

India's Covid Crisis: Can the Modi Regime Get India Out of It?

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It's hard to live in India these days, surrounded by death, fear and grief. We are inundated with heart-breaking TV reports of people begging for hospital beds and oxygen as their family members die on the pavement or in vehicles gasping for breath. Others die inside hospitals as they run out of oxygen. Equally disturbing are reports of crematorium and burial ground staff working 24/7 and still unable to get through the huge number of corpses, so that extra pyres have to be set up in parks and car parks; the massive discrepancy between those who are cremated or buried under Covid protocols and the official figures is explained by the fact that officials have been told not to write 'Covid-19' as the cause of death, suggesting to some experts that the real death toll may be 2 to 5 times higher than the reported figure.[1] Other medical experts say the death toll could be up to 10 times the official one.[2] Let's spell this out, for the sake of clarity. Twice the official death count of over 250,000 would bring it to 500,000 deaths, five times would bring it to 1.25 million, while 10 times would bring it up to 2.5 million. And since the cases are similarly undercounted due to the lack of testing, they too are probably the highest in the world.

These images from major cities have been flashed around the world, but what is happening in villages is even more terrifying. In the villages of Uttar Pradesh (UP), for example, cases and deaths have surged as a consequence of panchayat (village council) elections and 'people are dropping dead like flies'. People with severe Covid symptoms are sent to district hospitals, where all too often they die because there is no oxygen; but they are not tested so these are not recorded as Covid deaths. Others die at home, untested, as hospitals ask patients to arrange for oxygen cylinders themselves. Hospitals and families desperately appealing for oxygen as well as social activists doing their best to respond to these appeals have been threatened by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) chief minister with confiscation of their property for spreading rumours because, he says, there is no oxygen shortage in UP.[3]

How did this happen?

There were, of course, long-term problems with India's healthcare system, due to the failure of

successive governments to invest more than around 1.25 percent of GDP in it. And the deadliness of the second wave, probably driven by new and more transmissible variants, has taken everyone by surprise. But there was a whole year since the lockdown of March 24, 2020, to prepare for this onslaught. Why wasn't it used to minimise the scale of the second surge?

One reason, clearly, was Prime Minister Narendra Modi's boast at the World Economic Forum in January 2021 that India 'has saved humanity from a big disaster by containing corona effectively,' which he apparently believed.[4] As recently as March 2021, Health Minister Harsh Vardhan made the delusional claim that "We are in the end game of the Covid-19 pandemic in India." [5]

In a hard-hitting statement, Dr Navjot Dahiya, vice-president of the Indian Medical Association, called Modi a 'super-spreader' for holding political rallies 'tossing all Covid-19 norms in the air,' and for encouraging millions of pilgrims to attend the Kumbh Mela at Haridwar in Uttarakhand.[6] The criminal recklessness of Modi's behaviour is magnified when we factor in the unprecedented prolongation of the Bengal elections to *eight* phases by the Election Commission, acting under Modi's instructions, as most supposedly independent institutions now do. In fact, the Kumbh Mela was not even due until 2022, but was advanced to 2021 because of some astrological configuration; the BJP chief minister allowed devotees to crowd together without masks or physical distancing in the belief that the 'flow and blessings of Ma Ganga [Mother Ganges] will ensure coronavirus doesn't spread.' [7] The previous chief minister had been removed when he suggested subjecting the Kumbh Mela to restrictions in view of the Covid surge, illustrating the tendency whereby all power in the BJP is now concentrated in the PM; only those who fit in with his agenda can survive. The government at the centre and in BJP-ruled states is now synonymous with Modi.

If we go back a little further, we can detect two massive mistakes that have led to the current holocaust. One, which has become very obvious now, is the failure to ramp up oxygen supplies. The need for doing this was flagged as long ago as April 1, 2020, in a meeting of government officials.[8] Yet nothing was done until October 21, when the Central Medical Services Society (CMSS), an institution under the central Health Ministry, floated tenders for 150 (later raised to 162) Pressure Swing Adsorption (PSA) oxygen plants for district hospitals across the country; six months later, only 33 of them had been installed, and only 5 were functioning. All 162 plants cost only Rs 2,015,800.[9] Meanwhile, inexplicably, India exported twice as much oxygen in the first ten months of fiscal 2020-2021 as it did in the entire previous financial year.[10] If ten times the number of PSA plants had been ordered in April 2020 and the CMSS had ensured they were installed and functioning by April 2021, if oxygen had been stockpiled instead of being exported, and if oxygen distribution had been streamlined, we would not be seeing the thousands of deaths per day that doctors tell us are entirely preventable.

