

Deadly heat waves scorching India's cities point to impact of capitalist-induced climate change

Martina Inessa
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Tens of thousands of people across India have suffered heat strokes over the past two months, with hundreds, and most likely thousands, losing their lives. Due to the lack of reliable statistics on deaths in India—which has been glaringly highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic—most heat stroke deaths will have gone unreported or have been attributed to other causes.

Just between June 11 and June 19, 192 heat-related deaths were recorded among homeless people in the capital city of Delhi, according to the non-governmental organization Centre for Holistic Development. Police said that 50 bodies were retrieved in the 48 hours of June 19 and 20. Due to the extreme heat, at least 40,000 people have suffered heat strokes since March.

Ajay Chauhan, a physician at Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital (RMLH) in Delhi, declared, “This is an unprecedented heat wave. In my 13 years here, I don’t recall signing a death certificate for heat stroke. This year, I’ve signed numerous,” BBC reported.

In large Indian cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Hyderabad and Chennai, researchers have pointed to a phenomenon termed the “Urban Heat Island (UHI) effect.” In these crowded urban settings, temperatures can be several degrees higher than in surrounding non-urban areas, with the temperature differential even greater at night. The heat is trapped in concrete structures and tarmac roads along with air pollutants. This has been exacerbated by the waste heat from air conditioners and other machinery and the lack of green space.

According to a new study conducted by the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Bhubaneswar, the average warming caused by urbanization in India is 0.2 degrees Celsius every decade. Urbanization is responsible for around 37.7 percent of overall urban warming, or about 60 percent more warming in over 140 major Indian cities as compared to non-urban areas.

This is an indication that the majority of the victims of the increased number and intensity of heat waves come from the working class, particularly its most impoverished layers who migrate to cities to find jobs and struggle to survive in poverty. Three-quarters of India’s workforce work in heat-exposed industries, such as construction, mining and agriculture. This is exacerbated during heat waves, as there are less safe and productive work hours during the day. According to a *Lancet* study, severe heat in India cost the country 167.2 billion potential labour hours in 2021.

According to the IIT findings, Ahmedabad, Jaipur and Rajkot have the biggest urban effects on warming temperatures, while the Delhi national capital region and Pune were ranked fourth and fifth, respectively.

India’s weather agency, the India Meteorological Department (IMD), said the heat wave experienced this spring and summer is among the longest in the country’s history. Delhi has been struggling under a prolonged heat wave, with daily temperatures topping 40 °C (104 °F) in May and June and at one point reaching 50 °C (122 °F). Rajasthan registered 50.8 °C, while in Haryana, the maximum temperature reached 50.3 °C in May.

At least 37 cities had temperatures above 45 °Celsius, resulting in warnings of a “very high likelihood” of heat-related illnesses for the populace. High temperatures at night, up to 36 °Celsius in certain areas, pose a further risk, since people are unable to cool down.

This year Northwest India experienced its warmest June since at least 1901, with the highest recorded temperature of 38 °C. IMD reported that four of its 18 stations in the Northeastern region had recorded their highest-ever maximum temperatures: Lumding in Assam at 43 °C, Silchar in Assam at 40 °C, Itanagar in Arunachal Pradesh at 40.5 °C, and Passighat in Arunachal Pradesh at 39.6 °C. Four other stations in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh registered their highest-ever maximum temperatures in May.

Extreme heat forced India’s schools to close early for the summer.

On May 31, a 17-year-old teenager who had passed his 12th grade died from a suspected heat stroke in Thiruninravur, Chennai. The deceased, Shakthi, fainted due to his inability to resist the intense sun while attending the funeral of his classmate Harisudhan, who had died of heart illness. Shakthi was rushed to Kilpakkam Government Hospital in Chennai, where he died without responding to medical treatment. The doctors who examined him stated he died as a result of non-functioning sweat glands and other complications.

A huge majority of respondents to a recent Greenpeace survey on how heat affects street vendors in Delhi claimed health difficulties as a result of the hot weather. Irritation was the most prevalent symptom affecting almost 75 percent, followed by headaches, dehydration, sunburn, weariness and muscle cramps. Most people struggled to get medical care due to lack of money.

