

India rapidly emerging as epicenter of COVID-19 pandemic in Asia

By Wasantha Rupasinghe
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The total number of coronavirus cases in India is fast approaching half a million as infection rates continue to accelerate. New infections set yet another daily record yesterday, with 16,857 cases recorded, bringing the total to over 472,000.

The rapid, largely uncontrolled spread of the pandemic is the result of the criminal negligence of India's Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. As coronavirus cases exploded in recent weeks, Modi has overseen the phasing out of virtually all lockdown measures and assured big business that no second such shutdown will occur. Like its counterparts around the world, India's ruling elite has embraced a policy of "herd immunity" that threatens to cost hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of lives.

Total cases in India have more than doubled within less than three weeks as a result. Close to 250,000 new infections have been recorded since June 5, when the total case count stood at 226,000. The latest 100,000 cases have been recorded in just the past eight days.

Even according to the government's highly under-reported death count, 14,907 people have now lost their lives, nearly triple the number (5,608) on June 1. However, this is an insignificant number for Modi and his advisors. One of the government's top scientific experts has blithely declared that the policy of reopening the economy could well cost 2 million lives. In spite of this horrific prospect, no serious criticism of the Modi government's reckless course has been forthcoming from the opposition parties, which are implementing the homicidal back-to-work policy wherever they form the state government, or any faction within the ruling elite.

Forty-five percent of India's official COVID-19 cases have been reported by two states—Maharashtra, which lies on the west coast and where Mumbai is located, with 139,010, and the national capital territory Delhi with over 70,000.

Health Ministry data shows that three other states, Tamil Nadu in the south, Gujarat, on India's west coast, and the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, account for a further 25

percent of total COVID-19 cases.

The overall picture that emerges is that the coronavirus is now deeply entrenched in much of the country, including such large urban centers as Mumbai, Delhi and Chennai, and is rapidly spreading into rural areas where health care is even less accessible.

As terrible as the official government figures are, there is a widespread consensus that the true extent of the pandemic is much worse. Even before COVID-19, just 70 percent of deaths in India were registered and only a fifth of these are medically certified, as highlighted by the IndiaSpend web portal. As an example of the extreme unreliability of government figures, the web portal pointed to the official data on malaria in 2017. While government hospitals claimed just 194 malaria deaths occurred in India, the Global Burden of Disease, which uses multiple sources, including verbal autopsies, estimated 50,000 deaths for the same year.

Delhi has recorded at least 2,000 COVID-19 cases every day since June 17. On Tuesday, it reported its biggest ever one-day increase with nearly 4,000 cases. Total infections in Delhi are doubling within just 12 days.

The dramatic spread of the virus in India's capital city is directly linked to Modi's reckless policy of reopening the economy. On June 8, when a stepped-up campaign of re-openings began, dubbed by Modi "Unlock1," a total of 29,500 cases had been reported in Delhi since the pandemic began. Over the past 16 days, over 40,000 new infections have been detected.

The disastrous impact of the rapid rise in cases can be seen from the numerous reports of patients and their harried relatives unable to secure treatment, hospital wards where dead bodies remain unremoved due to staff shortages and overflowing morgues. Due to the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE), overworked doctors and medical staff are catching the virus in growing numbers.

The *Hindustan Times* reported Tuesday on the appalling situation at Lok Nayak Hospital, Delhi's biggest COVID-19 hospital with 2,000 beds. Relatives are forced to wait for up

to three days to receive information about their loved ones in intensive care. A doctor at the hospital said, “Demands for updates from the relatives of patients are overwhelmed.”

On Sunday, the *New Indian Express* reported that the Maharashtra state government has asked hospitals to use oxygen cylinders to provide immediate relief to COVID-19 patients because of a ventilator shortage. Home to 114 million people, Maharashtra has just 3,028 ventilators.

Although a BJP government release said it is supplying 50,000 “Made in India” ventilators to various state governments and union territories, only 2,923 ventilators have been manufactured so far and just 1,340 delivered.

For decades, whether the central government has been led by the BJP or the Congress Party, the Indian state has starved the public health system of resources, spending somewhere in the order of 1 to 1.5 percent of GDP on health care annually. Despite warnings from health experts that India is especially vulnerable to the pandemic because of its high-population density, endemic poverty, and ramshackle health care system, the Modi government has failed to pour resources into fighting COVID-19. As of June 23, India had performed 5.17 tests per thousand people, among the lowest testing ratios of any country with a large COVID-19 outbreak.

Government projections show that the disastrous health care situation is set to get even worse over the coming weeks. Authorities in Delhi expect the case count to reach a staggering 550,000 by the end of July. In Gurgaon, an industrial city about 30 kilometres southwest of the capital, where large numbers of workers labour in brutal conditions in manufacturing plants, infections are projected to reach 150,000 by the end of next month.

Coronavirus is also finding new breeding grounds in India's rural areas, where nearly 70 percent of the country's 1.37 billion people live. If the health care system in the major cities is dilapidated and collapsing, in rural India it is all but non-existent. Further compounding the crisis in rural area is the decision of various municipal authorities to prioritize local residents for care, thus closing down the typical practice of rural patients travelling to urban areas for hospital treatment.

The rapid spike in COVID-19 cases in rural areas was triggered by the chaotic return of nearly 10 million migrant workers to their home villages—a social and health disaster for which the BJP government and Indian elite are wholly responsible.

For more than two months the Modi government did next to nothing to halt the spread of COVID-19. Then without any serious preparation and less than four hour's public notice, it imposed a draconian nationwide lockdown on March 25 that resulted in tens of millions of migrant

workers and other day labourers losing their jobs overnight. With the BJP government refusing to provide them with any means of sustenance, millions of migrant workers began to return to their villages on foot. It took several days for the authorities to recognise that this mass migration—the largest since the 1947 communal partition of the subcontinent—threatened to spread the virus from the cities to rural India. The government then responded in typical brutal fashion, deploying security forces to herd those making their way home into makeshift, cramped internal refugee camps, where they were often ill-fed and otherwise abused.

After repeated extensions of the lockdown, which had originally been meant to last 21 days, the BJP government, in consultation with the states, finally allowed the migrant workers to go home. But, in a further act of negligence, they failed to systematically test them for COVID-19 and treat the sick before their departure.

Due to this criminal policy, Bihar, Assam, Jharkhand, Odisha and Uttar Pradesh, the states that received most of the returning migrant workers, also have some of the country's fastest-growing COVID-19 infection rates. Infections have now spread to 98 of the country's 112 poorest rural districts, up from 34 on April 15, according to data from NITI Aayog, the government's planning body.

On Monday, the government said it had released 10 billion rupees (\$ US132 million) to states and union territories for “the welfare of migrant laborers” including accommodation, food, medical treatment and transportation. Given the fact that tens of millions of workers lost their jobs and income since the lockdown was implemented, this is the equivalent of famine rations.

As the health and social catastrophe for India's impoverished workers and toilers deepens, the main concern of the Modi government and the ostensible parliamentary opposition is to reassure big business that nothing will get in the way of their profit-making. At a meeting with state chief ministers last week, Modi dismissed “rumours” about a second lockdown. Despite the rapidly accelerating rate of infection, he insisted that it was time to move to the next phase of “reopening” the economy.

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