Vaccines too save lives and cut transmission of the disease. It is not true that India produces 60 percent of the world's vaccines (it only supplies 60 percent of *UNICEF's* vaccines), but it is home to the world's largest vaccine manufacturer, the Serum Institute of India (SII), which is one of the few which already had influenza vaccine-producing capacity which could easily be switched to producing Covid-19 vaccines.[11] It was therefore welcome news when SII CEO Adar Poonawalla announced in late December 2020 that he had already produced and stockpiled 40-50 million doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, called Covishield in India, which had completed its Phase 3 trials in other countries. He expected to expand production to 100 million doses per month in March 2021 and 300 million doses per month by July. While SII had an agreement to supply 200 million doses to COVAX, to be distributed to other developing countries, most of the rest would be made available in India, especially the initial batch.[12]

One would have expected the government to start Phase 1 of the vaccination drive (for healthcare and hospital workers) at the beginning of January, but it started only on the 16th and even then very

slowly. The reason for the delay seems to have been that the government wanted a simultaneous roll-out of Covaxin, indigenously developed by Bharat Biotech with funding from the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), without waiting for it to complete its Phase 3 trials; health professionals who objected were told that if they were allotted Covaxin, they had to take it or not be vaccinated at all.[13] Even more reprehensible is the fact that unlike other countries, which provided advance funding to vaccine producers and tied up huge orders, the Indian government contributed nothing to the development or production of Covishield, and ordered only 11 million doses initially, along with 5.5 million doses of Covaxin, which is also a 2-dose vaccine.[14] By February, it ordered 10 million more doses of Covishield, still at the price of Rs 150 per dose which, according to Poonawalla, provided a small profit but not enough to reinvest in expanding production. When the government banned exports, he lost the income he had been counting on to increase production. In April he borrowed Rs 30 billion from banks, after which the Centre said it had authorised a loan of the same amount to SII and Rs 15 billion to Bharat Biotech to enable them to ramp up supplies; but due to the delay, 100 million doses per month would only be available after July, he said.[15]

This is surely a monumental botch-up. Despite being home to the manufacturer of one of the cheapest Covid-19 vaccines in the world, the government of India did not invest in expanding production or securing vaccine supplies in advance of the second wave. Modi, who has been acclaimed by his supporters for being business-friendly, doesn't seem to understand that businesses need investments and markets. The Centre placed an order for 110 million additional doses of Covishield in March, when cases were rising exponentially, but by April, vaccination centres were closing and people above 45 years were being turned away because vaccines had run out. In the midst of the vaccine crunch and knowing very well that it had pre-ordered the existing supply, the Centre announced that from May 1, 18-44-year-olds could get vaccinated, and while 50 percent of domestic vaccine production would go to the Centre, 50 percent would be sold to state governments at Rs 400 per dose for Covishield (later reduced to Rs 300), and Rs 600 per dose to private hospitals, with higher prices for Covaxin.

This announcement was received with widespread criticism because it would result in states and private buyers competing with each other to buy 50 percent of the vaccines. The price differential between the Centre and the states is certainly unjustifiable, but a deeper problem with the whole vaccination drive has received less attention. The requirement for registration and the mode of registration – you need to have a computer or smart phone with access to the internet, and it's a complicated process – makes it inaccessible to the poor. The vast majority of people queuing up to get vaccinated (except for hospital workers like cleaners) appear to be from the upper and middle classes, and this impression is confirmed by an India Today report by Preeti Choudhary, in which she found that not a single person in a Delhi slum had been vaccinated. The same is undoubtedly true for other slum-dwellers as well as villagers; the approximately 10 percent of the population which has received one dose of vaccine and 2 percent who have received two doses excludes the poor. Given the grossly unfair roll-out of the vaccination drive so far, it could actually be an improvement if state governments begin schemes to take (free) vaccines to slums and villages while employers pay for their employees (and in some cases their families too) to get vaccinated.[16]

