

Gasping for Oxygen

April and May saw a reeling India gasping for Oxygen while the new Indian variant of Corona (*delta*) devastated the whole country. Even the rich and the powerful were frantically running from pillar to post in pursuit of oxygen cylinder to save their loved ones. News emerged from the capital and major cities about the people falling dead like a fish out of water on the street, pavements, hospital premises, in the three wheelers, etc. Ambulance run short, medical personals and hospital beds were insufficient to handle the pandemic. The health care system completely collapsed. Pharmacies ran out of basic medicines like vitamins, zinc and paracetamol. Crematoriums ran out of wood and pyre and bodies were piled up for days. Getting a Covid test took up to a week. While saving their dear ones, many lost their own lives. Oxygen crisis persisted for weeks while corona virus continued to spread.

How did India reach there ?

Situations seemed under control in January and the country was getting out of the lockdown. On February 12, schools from classes 6 to 8 opened. On March 1, classes



Hindus believe the body must be destroyed to force the soul to separate from it. Many couldn't even do that as the crematorium ran out of pyre and wood.

from primary 1 to 5 opened. However, it didn't last long, just three weeks before the situation became out of control. The administration failed to foresee that the country was heading towards a humanitarian crisis. The UK and the USA, were hit harder by the second wave and the example was in front of India to get ready for the second wave. Negligence was on the part of the government for not to prepare the country while it came back to a calm. Officials had warned of looming oxygen shortages in April 2020, and then again in November, the government didn't appear to take action.

Here are major remarks from the government officials during this period.

On January 28, India reported 18,855 covid case per day and Prime Minister Narendra Modi proudly said « *India has saved the world, entire humanity, from a major tragedy by effectively controlling corona virus* »

On March 7, there were 18,599 new cases. Union Health Minister tweeted « *We are in the end game of the covid 19 pandemic in India* ».

On March 27, the cases surged to 62,714 and the legislative assembly election started in two States (Assam and West Bengal), politicians held series of huge gatherings and rallies over the following weeks.



People have died waiting for beds, and oxygen supplies. India's death toll is over 390,000 with 30 over million infected. Real numbers could be 5 to 10 times higher.

On March 30, recorded 53,480 cases and the health minister failed to see the second wave coming, he affirmed « *The situation is under control* ».

On April 1, Massive number of religious pilgrims arrived in *Haridwar* for the *Kumbha Mela* festival, the biggest in the world. Recorded number of cases on this day was 81,466. In the coming days, the cases started to go up and after a report of surging infection and death, the pilgrimage was stopped. People from different parts of the country got infected and went back to their villages with the corona. In spite of this hiking infections, Prime minister continued to hold rallies.

On April 17, Modi cheered the crowd in the election rally, without even wearing a mask : « *I have never seen such a big crowd.* » On this day there were 261,349 new cases.

Each day since April 22, the country reported more than 300,000 new cases. Death toll started to climb as the hospitals ran out of oxygen. Modi literally disappeared while all this was happening in the country.

This second wave, a more transmissible variant made deep inroads into smaller towns and remote vil-



Our staff motivate the elderly and bring them to the health centre for vaccination.



Coinciding with panchayat polls in May, Covid-19 cases soared 120%. 1,621 teachers on election duty died of corona in a month's time. On the picture : our staff waiting to cast their vote to elect the village leaders.

lages. People who returned from the cities and the pilgrimage carried the virus with them. Like a wild fire it spread into the villages. So many people got sick, and many died. Many student of the *St. Anthony's Schools* lost their parents. The private bus driver of the school who had been sick for two weeks was tested positive and few days later he passed away. On a daily basis we heard people from the neighboring villages known to us passing away. Without proper test-



ing, quarantine or hospital admissions the situation became much worse. No lockdown was imposed and life went on as usual. Most of these deaths in the villages are not in the official database because there's no testing done for a majority of cases. People are afraid of the social stigma, they do not want to acknowledge that it is corona.

