter M., went to court to demand that the Indian Health Ministry issue him a certificate without Modi's picture. He accused Modi of using the vaccination programme as a "propaganda tool" and noted he had had to personally cover the cost of his vaccination at a private hospital due to long queues for the free vaccines offered by the government.

The right-wing Chief Minister of West Bengal Mamata Banerjee has aptly pointed out that if Modi insists on having his face appear on every vaccine certificate, it should also rightly be on COVID-19 "death certificates too."

Like the governments of North America and Europe, Modi has used India's vaccine campaign, not to bolster efforts to eliminate the virus but to justify accelerating the criminal reopening of the economy to meet the demands of Indian big business. In his October 22 address, Modi declared that "the world now considers India to be much safer on the corona front." He made this self-serving statement to further

his drive to “reopen” India, including resuming in-person schooling, amid the mounting threats of a third wave of the pandemic in the country.

India has not even begun inoculating children aged 2 to 18 years old. Despite this, a number of states and the Delhi National Capital Territory began reopening schools with limited public health restrictions in late August. The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), the top government body for the formation, coordination and promotion of biomedical research, has advised India’s states to reopen schools in a “phased manner (beginning with primary school),” claiming “severe disease and mortality in (COVID-infected) children” is “less.” However, numerous scientific studies and the bitter experience of school reopening campaigns elsewhere have shown schools are important vectors of transmission and that children can and do die from coronavirus.

Behind the BJP’s hype, the reality is that India’s vaccine rollout has been a fiasco. Earlier this year, Modi proclaimed that the country would not only vaccinate its entire adult population by year’s end but also supply vaccine doses to much of the developing world, and this would enhance India’s global influence.

These plans were derailed, however, first by the Biden’s imposition of a ban on the export of raw materials essential for vaccine production, and then by India’s devastating second wave of the pandemic. At its peak in early May, COVID-19 was killing over 4,000 people per day, according to official figures. The overwhelming of the country’s hospitals by the surge of infections led to horrific scenes of desperation as dead bodies piled up in the streets, and crematoriums worked around the clock to keep up.

Unable to produce even a fraction of the vaccines desperately needed by its own people, India stopped vaccine exports last April and only resumed some token shipments this month.

Underscoring the Modi government’s callous class character, it long opposed providing free vaccinations. Throughout much of the deadly second wave, it continued to charge Indians for every vaccine dose. Only in early June, when the surge of infections and deaths was slowly subsiding, did the BJP government agree to provide vaccines free of charge through the public health care system. Even then, it still reserved 25 percent of all vaccine doses for private providers, ensuring that access to the potentially life-saving jab remained much easier for those with the financial resources to pay for it.

India’s ramshackle health care system, the product of decades of underfunding by the entire political establishment, has proven ill-equipped to roll out a successful vaccine program across wide swaths of the country. Many rural areas have adult populations with vaccination rates only a fraction of those in urban centres. According to an article in the Conversation website published on July 30, “By late May, 114 of India’s least developed districts had administered just 23 million doses to its 176 million residents,” while “India’s nine major cities received the same number of doses, despite having half as many people.”

Even in rural areas where vaccinations have been offered, there is a huge gap in the number who have full protection and those who have received just one dose. This is largely due to the fact that rural dwellers often have to travel several hours, at their own cost, to reach the nearest health care facility. Because many states have made the first dose of the vaccine a condition for accessing critical social welfare programs, many poor rural toilers have borne the expense of getting a first shot. But they are reluctant to make a similar expenditure in time and money to get the second.

Professor R. Ramakumar, from the School of Development Studies at the Tata Institute of Social Science, pointed out on Twitter that India will miss its target of vaccinating every adult by the end of the year by about 5-6 months. To reach that target “India should produce 870 million additional doses in two months November and December 2021,” or 15 million doses per day, he observed. “But India,” he continued, “gave only 5.5 million doses in the first 20 days of October 2021.”

Rijo John, a health economist and adjunct professor at Rajagiri College of Social Sciences, has noted that huge swaths of older, more vulnerable Indians remain at high risk of getting COVID-19. Just “80 percent of the 45+ population have had one dose, and only 43 percent of them have had both the doses.”

Under these conditions, the threat of a deadly third pandemic wave hangs menacingly over the country. This danger is made all the greater by the BJP government’s demand for a return to “normalcy,” which is supported by the opposition parties at the state level. Earlier this month, the Modi government reopened India to international tourism, despite the continuing rapid spread of the virus in the US and Europe and the emergence of new variants.

The decrepit health care system, which collapsed earlier this year amid the second wave, is in no condition to handle a third. Any additional funds provided to hospitals and other facilities have remained derisory, with hundreds of millions of Indians effectively having no access to adequate health care. Millions lack even running water to meet basic hygiene needs.

The *Times of India* reported on October 25, “Some hospitals have already started reporting an uptick in the number of cases” after the onset of the ongoing festival season. According to the newspaper, many hospitals which had shut down their COVID-19 wards earlier have reopened them with some seeing 20-25 percent more patients compared to the previous week. The following states recorded double-digit increases in new COVID-19 cases on a weekly basis: Chhattisgarh (60 percent), Assam (42 percent) and West Bengal (41 percent). Meanwhile, the southern Indian state of Kerala, which continues to lead the country in the number of new cases, experienced 61,010 cases in the last week against 59,521 cases the week before.



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