None of this was necessary. If the Centre had placed a massive order with SII at the beginning of January and paid enough in advance to enable the company to expand production, there would have been millions of doses more available for the over-45s by March; but you can't scale up production overnight – you need to construct or convert specialised bio-safety level 3 (BSL3) facilities, buy Covid vaccine-manufacturing equipment and raw materials, recruit and train additional workers and pay them decent salaries. Since the government had complete confidence in the safety and efficacy of Covaxin, it could have done the same with Bharat Biotech, and in addition licensed public sector

pharmaceutical units like the Haffkine Institute to produce it, as it has now started doing, since the ICMR is a government institution. It would then not have been left scrambling to buy more expensive vaccines at a time when vaccines are in short supply globally, and would eventually have had enough vaccines to supply to other developing countries.

Was he sleeping?

Instead of saving humanity from a disaster by containing Covid, India now threatens humanity with disaster by becoming a breeding-ground of lethal new strains of the virus, and more and more countries are understandably closing their borders to us. Modi's slogan of *aatmanirbhar* (self-reliance) has quietly been buried as India becomes a recipient of aid from all over the world, including much poorer developing countries. How did this happen? Was he sleeping?

On the contrary, he has been extremely busy implementing his core agenda of converting India into a Hindu Rashtra with himself as absolute ruler. Modi belongs to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), to which the BJP and thousands of other organisations are affiliated, forming what is known as the Sangh Parivar (Sangh family). Its ideology is Hindutva (not to be confused with the religion Hinduism), and goal is to convert India into a Hindu Rashtra, whose characteristics we will explore below. Modi has worked tirelessly to crown himself as the head of it. Early in the pandemic, he hosted Trump at a super-spreader event designed to promote Modi's image in India. Before Trump left India, members of the Sangh Parivar organised an anti-Muslim pogrom in Delhi facilitated by the Delhi police, which is controlled by the Centre.[17] No one was punished for those killings. Hindu Rashtra is a country in which Muslims can be murdered with impunity.

In April and May 2020, peaceful protesters against the Citizenship Amendment Act, which discriminates against Muslims and ignited fears that Muslims would be deprived of their citizenship and voting rights, were arrested and jailed under a draconian anti-terror law. The accused included Safoora Zargar, a student of Jamia Millia Islamia University who was pregnant at the time, and Kalita Devangana and Natasha Narwal of Jawaharlal Nehru University, both activists of *Pinjra Tod* (Break the Cage), a women's rights group.[18] These young women were among many more framed and jailed for defending the Indian Constitution, which prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion.

Among others arrested by the anti-terrorist National Investigation Agency (NIA) in this period and incarcerated in Covid-infested prisons were Dalit scholar and public intellectual Anand Teltumbde and civil rights activist Gautam Navlakha (arrested April 14); Delhi University associate professor and anti-caste crusader Hany Babu M.T. (arrested July 28); and 83-year-old Stan Swamy, a Jesuit priest and tribal rights activist who suffers from multiple ailments including Parkinson's disease (arrested October 8). They joined labour lawyer Sudha Bharadwaj, English professor Shoma Sen, writer and Dalit rights activist Sudhir Dhawale, advocates Surendra Gadling and Vernon Gonsalves, social activist and researcher Mahesh Raut, journalist Arun Ferreira, political prisoners' rights activist Rona Wilson, and writer Varavara Rao, all accused in the same case.[19] In February 2021, the *Washington Post* reported that American digital forensics company Arsenal Consulting, which had examined cloned copies of Rona Wilson's hard disk and thumb drive, concluded that the letters used as key evidence to implicate him and the rest of the accused were in files planted using malware, and had not even been opened by him. Yet the NIA opposed bail and continued to pursue the cases against them.[20] Evidently human and democratic rights must be stamped out in Hindu Rashtra, and the rule of law will not be allowed to get in the way of that process.

During this period, most BJP-ruled states passed love jihad laws which criminalise not just love and marriage but even friendship between Muslim men or boys and Hindu women or girls; the men and boys, if convicted, would be put behind bars, while the women or girls would be delivered into the

custody of their parents or state-run homes.[21] While the intention to persecute Muslims is obvious, these laws also show that love and friendship as well as women's agency have to be stamped out in Hindu Rashtra. So do science and rationality. The BJP's assault on these values continued over 2020-2021, and had a direct impact on the response to Covid-19, with BJP leaders proclaiming that cow urine, cow dung and yoga could ward off the virus.[22] We saw above that the waters of the Ganges too were supposed to have that property. How can we fight Covid-19 if that is what India's leaders believe?

