



COVID-19 CATASTROPHE IN INDIA : AN UNFOLDING TRAGEDY

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)

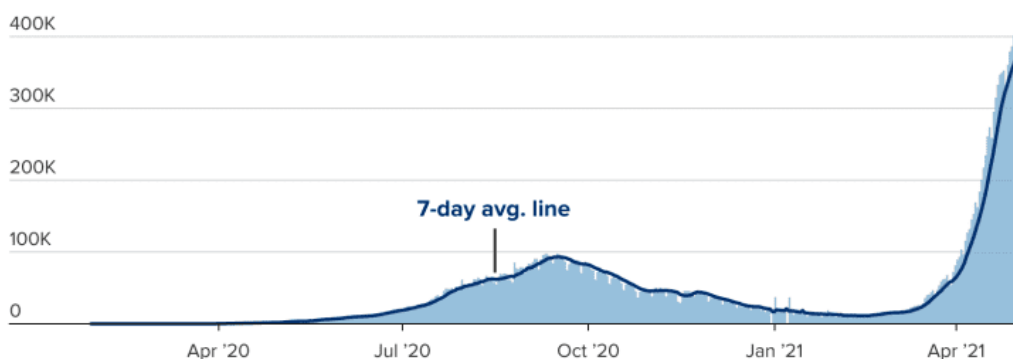


There seems to be no respite for mankind from the deadly Covid-19 virus as after wreaking havoc in the US and Europe, the virus has now turned towards South Asia and India has become new hotspot.

At the moment, the total number of positive cases stands at 20.28 million whereas some 222,408 people have lost their lives. Of 20.28 million positive cases, at least 10 million cases were reported in the last five months of 2021, particularly in April as is shown in the graph below.

Daily Covid cases in India

While the second wave began in February, infection numbers surged in April. Nearly 7 million new cases were reported in April.



Source: Johns Hopkins University. As of April 30, 2021.



Source: Saheli Roy Chaudhury, "India reports more than 357,000 new Covid cases as total crosses 20 million," CNBC, May 5, 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/05/04/india-covid-crisis-total-reported-cases-cross-20-million.html>

With positivity rate as high as 400,000 cases per day, the hospitals are now filled, and patients are being sent away. There is growing shortage of medicines as well as lifesaving oxygen cylinders. Images of people lying outside hospitals gasping for oxygen has left the world in absolute horror. Funeral pyres are burning round the clock and cremation grounds are running out of space. As a result, dead bodies are now being seen floating in rivers, particularly the Ganges.¹ This heart wrenching situation in India reached a point where a report published in New York Times had described it as “Crematories are so full of bodies, it’s as if a war just happened.”²

This unfolding calamity has given way to number of questions most important of which is how India not foresaw and take precautionary measures before the second wave of corona took India in its deadly grip.

Interestingly, on February 21, 2021 the Bharatiya Janata Party in its office bearers meeting had announced its victory against Covid. The resolution that was passed at the occasion stated “it can be said with pride that India not only defeated Covid under the able, sensitive, committed and visionary leadership of Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi..... The party unequivocally hails its leadership for introducing India to the world as a proud and victorious nation in the fight against Covid.”³ Only a month later warning signs had already started to surface which were unfortunately completely ignored by the government.

¹ “India’s holiest river Ganges is swollen with Covid victims,” *BBC News*, May 19, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-57154564>

² Jeffrey Gettleman “‘This is a catastrophe.’ In India, illness is everywhere,” *The New York Times*, April 28, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/27/world/asia/India-delhi-covid-cases.html>

³ “Resolution Passed in BJP National Office Bearers Meeting at NDMC Convention Centre, New Delhi,” Bharatiya Janata Party, February 21, 2021, https://www.bjp.org/en/pressreleasesdetail/4491198/Resolution-passed-in-BJP-National-Office-Bearers-meeting-at-NDMC-Convention-Centre-New-Delhi-?__cf_chl_captcha_tk__=992a53179b367e79b95e78e78097cf5ae0718f30-1621246827-0-ASzXA1T-BfXMRPyuy48B3YIG9WGrycM1xMMQHUB2bhctzvFuKee2PQ1QBjPPTCO0va4aSNd7ZIIYnm74ujwJKFRYGIR3rnHGcE_5Ns7Q0wb2viG2fIA2AwAkGvqAR_x2jFmDua_KCITvEn9BFA0Y1NnFB4r7ZeNpPSdJNYsXYIBItkpJ7TfCYMfJrXp4QJEBKOLS_k-8jLkjDZj_vc1w4lslk2Qm7KbY6cHsr2_uiwoTqagXuEorg1sC7hDHPeRd2a5mILNFULnsTq51tZxLiNnGI_mFcS3k3CfMhZEx4o4Uje6uLD9FaHWBg-sBnaQTFXMMaftIV_-fy3XatrQG2RqLErllAtkab5HARCKryQPlzFtntDai8h7g8iaV3tPI7UMjXFM7M0ju9Qb-KX896GE3ukNtH_YTVxt1jjOpEYjjouY4UC6fjXvGYZznhqMp_56becnt4wrx0q67ViRnN82skWvIHssnasaMb53INAmKoaiypcoNsGr42JPzFPWxbnocSTLimMHHOFLdYMR0DEV8OqCKyr-YuG_K_q9WSgXmDSerSnA5GGH0RenmwX9EzK3ZF3MZabGPvHXfhWxpvqAiXGVvjJVK3eg0HH-AHqylpjkzsHTb8BMRBdhHylP8zEAo_8KfUTgPB0a0aldR24jCVUY9JSd-9YcW_CuFm5yi2iflrN470lx_C9m_Ch2QbWi7vh1-3Gk0B7Woz0MJXYM2YTyZjlyd-s3_k8_E4xUI10n5XEs2gxcQQ143IH_5yykfDu8dLl2MwVxOM84On8oDloKiA8clCkBlgk0mmwYTq9aiQ4W86VsswrqKp91t5rIKzV_x3V4hi3tmoGPA8

