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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### Underreporting of COVID-19 Deaths in India: Bad Science or Smart Politics?

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#### ABSTRACT:

COVID-19 pandemic has devastated the world over the past three years with millions already dead. Despite making major strides to combat the pandemic with useful vaccines against the SARS-CoV-2 virus, potential for more dangers from new variants of COVID-19 cannot be ruled out. Several studies have recently shown that the number of COVID-19 deaths as reported by different nations was far less than the number of people who may have died due to pandemic. Although many countries across the globe may have undercounted the death toll due to COVID-19, India holds the ignominious distinction for the highest number of unrecognized COVID-19 deaths. Both unreliable science and willful spread of misinformation about true lethal nature of COVID-19 by devious governmental authorities are likely responsible for the gross underreporting of COVID-19 deaths. Complete scientific transparency and absolute immunity against political intrusion of healthcare would be essential to end the COVID-19 pandemic and to protect humanity against other pandemics in future.

**Introduction:**

While the acute global devastation caused by the SARS-CoV2 virus disease (COVID-19) pandemic over the past more than three years may have waned to some extent due to remarkable scientific advances made with useful vaccines production against the virus and improved socio-behavioral responses by the governments in most countries, potential for serious public health threats from COVID-19 still exists that may require a broader scientific and sociopolitical cooperation between countries across the globe for effective control of the pandemic in the future. A recent study conducted by a multidisciplinary panel by major governmental and non-governmental organizations from 112 countries has echoed a similar concern about future of COVID-19 as experts from across the globe have provided over one hundred specific medical as well as socio-political recommendations, many of which were consensus opinions, for preventing another major global catastrophe and effectively ending the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>1</sup>.

Another comprehensive report by the *Lancet* Commission on COVID-19 has pointed fingers to the governmental authorities of many countries for not maintaining public transparency and for failing to adhere to the basic scientific rationality for the incredible death toll already inflicted by the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>2</sup>. The study by the *Lancet* Commission has also reported that local and national political leaders in different countries have frequently played an irresponsible role by spreading scientific misinformation about COVID-19 and suggested that such letdowns by the governmental authorities may have contributed to the staggering number of global deaths from the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>2</sup>.

One of the most dreadful aspects of the misinformation about COVID-19 promoted in several countries has been the categorical denial of the correct number of fatalities caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The World Health Organization (WHO) has estimated that about 15 million excess deaths from COVID-19 may have occurred compared to the officially admitted mortality figures by various nations during 2020-21<sup>3</sup>. Not surprisingly, most nations blamed for deliberately minimizing the COVID-19 mortality rate rejected the WHO report of excessive deaths without providing any valid explanation. Lack of transparency and/or willful spread of unreliable scientific views by government leaders falsely claiming reduced mortality and morbidity rates due to the COVID-19 may have worked for a short-term political gain for these political personalities but in

the long-run, such devious ploys always backfire and in the present context, spread of misinformation about reduced mortality by the government may already have contributed to the massive human destruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The shocking spread of misinformation and disinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic by governmental authorities in various countries have also exposed the glaring lacunae in the present healthcare delivery system. Nothing can do more harm to the society for combating a serious epidemic or pandemic caused by a new and little-known virus like the COVID-19 than deliberate manipulation of its truthful lethal nature by the government.

**Unreported death-toll from COVID-19:**

A recent report by Wang et al.<sup>4</sup> has scientifically analyzed COVID-19 death toll and painted a grim picture of gross underreporting of COVID-19 deaths in many countries that likely had a negative impact on public health policies for combatting the COVID-19 pandemic. This study has estimated that three times more people might have died across the world due to COVID-19 between 2000-2021 compared to the deaths officially reported by different nations underscoring the global nature of the unrecognized COVID-19 deaths. Although an artificially reduced number of COVID-19 deaths were reported by several nations, both rich and poor, India holds the ignominious distinction of leading the world in underreporting of COVID-19 deaths by almost ten folds. Indian authorities have officially reported only about 489,000 COVID-19 deaths compared to the estimated death of 4,070,000 as shown in the study by Wang et al.<sup>4</sup>

**Minimizing COVID-19 deaths in India:**

Questions of suppression of COVID-19 deaths in India were also raised by other groups at different times<sup>5-7</sup>. Unfortunately, Indian authorities have always attempted to downplay the scientific evidence of increased mortality from COVID-19 and simply brushed aside the serious allegations of willful underreporting of COVID-19 mortalities. The news of huge undercounting of COVID-19 deaths in India were also kept largely concealed from the ordinary people as local and national Indian media have generally remained mute about the high death rate during the COVID-19 pandemic. While media groups in India were largely not outspoken about the high death-toll from COVID-19 perhaps under extraneous political pressure, media outlets in other countries and major international medical journals frequently reported the enormous number

of unrecognized deaths from COVID-19 pandemic in India<sup>7-9</sup>.