On September 22, 2020, three new labour codes were passed in parliament by voice vote after just three hours of discussion. All of them took away existing rights from workers. A code on wages had already been passed in 2019. The central trade unions burned copies of the four codes on April 1, 2021 - the day when they were scheduled to come into effect - and demanded their withdrawal.[23] They were perhaps taking a leaf out of the book of millions of farmers protesting against three farm laws, also passed in September 2020 in similar circumstances, and demanding their repeal. The farmers argued that the laws would ruin 85 percent of farmers, deprive many of them of their land, and benefit only billionaires Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani, both close to Modi, who were planning to go into agribusiness.[24] After months of intimidation and demonisation failed to disperse the farmers, the government barricaded the roads leading into Delhi with barbed wire, boulders, walls, and iron nails embedded in concrete to keep them - the people who grow the food we eat every day - out of the capital city of their own country![25]

A major obstacle to realising Hindu Rashtra is the existence of states ruled by opposition parties; removing this obstacle has been an obsession of Modi and his right-hand man, Home Minister Amit Shah. One way of doing this was visible to all during the recent elections: numerous election rallies with high-pitched speeches full of bigotry and misogyny. Voters are bribed with promises: in recent elections, voters in Bihar and Bengal were told they would get Covid vaccines free if the BJP comes to power, implying that if the BJP loses they would be left to die. The BJP did come to power in Bihar amidst allegations of vote-rigging but Biharis are still dying in their thousands, showing how empty these promises are.

Less visible are the machinations before, after and between elections. One is bribing or blackmailing opposition legislators to resign. The Congress government of Madhya Pradesh was brought down in March 2020 when 22 Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) resigned, and the Congress-Draida Munetra Kazhagam (DMK) government in Puducherry was brought down in February 2021 when 6 MLAs resigned. Often opposition representatives are bribed before elections, or, if they refuse to be bought, the Centre uses tools like the Income-Tax and Anti-Corruption authorities to harass them and their relatives. In the run-up to the Bengal elections, the BJP bought up dozens of MLAs from the Trinamool Congress (TMC) and other parties, but still lost the election. In Maharashtra, the BJP tried to topple the Maha Vikas Aghadi government after a policeman, who had been implicated in a supposed terror plot against Mukesh Ambani and the subsequent murder of his accomplice, made allegations of corruption against the state Home Minister; they forced him to resign just as the second Covid wave hit Maharashtra. The efforts to pull down the government are still ongoing, despite the fact that the Supreme Court has commended the way that Maharashtra has handled the Covid crisis. The BJP's priorities are clear.

Among countless photo-ops and homilies that keep Modi's face and voice constantly before the public, two events stand out. On August 5, 2020, he laid the foundation stone for a grand Ram temple in Ayodhya. It is to be built on the site of the Babri Mosque, which was demolished on December 6, 1992, as part of a bloody anti-Muslim campaign in which Modi took part, and can be considered to be the heart of Hindu Rashtra. Then on December 10, 2020, Modi laid the foundation stone of the Central Vista Project in central Delhi, a vanity project which costs Rs 200,000,000,000 and includes a new palace for Modi. Work on the project has been classified as an 'essential service,'

and continues even under lockdown. Ordinary citizens have made back-of-the-envelope calculations of how many hospitals, oxygen concentrators, oxygen cylinders, vaccines, Covid-19 tests, etc. could be produced or bought with this money,[26] but Modi's priority is to concentrate power in his hands, not save lives. Concentration of power also entails censoring criticism that dents his image[27] and lying relentlessly about how everything is fine and there are no shortages of oxygen or vaccines, even as courageous reporters bring us stories of Covid deaths in every family in rural UP, and dead bodies being dumped in rivers in UP and Bihar as they run out of wood for pyres.

These activities of the Modi regime over the past 15 months make it clear that in order to fight against Covid, we have to fight the regime at every level. We need to know exactly what is happening and where, but the regime covers up this information. We need science and rationality, but the regime actively undermines these values. We need money to be spent on life-saving oxygen, vaccines, etc., but instead the regime is spending stupendous sums of money on expanding and consolidating power. Above all we need humanity, but the regime has none.

