

India reports first Omicron death as daily infections surge past 100,000

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India, where COVID-19 cases have recently begun growing exponentially, officially confirmed its first death from the highly infectious Omicron variant Wednesday. Friday saw a second, of a 45-year-old woman from Odisha's Balangir district.

These reports shatter bogus claims by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government and the capitalist ruling elite that the new variant is "milder" and that there is "no need to panic." It has now spread to 27 of India's 36 states and Union Territories.

The first victim, a 73-year-old retiree who tested positive for COVID-19 earlier in December but recovered from the disease, had in fact died on December 31 in Rajasthan's Udaipur district.

The fully vaccinated man was admitted to a government hospital on December 15 after testing positive the same day. Tests done on this man on December 21 and 25 came back negative. However, on December 25, his genome sequencing report confirmed that he had the Omicron variant. Dinesh Kharadi, the Chief Medical and Health Officer in Udaipur, told reporters: "The death appeared to be from post-COVID pneumonia with comorbidity of diabetes mellitus, hypertension and hypothyroidism."

Joint Secretary for the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare Lav Agarwal, who is at the forefront of efforts to paint Omicron as "milder," downplayed its role in this death, saying: "He was an elderly person who had diabetes and comorbid conditions." Instead of alerting the public to the devastating emergency situation emerging worldwide as the Omicron variant spreads, Agarwal encouraged the public to write it off as the product of old age and ill health, not deliberate policies.

Capitalist politicians proceed with naked indifference to life. In May 2020, as 400,000 people fell ill and 4,000 died every day in India, Modi government health

advisor Jayaprakash Muliyil warned: "With a substantial opening up of the lockdown, India may see at least two million deaths." Yet Modi opened up the lockdown before viral spread had ended and contact tracing was set up, and epidemiologists have estimated that at least 6 million people have died in India of COVID-19, though the notoriously under-counted official toll now stands at 483,178.

Leading scientists have repeatedly shown that even doubly vaccinated individuals are significantly less protected from the Omicron variant, which is increasingly becoming dominant over the Delta variant that caused India's second wave. This has now been confirmed, tragically, in that India's first Omicron-related death was of a vaccinated individual. In one study of 183 Omicron infections, health authorities found that 87 or nearly 50 percent of them were fully vaccinated.

Instead of citing this to stress that vaccines alone will not halt the pandemic and that lockdowns and strict public health measures are urgently necessary, Indian authorities have responded by announcing that the "use of masks and surveillance is key to breaking the chain of transmission." However, basic measures like masking, even if fully implemented, are not enough to break the tidal wave of cases of the highly contagious Omicron variant.

In May, the Modi government said India's entire adult population of 940 million would be "fully vaccinated" by the end of 2021. However, as of December 31, only 64 percent of India's adult population was "fully vaccinated" and around 90 percent had received a first dose. Average monthly vaccinations have also been systematically falling in September, October and November as 8.1 million, 5.4 million and 5.7 inoculations, respectively.

India started vaccinating the 15-to-17 age group (120 million people, according to the 2011 census) only at beginning of January 2022, as the third wave of the pandemic loomed. Unlike many other countries in the world, such as in Europe, where adults are around 80 percent of the population, adults constitute only 63 percent of India's total population. This means that even if adults were fully vaccinated, one-third of India's massive 1.38 billion population would still be without protection provided by vaccines.

The consequences of Modi's murderous policy are emerging. "Scores of children below six years—who are not yet included in the vaccination drive—have been struck by Covid over the last five days, often with breathing distress, severe weakness and high fever leading to hospitalization," the *Times of India* reported on January 6, adding: "A substantial number of children below three years are among those affected."

Modi and the entire Indian ruling class like their international counterparts are aware of the disastrous consequences of their murderous herd immunity policy, which let COVID-19 rip through millions of unprotected people unchecked.

On Friday, India recorded the highest number of daily cases in over 200 days, as its daily COVID-19 cases exceeded the grim milestone of 100,000 (117,100), 28 percent higher than 90,928 the previous day, and nearly seven times higher than a week ago. However, Indian national health official Arti Ahuja admitted that "in the absence of sufficient testing, the true level of infection spread in the community would not be revealed." On Friday, 302 people died of COVID-19 in India.

Mumbai, India's financial capital with over 20 million population, recorded 20,181 cases Friday, the most since the pandemic began in 2020, and 33 percent more than Thursday's 15,666 cases. Likewise, India's capital Delhi on Friday reported over 15,000 daily COVID-19 cases, the most since May 6. While Mumbai city officials said in a daily health bulletin that "only 8 percent of those infected were hospitalized," the massive surge in the number of infected could mean that these 8 percent could swamp hospitals, as in earlier waves of the pandemic.

Already, hundreds of medical workers including doctors in Mumbai's biggest hospitals have been infected with COVID-19 in recent days, *NDTV* reported on January 6. Despite massive surges in cases, the state

government said Thursday: "There is not case for a lockdown." So far, it has enforced limited restrictions that include closing down schools and colleges till February 15.

Indian authorities' repeated statements that "Omicron is less severe than Delta" testifies to the criminal ignorance and indifference of Modi and the entire ruling elite towards the lives of millions of Indians. With a smaller percentage of the population vaccinated, leaving hundreds of millions completely open to the highly transmissible Omicron variant, medical experts expect a surge in cases and in hospitalization rates in coming days.

"Omicron will lead to a much higher number of cases in a shorter period, leading to a disintegration of our already overburdened healthcare system," Mahek Nankani, an Assistant Programme Manager at the Takshashila Institute (TI) and Dr. Harshit Kukreja, a Research Analyst with the TI warned in the *Deccan Herald* on December 30. They showed this would leave hospitals incapable of caring for other patients with non-communicable diseases, such as chronic diabetes.

The Indian political establishment, devoted to the profit interests of a tiny capitalist elite, have totally ignored this shocking aspect of the pandemic, which has already led to a massive humanitarian crisis. Following the footsteps of his counterparts worldwide, particularly in the United States, Brazil and Europe, Modi has not allocated the massive resources needed to upgrade India's health infrastructure. Instead, he has continued diverting billions of dollars into the coffers of a tiny layer of Indian multi-billionaires.



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