India registered 2,227 deaths as a result of extreme weather events in 2022, the country's sixth warmest year on record since 1901, according to the "Climate of India During 2022" study released by the IMD. During a horrific heat wave that persisted in North India in June 2023, more than 98 people died in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh alone, as a result of intense heat events that happened between June 14 and June 16, 2023.

In light of these previous fatal heat waves and the availability of suggested guidelines by various scholars and research institutes, the Indian government's failure to develop a heat wave response plan is scandalous. It is yet another stark example of the Indian capitalist elite's callous indifference to the most vulnerable working class sections of society.

The heat wave has been compounded by an ongoing water crisis, which further raises the risk of people suffering dehydration and all the attendant maladies associated with it amid the high temperatures.

Yale University's 2022 unsafe drinking water index ranked India 141 out of 180 countries, with nearly 70 percent of India's water supply contaminated. According to the National Institution for Transforming India's (NITI) 2018 Composite Water Management Index report, about 600 million people are experiencing high to extreme water stress due to lack of ready access to potable water. Inadequate access to safe water is estimated to cause 200,000 fatalities per year.

This shows that at the behest of India's capitalist elite, the national and state governments, including those led by the ostensible opposition parties, have systematically placed protecting investor wealth and corporate profit ahead of saving human lives. This is why they have refused to provide and protect such a basic amenity as water, and failed to mobilize the resources needed to combat the extreme heat weather to protect the working masses.

According to research published in *Science Advances* last month, "life expectancy at birth was 2.6 years lower and mortality was 17% higher in 2020" than in 2019, "implying 1.19 million excess deaths" due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. This is eight times more than the Narendra Modi-led BJP government's official claim of 148,738 COVID-19 deaths in 2020.

Previous studies have shown that Indian authorities have vastly undercounted the number of COVID-19 fatalities. While the government has claimed 481,000 Indians succumbed to COVID-19 in 2020 and 2021, the WHO has estimated the true total was nearly 10 times that, or around 4.7 million.

The significance of the *Science Advances* study, which was based on government mortality records, is that it shows India's first 2020 COVID-19 wave was far more deadly than hitherto recognized. Predictably, India's far-right BJP government has angrily dismissed the study, just as it has all the others that have credibly demonstrated that India's COVID-19 fatality figures are a fraud. With the full complicity of the Congress Party and the rest of the opposition, Modi and the BJP are deliberately covering up the pandemic's true impact so as to justify their criminal profits-before-lives pandemic response and continued indifference to public health.

This is similarly true of the official response to this year's heat wave and the ongoing impact of climate change. Preventable and

catastrophic loss of life in India is the product of state policy.

Scientists have repeatedly warned of the enormous rise in greenhouse gas emissions and their potentially disastrous effects. Capitalist-induced climate change, primarily caused by the use of fossil fuels, is making heat waves hotter and more likely to occur around the planet, according to scientists who study how severe weather occurrences are changing. Cities are particularly vulnerable to the combined effects of urbanisation and climate change.

Dr. Rahula Mahanta, head of the Interdisciplinary Climate Research Center at Cotton University in Assam, said El Niño, a recurring abnormal warming of surface waters in the equatorial Pacific Ocean, played a role in the recent record-breaking temperatures. The weather pattern is known to cause excessive heat throughout various parts of the world.

Climate scientists have been warning for decades about the hazards of excessive heat, which is only getting worse.

The growing number of intense heat events around the world in recent years indicate that climate models have underestimated the rate and intensity of global warming. Heat beyond the limits of human endurance is no longer a distant dystopian future.

According to a study published in the journal *Nature Cities*, this heat has a long-term impact on other aspects of climate, such as rainfall and pollutants.

Global warming is producing extreme weather events across the world. It necessitates immediate and globally coordinated action to prevent a huge death toll, especially among vulnerable sections of society and millions from losing their livelihoods. But this cannot and will not be done by the rival nationally-based capitalist elites that plunder nature, just as they savagely exploit the working class so as to prevail in the struggle for profits, resources and geostrategic advantage.

The international working class, which suffers most from extreme weather events, is the only social force with the power to overthrow capitalism and establish a socialist society, in which human needs will prevail over private profit, so as to ensure that the planet remains livable and society's wealth is used to provide well-paying jobs and quality public services for all.



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