

India's health minister downplays raging pandemic to conceal ruling elite's criminal "herd immunity" policy

By Saman Gunadasa
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While India's coronavirus cases are increasing at an alarming rate, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government's health minister, Harsh Vardhan, has downplayed the threat posed by the pandemic's relentless spread. Vardhan's remarks were aimed at justifying the government's reopening of the economy, which has also been supported by the state governments led by the opposition parties and has needlessly exposed millions of workers and rural toilers to the virus.

Even according to the highly under-reported official figures, India's total number of COVID-19 infections has passed 5.6 million, while more than 90,000 deaths have been registered. India is second only to the United States in terms of the number of coronavirus cases. However, due to the high level of transmission, with new cases routinely exceeding 90,000 per day, India is expected to surpass the US sooner rather than later.

In an hour-long appearance on social media Sunday, health minister Vardhan made the truly absurd claim that community transmission of the virus is not yet occurring in India. "Only 10 states are contributing 77 percent of active cases," argued Vardhan. "If you see state-specific data, you will find that these cases are concentrated in few districts."

Addressing India's parliament on the first day of its Monsoon session, on Sept. 14, Vardhan similarly tried to cavalierly downplay the pandemic's impact. He claimed that 92 percent of cases are reported to be a "mild disease," and contended India's response to the pandemic is among the best in the world. "India," he said, "has been able to limit its cases and deaths to 3,328 cases per million and 55 deaths per million population respectively, which is one of the lowest in the world as compared to similarly affected countries."

Vardhan's effort to cherry pick statistics that compare relatively well to other countries thanks only to India's large population of 1.3 billion people cannot disguise the fact that all states and Union territories have recorded increasing infections, and that the pandemic and its economic fallout have produced a social catastrophe.

On Saturday, the Delhi government's health minister, Satyendar Jain, from the Aam Aadmi Party, admitted the vast

increase in infections, adding, "We should have accepted there is community spread."

In a further exposure of the bogus character of Vardhan's denial that community spread is taking place, 30 MPs and 50 members of staff tested positive for the virus prior to the commencement of the new parliamentary session.

Even based on the severely under-counted official death toll of more than 90,000, India is currently third globally in terms of coronavirus deaths, behind only the United States and Brazil. Indian authorities are notorious for failing to provide the cause of death in the majority of cases even under non-pandemic conditions, making it all but certain that the actual death toll is far higher.

Compared to the other countries of South Asia, India's recorded deaths per million population is much higher. As of September 21, according to Worldometer, deaths per million cases in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh were respectively 64, 29, and 30.

Various scientific studies have shown that India's official tally of coronavirus cases grossly understates the pandemic's prevalence. The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) published a sero-survey, which measures the percentage of the population with coronavirus antibodies, on September 10. Conducted in 700 villages/wards from 70 districts across 21 states, the study found that in early May, India potentially had 6.4 million COVID-19 infections. This indicated an overall infection to case ratio (ICR), i.e., the ratio of undetected infections to confirmed cases, of between 82 and 130 to 1. Extrapolating from this finding, the survey concluded half of the Indian population could now have been infected with the virus.

These findings indicate the perilous situation produced by the BJP government's homicidal policy of "herd immunity," under which the virus is allowed to spread unchecked through the population. Such a policy invariably means accepting large-scale death, especially among the elderly and immune-compromised populations. One of the government's top epidemiological advisers, himself an advocate of herd immunity, admitted in the early stages of the pandemic that the

pursuit of such a criminal policy could result in the deaths of 2 million Indians.

Mass death on such a horrific scale is justified by the proponents of “herd immunity” with the need to protect the “economy” and corporate profits. As Vardhan told parliament, “We are in the stage of unlock to revive the economy.”

With the economy now largely reopened, the government has placed all responsibility for containing the virus onto working people. Prime Minister Modi’s advice for citizens to “follow all precautions including masks and social distancing” shows the utter contempt of the ruling class for the vast majority of the population, large sections of which live in slums or rural areas with no chance to follow basic hygiene measures or socially distance.

The BJP government sanctioned the reopening of workplaces and factories as early as late April. Despite the subsequent surge in infections, no restrictions have been put in place on big business’ profit-making operations. Moreover, public transport services throughout India such as buses, trains, metros (subways), and smaller vans cannot comply with public health precautions as they are crammed to capacity with people trying to get to work.

While no expense has been spared on supporting major companies and funding the Indian military, which recently held a ceremony to accept the first batch of a fleet of Rafale fighter jets worth some \$7.8 billion, the chronically under-funded public health care system is in crisis. Several states have reported severe shortages of oxygen and intensive care beds. Indian media outlets reported last week that four COVID-19 patients died in Madhya Pradesh due to oxygen shortages. Similar shortages have been reported by Maharashtra and Punjab. In Bengaluru (Bangalore), the main city in Karnataka, which recorded close to 10,000 new cases on Sunday, there is an acute shortage of ICU beds with ventilators.

Responding to a public outcry over the oxygen shortages, Health Ministry Secretary Rajesh Bhushan claimed that there is “no shortage” of medical oxygen and that the problem is with organizing the replenishing of supplies. However, figures from the All India Industrial Gases Manufacturers Association contradict this assertion, since they indicate that oxygen usage by hospitals has grown exponentially as the number of patients has risen. Compared to an average daily consumption of 750 tonnes by hospitals and care centers in April, this month’s daily consumption has shot up to 2,700 tonnes.

The Modi government and Indian ruling class’ herd immunity policy is the spearhead of their drive to intensify the exploitation of the working class and rural toilers.

Facing a catastrophic 23.9 percent drop in GDP in the April-June quarter and predictions of a year-long contraction of at least 5 percent, Modi has promised to implement a “quantum jump” of pro-investor reforms. The government has already announced a wave of privatizations, and in the face of mounting farmer protests, last week rammed through

parliament two laws that will facilitate the rapid expansion of agri-business. The government is also intent on passing three labor laws in the coming days that will further expand contract labour, gut restrictions on layoffs in the “formal” or large-scale enterprise sector, weaken India’s already notoriously lax occupational health and safety regulations, and outlaw many worker job actions.

This class war assault on the working class, goes hand-in-hand with the government’s aggressive drive to expand India’s reactionary, anti-China military-strategic partnership with US imperialism. With active encouragement from Washington and the support of the opposition Congress Party, the Modi government has taken a provocative, bellicose stand in the current border crisis with China; while working with the US, and its principal Asia-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia, to bully and entice western-based firms to develop India into an alternative manufacturing production-chain hub to China.

Fearing the growing opposition of workers and rural toilers to its right-wing policies and ruinous response to the pandemic, the BJP government is also exploiting the tensions with China to whip up national chauvinism, and it continues to shamelessly promote anti-Muslim Hindu communalism with the aim of dividing the working class.

In this situation, the Indian Stalinists are playing a treacherous role. They are redoubling their efforts to shackle the working class to the BJP’s ruling class opponents—the big business Congress Party, which has long spearheaded the capitalist elite’s neo-liberal agenda and pursuit of a “global strategic partnership” with US imperialism, and various regional-chauvinist and caste-based bourgeois parties.

The main Stalinist party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, is in the process of formalizing an electoral alliance with the Congress in West Bengal, India’s fourth largest state. Earlier this month, the CPM publicly welcomed Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi’s choice of president of the party’s state unit, declaring him the right person to lead the “Congress-CPM alliance.”

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