Wang et al.<sup>4</sup> have provided compelling evidence showing unreported COVID-19 deaths with statistical comparison of “cause-specific” deaths during and prior to the coronavirus pandemic in India and several other countries across the world. Although during the two-year period between Jan. 1, 2020 and Dec. 31, 2021, a total of 5.94 million COVID-19 deaths were recognized worldwide, these authors have estimated that about 18.2 million may actually have died across the world because of COVID-19 during this period. Even though the number of excess COVID-19 deaths were found to exist in all continents and countries big and small including rich nations like USA, India with an estimated 4.07 million unreported COVID-19 deaths held the top spot in unrecognized deaths from the COVID-19 pandemic. Both a “systematic bias” and “limitation of resources” were blamed in this study for the massive underreporting of COVID-19 deaths in the Indian subcontinent<sup>4</sup>.

Misclassification of disease and controversial categorization of comorbidities have been imputed for the non-reporting of COVID-19 deaths in India in the past but strange scientific nomenclatures were introduced for COVID-19-related deaths as gross underreporting of mortalities from COVID-19 started during the “second-wave” in India when many governmental authorities adopted an unprecedented scientific classification criteria to minimize the number of fatalities by simply not mentioning COVID-19 in the death certificate whenever a COVID-victim had other comorbid conditions like cancer or diabetes<sup>10</sup>.

### **Role of politics for underreporting of COVID-19 deaths in India:**

Political intrusion of the health regulatory system in India is also blamed for the massive underreporting of deaths during the COVID-19 pandemic in India<sup>11</sup>. Stakes could not be higher for many Indian political leaders during the coronavirus “second-wave” as ordinary people, strictly confined in home due to nationwide lockdown, watched on TV with horror on a daily basis as COVID-19 patients succumbed in large numbers for a variety of unacceptable reasons including lack of oxygen supply in major hospitals and as dead bodies, too many to be cremated through a proper Hindu ritual, were seen floating as corpses were dumped in the river by their devastated families<sup>10-12</sup>. Even on the face of such indubitable evidences and news of rapid spread of COVID-19 across the country during the “second-wave”, Indian health authorities

maintained that not many patients died due to COVID-19, which as now it appears, was almost ten-fold less than the actual number of COVID-19 deaths<sup>4</sup>. Extraneous pressures by political leaders with an oblique motive were reported in the past to manipulate public perception of the real danger of COVID-19 pandemic<sup>6,10,11</sup>.

Another different but plausible political reason for deliberate reporting of a vastly reduced number of COVID-19 deaths by Indian health authorities may be an unusual judicial decision passed recently by the Supreme Court of India. The Apex Court directed following the devastating COVID-19 “second-wave” that Indian government must provide a financial compensation of Rs. 50,000/- (equivalent to about US \$ 675) for each victim who had died due to COVID-19 irrespective of whether there was any failure in medical management of the patient<sup>13</sup>. India, a nation of close to 1.4 billion people, where reportedly almost five million citizens have already died due to the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>4</sup>, it would be a colossal economic toll on the Indian government to pay financial reparation, as ordered by the Supreme Court, to the families of five million COVID-19 death victims. One wonders whether the political calculation of the prospect of an enormous financial burden for the government to compensate every victim of COVID-19, as ordered by the Supreme Court of India, played any role for drastic undercounting of actual number of COVID-19 deaths in India.

### **Conclusion:**

It is difficult to judge as to what extent the intrinsic scientific shortcomings and political exigencies by devious politicians were responsible for the palpable underreporting of COVID-19 deaths in India. Although reluctance to admit the “real” number of COVID-19 deaths is not unique for India but there is no argument that the sheer enormity of the unrecognized COVID-19 mortalities in India, whether due to poor science or shifty political leaders, may already have impeded implementation of a more effective public health policy to combat COVID-19 pandemic in India leading to loss of excessive human lives over the past three years. Willful misrepresentation of scientific evidence or deliberate underreporting of mortality/morbidity caused by an infectious microorganism like COVID-19 by any government is wrong anyway we look as it is likely to produce catastrophic consequences for the ordinary people in the next pandemic to hit the world.

### **Conflict of Interest:**

The author is the founding-president of PBT, a registered humanitarian organization (NGO) in India that has been involved in fighting against medical negligence and healthcare corruption in India for the past two decades.

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