As Omicron begins to spread in India, school reopenings put tens of millions of children at risk of infection

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Reports continue to emerge of the Omicron variant's spread in states scattered across India. At least 30 cases had been identified as of December 7, with government officials acknowledging that some of them have no connection to travel. Given India's notoriously poor record of mass testing, this strongly indicates that community transmission of the potentially more infectious and virulent variant has already begun.

With initial data from South Africa suggesting that children are at greater risk of being infected and sickened by the new variant, the Indian ruling elite's continued drive to reopen schools threatens to produce mass infection, compounding an already dire social crisis facing children and families that has been decades in the making.

There is widespread public apprehension about the Omicron variant in a country that has already experienced two devastating waves of COVID-19 that, according to studies of excess mortality have left at least 4 million and most likely 5 million Indians dead. But India's far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) central government and state governments, whether led by the BJP or the Congress and various other opposition parties, are determined to prioritize profits over lives. Reopening schools is seen as a vital element in forcing Indians to "learn to live with the virus."

The reopening of schools for in-person learning has taken place across the country this fall. In Kerala, the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) government reopened higher educational institutions from October 4 and schools from November 1.

The DMK-led Tamil Nadu government reopened schools for Classes 1 to 8 from November 1. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP)-led Delhi government ordered in-person classes for all grades to recommence November 1. In Madhya Pradesh, the state government resumed physical classes for students of primary and senior classes from September 21. In Karnataka, in-person classes for Classes 1 to 5 began October 25. Schools, colleges and universities in West Bengal were reopened for physical classes on November 16.

Meanwhile, the University Grants Commission (UGC), which is part of the Ministry of Education, released a circular on November 4 claiming that higher educational institutions can restart physical classes with 50 percent attendance in areas outside containment zones. All colleges affiliated with Delhi University partially reopened on September 15.

Although India's current 7-day average of COVID-19 daily cases is around 10,000, representing a decline from the figure reported in early September, i.e., above 40,000, these numbers are highly undercounted, due to a lack of reporting and testing. With the arrival of the Omicron variant, a new COVID-19 surge among the country's large, overwhelmingly unvaccinated population of children and young people threatens to occur.

Numerous infections related to schools have already been reported. More than 400 school students and nearly 50 teachers tested positive for COVID-19 in Himachal Pradesh's Kangra district last month. A 13-year-old girl student from Uttar Pradesh's Hamirpur district died of COVID-19 on October 21. Meanwhile, the northeastern state of Sikkim had to shut all schools and colleges within a week of reopening on September 6 due to the high number of positive tests. During the last week of October, 32 students tested positive for COVID-19 at a residential school in the Kodagu district of Karnataka. At least 30 students and teachers have tested positive for COVID-19 since the reopening of schools in Tamil Nadu.

A study conducted by the World Health Organisation (WHO) found high COVID-19 rates among the 0-19 age group in India. "Using viral genomic sequences from 9,500 COVID-19 patients, the study found an increased number of infections among younger age groups (0-19 years) and women, a lower mean age for infection and symptomatic illness/hospitalisation, higher mortality and more frequent incidences of post-vaccination infections with Delta variant compared to the non-VOC (B.1) variant," the WHO update said.

Doctors have warned that school reopenings will lead to the spread of the virus. "Children can be potential reservoirs of the Sars-CoV-2 and vaccinating them becomes a public health imperative," commented Indian virologist Dr. T Jacob John. "We have underestimated the epidemic among children as they

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are not falling sick so much, but we must think of children as a reservoir of the virus."

India currently has no vaccination program for children and adolescents. Since the late spring, the Modi government has claimed to offer free vaccinations to all adults, but it insists on distributing 25 percent of vaccines through private hospitals who charge fees that represent well over a day's wage per shot for hundreds of millions of workers and toilers.

Only 29.4 percent of India's population is fully vaccinated. This means that broad layers of workers as well as school-aged youth are highly vulnerable to contracting the disease.

Children and adolescents who contract COVID-19 are at risk not only of dying but of developing Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in Children (MIS-C), which attacks multiple organs and creates other possibly permanent illnesses. Already, 4 children have died and over 300 were infected by MIS-C, a post-COVID complication, in Kerala in the last five months, according to the state health ministry. Twenty-nine MIS-C cases were reported in neighbouring Karnataka and 14 in Tamil Nadu in the last six months.

The Union and state governments have cynically seized on the dire social conditions confronting children and their families across India to legitimise their school reopening push. The horrendous levels of poverty and misery that exist in the country's teeming slums and rural areas—the product of the ruling elite's refusal to adequately fund social services and education for decades—left the vast majority of children deprived of any schooling whatsoever during the period of pandemic-related school closures.

The results of a recent survey on School Children's Online and Offline Learning (SCHOOL), carried out in 15 states and Union territories and prepared by a coordination team that included Indian economists Jean Drèze and Reetika Khera, points to a massive educational crisis. Titled "LOCKED OUT: Emergency Report on School Education," it found that a lack of access to the proper tools required for online learning was one of the main impediments to children's participation in any kind of education during the period of school closures. The report found that only 51 percent of rural households surveyed had even one smartphone—and only 8 percent of children in rural areas had attended regular online classes.

According to a report released by the United Nations Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF), merely 8.5 percent of students in India have access to the internet. The overall availability of computing devices (desktops or laptops) in school is 22 percent for all India, with rural areas seeing much lower provisioning (18 percent) than urban areas (43 percent).

A recent report titled "A Future at Stake–Guidelines and Principles to Resume and Renew Education" prepared by the National Coalition on the Education Emergency, a group of academics and educationists, revealed that the "overwhelming majority of India's 250 million children had no structured learning opportunities during the pandemic, leading to an education emergency of incalculable proportions." The report highlighted "the loss of the most basic language and mathematics skills" among children of the rural and urban poor, and migrant labourers.

If India's fabulously wealthy super-rich and the political establishment that does their bidding were so concerned about the educational development of the country's hundreds of millions of young people, why have they permitted the disastrous social conditions documented in the reports on childhood education to develop and fester? The lack of access to basic necessities of life for the vast majority of India's population was not a phenomenon that emerged overnight with the adoption of lockdowns, but the product of decades of underfunding of critical social services to pay for India's ever-expanding military and the enrichment of its billionaires. The Union government spends a pathetic 3.1 percent of GDP, while providing India's military with the third-largest military budget in the world, behind only the United States and China.

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) 2021 State of the Education Report (SOER) for India, entitled "No Teacher, No Class," there are as many as 110,971 single-teacher schools in the country and 89 percent of such schools are in rural areas. The UNESCO report noted that the country is short of 1.1 million skilled teachers, with the rural areas accounting for the lion's share of the deficit. Teacher vacancies in schools in some rural areas reach as high as 69 percent.

Across the country, over 200,000 schools (16 percent) do not have a library facility, 900,000 schools do not have functional computer facilities for the students (28.55 percent), and over 1.1 million schools do not have internet facilities, states the Unified District Information System for Education Plus report. According to official estimates, 10 percent of schools do not have hand wash facilities, leading to unhygienic conditions for the students. A total of 29,967 schools do not have drinking water facilities within the school premises and over 6,000 schools across India do not have a building. A recent official report by the Parliamentary panel on education stated that only 56 percent of schools have electricity and almost 40 percent of schools do not have boundary walls.

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