Days after BJP passed its resolution, the Election Commission announced elections in five states involving 186 million people.⁴ Extensive election campaigns were held where Covid SoPs or social distancing were seldom followed. In March 2021, around 130,000 Indians were allowed to watch two international games of cricket between India and England in Gujarat. Slow vaccination drive is also said to be one reason for the devastation caused by Covid. On top of this, the Modi government also allowed Hindu religious festival the Kumbh mela throughout the month of April in Haridwar where some 7 million people are said to have participated.⁵ Reservations were expressed on government's decision to allow Kumbh mela and in the words of Ashish Jha, the Dean of the School of Public Health at Brown University, the Kumbh mela *"may end up being the biggest super spreader in the history of this pandemic,"*⁶

Interestingly, last year when the first wave of corona virus had hit India, a gathering of a Tableeghi Jamaat with its few thousand Muslims had met between 13-15 March, 2020. It was time when advisories against mass gathering were being issued and most of the participants had already left the premises leaving behind only around 1000 participants who could not leave mainly because all trains and flights were suddenly suspended. When the news of this gathering came to light, the Muslims across India were targeted with all sorts of hate incidents and were held responsible for spreading the virus by the media and members of the ruling elite alike. However, when critics point to Kumbh mela as a source of spreading the virus, the BJP leaders were quick to defend saying that people's health is a priority but matters of faith cannot be totally ignored⁷ or faith is above Covid protocols⁸. It is also worth mentioning here that while Hindus attended their religious gathering in huge numbers, the minorities particularly Muslims and Christians were under restrictions with limited number of worshipers.

The faulty policies and mismanagement that resulted in the catastrophe that has befallen India has invited wrath of the Indian people towards its leadership. Trends like #ResignModi

⁴ "Covid-19: How India failed to prevent a deadly second wave," BBC News, April 19, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-56771766>

⁵ "70 lakh participated in Kumbh mela held amid covid surge," NDTV, May 1, 2021, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/70-lakh-participated-in-kumbh-mela-amid-covid-19-surge-2425654>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "People's health a priority, but matters of faith cannot be totally ignored: Uttarakhand CM," India TV, April 14, 2021, <https://www.indiatvnews.com/news/india/kumbh-mela-uttarakhand-cm-tirath-singh-rawat-statement-697575>

⁸ "Faith is above covid protocols: UP BJP MLA defends massive crowds in Haridwar's Kumbh mela," *The Logical Indian*, April 17, 2021, <https://thelogicalindian.com/trending/sunil-bharala-covid-kumbh-mela-27862>

and #ModiMustResign⁹ were seen trending at the top. The criticism was so harsh that the Modi government had sent notices to Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to remove around 100 posts and block number of accounts that were critical of the government. Interestingly, the General Secretary of the Indian National Students Union had filed a missing persons complaint at the Parliament Street Police station in Delhi as *“he wanted the absence of political leadership when India had been brought to its knees by Covid-19 to be a matter of official record.”*¹⁰

BJP’s government’s over confidence and overlooking the early signs of Covid second wave has cast a dark cloud over India. Since India has become an epicentre of Covid 19, Pakistan needs to exercise extreme caution. Strict adherence to SoPs is required and more and more people should be encouraged to vaccinate themselves. A contingency plan in case such a calamity befalls Pakistan must be prepared.

⁹ “As public outrage spikes, #ResignPMModi, #ModiMustResign trends on Twitter,” DT Next, April 30, 2021, <https://www.dtnext.in/News/National/2021/04/30123637/1291153/As-public-outrage-spikes-ResignPMmodi-ModiMustResign-.vpf>

¹⁰ “‘Everybody is angry’ : Modi under fire over India’s covid second wave,” *The Guardian*, May 17, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/17/everybody-is-angry-modi-under-fire-over-indias-covid-second-wave>