

US\$152 million “pre-wedding” bash of Asia’s richest man shows contempt of billionaires toward workers and rural poor

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While hundreds of millions of poor people are struggling to survive without proper food, and even water, India’s richest person, billionaire Mukesh Ambani, has spent more than US\$150 million for his youngest son Anant’s three-day “pre-wedding” bash. How much Ambani will spend for the actual wedding, scheduled to be held on July 12, remains to be seen. In 2018, he spent around \$100 million for his daughter Isha’s wedding, in which former US secretaries of state Hillary Clinton and John Kerry, among others, participated.

Mukesh Ambani is the world’s 10th richest person and the richest man in India and Asia, worth more than \$116 billion according to the *Forbes* magazine billionaires list. Ambani’s Reliance Industries is a massive conglomerate, reporting over \$100 billion in annual revenue with, interests ranging from petrochemicals and oil and gas to telecom and retail.

The Ambani family owns, among other assets, a 27-story private apartment building named Antila, worth \$1 billion in India’s financial capital Mumbai. The city is also home to Dharavi, one of the world’s largest slums, in which 1 million people live in just over 2.39 square kilometres. Antila has three helipads, a 160-car garage, a private movie theater, a swimming pool and a fitness center.

The splashy three-day (March 1-3) pre-nuptial extravaganza was held in the family hometown of Jamnagar, a western Indian city of around 600,000 people in a near-desert part of Gujarat state, where the family also owns the main oil refinery.

The whole event was organized in a way to exhibit immense wealth, the luxury life-style of the Ambani family in particular, and India’s super-rich in general. The Ambanis sent invitations to nearly 1,200 wealthy persons, among whom were billionaires like Bill Gates, Gautam Adani, Mark Zuckerberg, Ivanka Trump, pop star Rihanna and others.

The guests came in chartered jets from New Delhi and Mumbai and they were provided services of hair stylists,

makeup artists and drapists. According to Jamnagar airport authorities, around 130 flights arrived for the event. Videos of the celebration went viral on social media platforms including Facebook and Instagram and were widely reported by major news wire services.

According to Reuters, the guests were given a detailed, nine-page dress code for festivities. “Dress code included a ‘jungle fever’ theme and a theme that encouraged ‘dazzling’ Indian outfits. For over three days, thousands of guests who stayed in luxury tents were offered lavish cocktail and dinner parties in lavishly decorated locations within the Reliance Greens complex, where they were served their choice of 2,500 dishes cooked by more than 100 chefs. The catering contract alone is reported to have cost \$25 million.

Social media posts from the opulent bash underscores how the super-rich have no care about the miserable living conditions of millions of Indian workers and the poor. One such video showed how Meta (Facebook) CEO Zuckerberg and his “philanthropist” wife Priscilla Chan were praising the \$1 million luxury timepiece of Ambani’s son Anant. “You know, I never really wanted to get a watch, but after seeing that, I was like, watches are cool,” the American billionaire said.

The biggest names of Hollywood, celebrated by millions of people, were seen dancing with the Ambanis on stage, and nobody was concerned what was happening to hundreds of millions of poor people outside their island of wealth. Pop singer Rihanna was paid somewhere between \$8 million and \$9 million for her performance during the festivities.

The whole event only reflects the utter indifference of India’s capitalist elite toward the plight of more than a billion workers and oppressed in India. There is no doubt that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was among the invitees. However, he avoided participating for purely tactical reasons, as such an open identification with India’s super-rich would be politically disadvantageous to him and

his Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party, which are seeking to retain power in the general elections now scheduled to be held from April 19 to June 1. The Congress Party and other opposition parties have already accused Modi of cronyism, citing his strong backing to Ambani along with India's second richest billionaire, Gautam Adani.

Yet the Modi government's patronage for the extravagant event was very visible. According to the *New York Times*, using public money, the government turned Jamnagar's small domestic airport into a designated international airport, clearing the way for guests to land their private aircraft. Furthermore, "the government airport was expanded, staff numbers were increased, and the Indian Air Force deployed additional military personnel—all in the service of one event for one family."

The billionaires have multiplied their mountain of wealth thanks to Modi's pro-investor and anti-working class policies. To understand this, one would have to look at Ambani's wealth in 2014 (\$23.4 billion) when Modi first came to power. Now he has increased it almost five times. Giving one example, the *New York Times* refers to Ambani's domination over the telecommunications industry, where the billionaire has invested heavily since Modi came to power, and "now owns more than 70 outlets, including India's biggest media conglomerate, which are followed by 800 million weekly viewers." In turn, "many of these outlets have been trumpeting Mr. Modi's credentials and heaping praise on him."

Under the Modi government, which is now seeking a third term, India's rich have become more rich at the expense of billions of workers and poor. The World Inequality Report 2022 wrote: "India is among the most unequal countries in the world." Oxfam found that "the wealthiest 10 percent own more than 72 percent of the total wealth, the top 5 percent own nearly 62 percent of the total wealth, and the top 1 percent own nearly 40.6 of the total wealth in India."

The billionaire Gautam Adani, who until a few weeks ago was being touted as Asia's richest person (until he was displaced by Ambani), is also a close ally of Modi. According to Oxfam, "Adani's wealth alone increased eight times during the pandemic and then nearly doubled to INR10.96 lakh crore (\$132.48 billion) in October 2022, making him the richest Indian."

The situation for poor people is totally different. In the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, Oxfam found that the bottom 50 percent of the population have continued to see both their income and wealth chipped away. By 2020, their share was estimated to have fallen to only 13 percent of the national income and less than 3 percent of the total wealth. The impact has been "exceptionally poor diets, increased

debt and deaths," the report notes.

The country still has the world's highest number of desperately poor people, at 228.9 million. On the other hand, the total number of billionaires in India increased from 102 in 2020 to 166 in 2022. The combined wealth of India's richest has touched 54,120 billion rupees (\$630 billion). The wealth of the top 10 richest in India stands at 27,520 billion rupees (\$332 billion), a 32.8 percent rise from 2021.

While the Ambanis and other Indian billionaires celebrate their massive wealth, India ranks 111th among 125 countries in the Global Hunger Index report in 2023. Among the few countries ranking lower are Afghanistan, the Congo, Yemen and Sudan. Not only that, India is one of a group of 40 countries where the scale of global hunger has been termed "serious." The report further noted that India has the highest child "wasting" (low weight for height) rate across the world, at 18.7 percent, reflecting acute malnutrition. At the same time, the prevalence of anemia among women aged 15-24 is a major problem in India. More than 50 percent of women and adolescents are anemic in the country, one of the highest rates in the world.

These are only a few indicators that show extreme poverty among working people and the oppressed in India. But the Modi government and the Indian elite express no concern about these conditions for hundreds of millions of people. This was the same ruling elite that allowed the COVID-19 pandemic to rip through the unprotected Indian population, causing an estimated 5 million-6 million deaths.

It is necessary to put an end to the immense accumulation of wealth in the hands of a handful of billionaires and use those resources to raise the miserable living conditions of hundreds of millions of Indian workers and poor. This can be done only through a socialist revolution of the Indian working class, rallying the rural poor alongside it, overthrowing bourgeois rule and taking power into its own hands, as a part of the struggle for socialism internationally.



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