

India set to surpass two million COVID-19 cases within days

By Wasantha Rupasinghe
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While Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other ministers in his far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government continue to cynically claim that India, under their leadership, is mounting a “successful battle” against COVID-19, the virus is in fact rampaging across the country; and is now deeply entrenched in both India’s teeming cities and in rural areas, where health care facilities are all but non-existent.

Currently, India is the country with the third highest number of infections in the world after the US and Brazil. Total infections have surged passed the grim milestone of 1.5 million. India is also currently sixth in terms of recorded COVID-19 deaths, with 34,191 fatalities. However, it is widely recognised that the figures provided by India’s Ministry of Health and Family Welfare fall well short of the true number of infections and deaths.

Even going by the official figures, India has one of the most rapidly rising case counts in the world. Official cases have doubled within just 19 days, compared to 40 days in the US and 36 days in Brazil. During the last six days, India has reported nearly 50,000 new cases daily, including 49,292 cases on Tuesday. Over the past 12 days, half a million new infections have been registered.

Leading epidemiologists and medical experts believe the impact of the pandemic is far greater than these figures suggest. In an interview with journalist Karan Thapar of *The Wire* on July 25, Bhramar Mukherjee, Professor of Epidemiology & Biostatistics at the University of Michigan, said that COVID-19 is surging like a “storm” across India. She expressed shock about the virus’ spread into villages with “fragile” health care systems. According to Mukherjee’s assessment, India has between 20 and 30 million undetected COVID-19 cases. Within six weeks, she believes the true number of infections will reach 100 million.

The *Times of India* noted on Tuesday that half of the country’s 739 districts have reported at least 500 cases

each. “Of them, about 200 have more than 1,000 cases each and there has been at least one Covid-19 death in almost 80 percent of the districts,” reported the *Times*. Painting a bleak picture of the situation, it added, “Many of these emerging hotspots have scanty health infrastructure and managing an explosion of cases could prove beyond their capabilities. Already, cases in 11 districts are growing at double-digit rates.”

However, the Modi government has shown little concern over the pandemic’s rapid acceleration. Instead, it repeatedly parrots the claim that “India is doing better than other countries.” In his monthly national radio address on July 26, Modi advanced this line of argumentation, claiming that the “recovery rate in our country is better compared to other countries,” “the mortality rate is much less as well,” and “India has also succeeded in saving the lives of millions of the people.”

These lies are meant to provide muster for the government’s homicidal drive to “reopen” the economy, forcing workers back on the job amid the pandemic and with little to no safety measures. They are also a desperate attempt to cover up the scale of the disaster in the hope an explosion of popular anger against the Modi government and the entire ruling elite can be avoided.

Even the government’s own undercounted figures do not support Modi’s contention that India has been “successful” in coping with the coronavirus.

In the *Wire* interview, Professor Mukherjee pointed to a survey showing that 23 percent or 5 million people in Delhi, India’s National Capital Territory, have been infected with COVID-19. Mukherjee added, “but only 100,000 (were) detected” due to the low level of testing. India has only tested the equivalent of 1.2 percent of its 1.3 billion population (or 17.33 million samples). This equates to just over 11,400 tests per million people. The US meanwhile has tested the equivalent of 14 percent of its population and Russia 17 percent. “We need to do 40

million more tests as of today,” Mukherjee added

She then went on to expose the bogus character of India’s COVID-19 recovery rate, a statistic that Modi and government officials are forever touting as proof of the efficacy of their efforts to contain the pandemic. According to the government’s data, 63 percent of those infected by COVID-19 during the past six months have recovered. But Professor Mukherjee explained that the criteria used to determine who has recovered varies by country. For example, in the US a patient is declared “recovered” after two negative RT-PCR tests. “I do not know how ‘recovered’ is being determined (in India),” said Mukherjee. “I doubt two tests for everybody. (If that was the case) then the number of tests would have been much larger in India.”

The interviewer, Thapar, then recalled that in the “Days of April ... two negative tests were required before you (were) allowed to leave hospital.” However in June, the “Delhi government decided if you don’t have fever, are not symptomatic, you can be discharged without any tests.”

While there is no publicly available data about fatalities among “cured” COVID-19 patients, there are several well-documented cases of people dying shortly after being released from hospital, including at least one case while the patient was travelling home by bus.

Mukherjee drew attention to the glaring levels of social inequality, although she did not elaborate on this pivotal issue. “We don’t have accurate hospitalization data in India. What I noticed from anecdotal sharing is that people who are rich and have connections are getting to the hospitals (while) poor people are not getting hospital care.” Hospital admissions are not “based on symptoms or severity but just economic status.”

Modi and the Indian ruling elite are desperately seeking to hide this reality. However, it is plain for all to see that the surge in India’s caseload and deaths is the direct outcome of the decision taken by the Modi government and supported, and where they form the state government implemented, by the opposition to “reopen the economy,” so that big business can resume extracting profit from India’s impoverished workers and toilers. Modi allowed export industries and other key sectors like construction to resume operations even in so-called COVID-19 hotspots at the end of April, when India’s official total COVID-19 caseload stood at 35,365, with 1,152 deaths.

Following in the footsteps of the United States and the European powers, Modi and the Indian elite have embraced the disastrous and unscientific “herd

immunity” policy, under which the virus is allowed to spread through the population essentially unhindered. Jayaprakash Muliyil, the chairman of the Scientific Advisory Committee of the government’s National Institute of Epidemiology and an outspoken proponent of reopening the economy and pursuing “herd immunity,” bluntly declared that “With a substantial opening up of the lockdown, India may see at least two million deaths.”

Modi’s two-month-long, ill-prepared lockdown was not accompanied by any scientifically planned health care programme, let alone the mobilisation of vital resources to fight the pandemic. The Modi government’s refusal to provide adequate financial and social support to millions of workers during the lockdown resulted in mass lay-offs and horrific scenes of social distress, especially for tens of millions of impoverished migrant workers.

If the ruling elite learned anything from this experience, it is that they will not impose a second lockdown, even at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives. Modi has vowed that there will not be another total lockdown no matter the death count. In an editorial Tuesday, the *Times of India* denounced even the limited restrictions that some state governments have re-imposed in the face of the massive spike in COVID-19 cases and deaths. “ [T]here can be no more excuses,” declared the *Times*, “for continuing with lockdowns after experiencing the massive economic damage they have wrought.” The central government,” it insisted, “must get all states on board” for “unlocking plans for August.”

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