In *Uttar Pradesh*, local elections took place in four phases from April 15 to 29. In each village of this 200 million populated state, the candidates and their groups were moving from one house to another, offering them liquor, throwing parties and gifts to get elected. This has made the situation much worse. Over 1,600 teachers who were on the election duty died of Covid in *Uttar Pradesh* !

India's holiest river, the Ganges, has been swollen with bodies

Hundreds of corpses have been found floating in the river or buried in the sand of its banks.

Traditionally, Hindus cremate their dead. But many people who couldn't afford cremation pushed the bodies into the river Ganges. When they couldn't find wood or a cremation spot, they just buried them on the river bed. There is 'massive' discrepancy in the death toll. The newsroom counting the uncounted deaths reckoned that the real number of deaths could be by a staggering factor of 10.

India's health system has been underfunded for years. India has 0.9 physicians per 1,000 people, well under the world average of 1.6, according to the World Bank.

Our Covid 19 Vaccination Campaign support

Schools were closed by the end of March and the online

classes started for all the grades. Though teachers started to take classes for small groups in the villages, it was stopped as the infection spread in the villages too. Teachers from the campus went back to their native states in mid May and continue to do the online classes from their home. Board exams of the classes 10 and 12 are cancelled. The reopening of the schools supposed to be in July but the uncertainty continues. The fear of the third wave is in the corner.

While the people from states like *Kerala* rush to get vaccinated, the north Indian villagers are hesitant to get the vaccination. Though people above 45 can get vaccination, only a small percentage of them have gone



Vaccination centres are set up in the villages in coordination with the local health centre.



Our vehicles move from one village to another in both *Asmoli* and *Rahrai* project areas to spread the awareness about the vaccination.

for it. Our field staff from *Asmoli* and *Rahrai* projects are doing their best to motivate the villagers to vaccinate. We spread awareness about its devastating effect if they do not protect themselves by social distancing, wearing masks and vaccination. Awareness messages were recorded about the importance of Vaccination and our vehicles move from one village to other, playing the recorded message. Field staff coordinate the vaccination program with the village leaders and health workers and arrange vaccination camps in villages. Our buses and cars have been at the disposal of the health workers and village leaders to bring those who are 45 and above in the PHC for the vaccination. Though more people are coming forward, its very slow. Our aim to reach the vaccination to 70% of the villagers seems highly ambitious except in few villages like *Dugawar*. Meanwhile the vaccination program from the side of the government also halted because of the shortage of vaccine.

India's ambitious Vaccination Program

The ambitious project to vaccinate 300 million people by July free of charge was short lived as vaccine stocks in the country nearly dried up. In April, when India was hit by a dramatic surge in case numbers and India's vaccine drive was faltering central government asked the State government to procure the vaccine on their own. This brought strong criticism even from India's top court, and following the strong criticism, Modi was forced to go back to the original policy of providing free vaccination. Latest news is that by the end of the year, all will be vaccinated. The gov-

ernment's target is for two billion doses to be made between August and the end of 2021, to fully vaccinate the entire adult population. These projections for the manufacture of currently approved vaccines in India still fall a long way short of the government's ambition of two billion vaccines to be produced before the end of the year. At the current pace, it could take up to 1.6 years for the adult population to get vaccinated.

The year 2021 began with the hope that development, manufacture and deployment of vaccines would soon bring Covid 19 pandemic to an end. Halfway through the year, vaccination is underway in the world, albeit at a much slower pace for the mostly poor nations. India is still far from reaching its own target. The UN-backed Covax scheme to provide doses to low and middle-income countries is also halted as India couldn't meet the demand from within. The second wave is on the downward trend ; the third wave is expected around November, this interval must be used as a buffer to launch the vaccination campaign into overdrive. By the first week of June, only 3.26 percent of the total population is vaccinated in India.

The sheer magnitude of its 1.38 billion population, makes it difficult to execute a swift rollout.



India's 1.38-billion population, majority of them living in the villages, makes it difficult to execute a swift rollout.