

# Modi pledges to defend financial oligarchy's profits as Omicron tsunami rips through India

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As a tsunami of COVID-19 cases spreads throughout India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has once again promised the financial oligarchy that no national lockdowns will come to interrupt the flow of profits to the financial oligarchy. All industries and businesses are to continue to function, forcing workers to work despite the dangerous pandemic situation.

On January 13, Modi chaired a “high-level meeting” on the pandemic with state Chief Ministers to “review Public Health Preparedness for COVID-19 and Vaccination Progress,” the Indian prime minister’s official website reported. Modi’s “review,” however, did not aim to highlight the danger posed by the highly infectious Omicron variant, which is now driving an exponential rise in coronavirus infections.

Actually, Modi, in his remarks at the meeting, has once again made clear that his government’s policy, like that of many other capitalist governments around the world, is to allow the coronavirus to infect literally every single Indian. Noting that the Omicron variant is “infecting the masses many times faster than the earlier variants,” he blandly declared, “we have to ensure that there is no panic.”

Modi’s remarks were not aimed to prevent panic but to prevent action to halt mass infections. His ruling Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) was holding massive election rallies in five poll-bound states, including Uttar Pradesh, until the country’s Election Commission finally forced a ban on rallies in the beginning of the year.

Other public events in which thousands of people are gathering are also proceeding. One such superspreader event was the 47-day annual religious fair “Magh Mela-2022,” where tens of thousands of Hindu devotees swim in three rivers in Prayagraj, in BJP-controlled Uttar

Pradesh, India’s most populous state with over 200 million inhabitants.

When it comes to talk about the profit interests of the financial oligarchy, on the other hand, Modi was very firm. “While devising any strategy” on COVID-19, he insisted that “we must keep in mind there should be minimum damage to the livelihood of the common people and economic activities, and the momentum of the economy should be maintained.”

Given that Modi’s policies have driven hundreds of millions of people into extreme poverty during the pandemic, his reference here to “common people” is entirely bogus. His message is not to Indian toilers but to the financial aristocrats who have increased their personal wealth during the pandemic by tens of billions of dollars. Amid an exponential surge of Omicron cases, Modi’s word has only one meaning: whatever disaster is going to emerge, “the momentum of the economy,” that is, the superexploitation of workers, “should be maintained.”

To justify this pro-business policy amid massive surge of COVID-19 cases, he proposed to “focus more on local containment” rather than on a national lockdown, and “home isolation” rather than strict contact tracing, mass testing and other key public health policies.

Modi and his policy makers are well aware that even these limited measures are not effective in a massive country like India, where most Indians live in small tenements, overcrowded slums and small huts without any hygienic conditions or clean water. While calling for home isolation of COVID-19 patients, he did not say a word on providing financial assistance or food for those who are infected and their families. Nor did he say a word on assistance on medical expenses for those needing care.

His call to “focus more on local containment” marks not only the abandonment of even a limited nationally

coordinated programme to fight the pandemic.

On the very day that Modi made these remarks, India witnessed more than 247,000 daily cases in 24 hours, up 27 percent from the previous day's count. On the same day, 380 new deaths were confirmed, bringing the highly undercounted official toll to 485,035. As of January 19, six days after Modi's speech, the total number of infections reached 33.2 million cases, and the active cases count was nearing 2 million.

In reality, scientific studies have shown the real death count in India is fully 10 times higher, between 3 and 5 million deaths.

Moreover, experts are raising serious doubts about the official numbers of COVID-19 cases and tests. On January 15, an *NDTV* report showed how India's daily tests have not been kept up with the speed at which cases have shot up in December indicating serious under-reporting of COVID-19 cases. "Cases are up 265 percent, but tests are up only 4 percent," it noted. Referring to the positivity rate—currently at 19.65 percent, and continuously increasing—*NDTV* concluded, "This shows that more and more tests are turning out to be positive."

Yet, neither Modi nor Indian ruling elite as a whole sees the situation as alarming enough to press the warning button.

Ignoring countless reports showing that a vaccine-alone policy cannot fight COVID-19 and particularly highly infectious and vaccine-resistant variants like Omicron, Modi in his remarks to the Chief Ministers, said that "vaccination is the most effective weapon to fight against corona."

During the meetings, Modi boasted of India's vaccination figures. However, even in this arena, he covers up critical figures. Of 940 million adults over 18 in India eligible for vaccination, 640 million have received at least one dose, leaving 300 million adults at risk of infection.

Even though the Modi government has announced vaccination for the 15-18 age group from January 3, *NewsClick* wrote: "It is progressing at a slow pace as usual." Meanwhile, as schools and colleges reopen, the under-18 population has been increasingly getting infected. Meanwhile, unlike many other countries, India is not providing third "booster" doses to the population. Though Modi recently promised the booster shots for 30 million health care and other frontline workers, even that is "shockingly lagging," reported the news website.

To pretend that his government does care about the pandemic, Modi claimed: "We have to continue scaling

up our medical infrastructure and manpower with an emphasis on science-based knowledge on the awareness front." The bitter experience of the past two years tells an entirely different story.

Even after disastrous pandemic experiences, India's budget allocation for health care stood at 1.8 percent of its GDP, among the lowest of any government in the world. Despite empty talk of "scaling up medical infrastructure and manpower," thousands of frontline workers including health employees have been repeatedly coming onto the street in protest on several demands, including decent wages.

Modi and the Indian ruling elite have left the people in the dark on this unraveling situation. Already, media reports show rising numbers of hospitalized cases. After the deaths of at least 1,700 doctors in India during the COVID-19 pandemic, thousands of health care workers are falling ill in hospitals in Delhi, Mumbai and across Maharashtra state. This is forcing a number of hospitals to stop treating non-COVID patients with critical non-communicable diseases like chronic diabetes.

For all of Modi's references to "science-based knowledge on [the] awareness front," he has from the beginning of the pandemic promoted superstitions, invoking cosmic energy to drive out the SARS-CoV-2 virus by exhorting the public to beat gongs and blow conches at auspicious hours. Two years later, scientists are worrying about the lack of proper scientific data on literally every aspect of COVID-19, including infections, deaths and vaccine effectiveness.

Modi is notorious for these types of public stunts aimed at gaining petty popularity, like printing his image on vaccine certificates. However, history will record that the Indian ruling elite's pandemic policy was a horrific failure, driven entirely by the profit interests of Indian and international capital.



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