What can we do?

An effective fight against Covid-19 depends on our recognising that India is in an undeclared civil war between a Hindutva dictatorship and a secular democratic republic, and that the Hindutva dictatorship, currently in power at the Centre and in several states, has neither the will nor the competence to defeat the virus.

Dr Anthony Fauci has recommended a national lockdown and the Congress Party has echoed him. With all due respect, I beg to disagree. Even the local lockdowns in Mumbai and Delhi sent migrant workers fleeing these cities; if they were not infected with Covid already, there was a good chance they would pick it up in crowded trains and buses and carry it to their villages. In any case, what does physical distancing mean in slums where a three-generation family or eight migrant workers live in one small room, and 300 people share a toilet and water-tap? For these people as well as the rural population, the only hope lies in getting vaccinated, but this is precisely what they are being deprived of.

It is certainly necessary to demand transparency from the Centre regarding how many vaccine doses they have acquired and how they are being distributed, since the Centre is still supposed to be supplying free vaccines to the over-45s. The letter by 12 opposition parties to the PM proposing that the Centre divert money from the Central Vista Project and Modi's opaque PMCare fund to procure enough vaccines for a free, universal vaccine campaign, oxygen and other medical supplies, as well as funding welfare measures and repealing the farm laws, makes excellent demands.[28]

Unfortunately, Modi is not likely to take this advice, so the states need to take action too. One possibility is for opposition-ruled states to form a consortium and negotiate directly with Poonawalla, requesting that the price of vaccines for state governments, which are much poorer than the Centre, should not be higher. They could also ask him what is required for SII to expand production to 300 million doses per month by July, as he was originally intending? After all, at that level, SII could produce 1.8 billion doses in six months, enough to provide an additional 90 million Indians with two doses. If he says that a certain amount of investment is required, they could look for financing. They could do the same with Bharat Biotech's Krishna Ella. This would be cheaper than individual states floating global tenders. As and when other vaccines become available, they could add them to speed up the vaccination drive.

Ensuring that the vaccines reach slums and villages is also a priority. For vaccines supplied by the Centre, this would require a tech-savvy task force to go out and help these people to get registered, tell them where to go, and ensure that vaccines are available when they turn up at the designated centres. This would have to be done across the country, including BJP-ruled states. For vaccines

supplied by the states, more flexible arrangements could be made, setting up vaccination centres close to where people live.

Foreign medical aid is welcome, but countries sending it through the government should be aware that there is absolutely no transparency about how it is being distributed, and it is not reaching those who need it most, who continue to die in their thousands every day.[29] The only information given to us by the Health Ministry is that the aid has been sent to 38 elite institutions and hospitals run by the central government, in which no shortages of oxygen or other medical supplies has been reported. A targeted approach would be much more effective, but efforts by foreign donors to send aid directly to non-profits working on the ground have been sabotaged by the Modi regime's amendment to the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act in September 2020, at the height of the first surge, which ensures that "The organizations best placed to respond to community needs at the grass roots in a timely, agile manner are unable to access these donors." [30] In other words, Modi is blocking life-saving foreign aid in order to consolidate his vice-like grip on power. Providing funds to vaccine producers in India to scale up production rapidly, in return for a commitment that they will provide vaccines at cost price to the central and state governments in India as well as COVAX for at least a year, would be of major importance. It would create a win-win situation, helping to end the Covid surge in India and other developing countries while allowing the companies to sell at a profit later.

The international press and human rights organisations are on the whole clear about the nature of the Modi regime, but Western governments seem to be treating it as a *democratic* counterweight to Xi Jinping's China! This makes no sense. Xi is erasing all traces of Muslims in China, and Modi is doing the same in India; Xi supports the genocidal Myanmar military, and so does Modi; Xi unleashed Covid-19 on the world by victimising doctors who warned of it, and Modi is spreading the virus. Modi is as brutal as Xi, and treating him as an ally will simply help him to crush the remaining vestiges of democracy in India and continue his disastrous Covid policy.

Despite the ghastly situation in India, there are still brave journalists risking their lives to bring us the truth about what is happening across the country, and humane people putting their own lives on hold in order to save the lives of others. Truth, courage, humanity: that is what we need to get us out of this crisis.

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