

Silencing The Media: COVID-19 Death Controversy in India

Kunal Saha*

Department of Pediatrics & Microbiology, Ohio State University Medical Center, Columbus, Ohio, USA and President, People for Better Treatment (PBT), Commercial Point (Ground Floor), 79 Lenin Sarani, Kolkata, India

***Corresponding author:**

Kunal Saha,
Department of Pediatrics & Microbiology, Ohio State University Medical Center, Columbus, Ohio, USA and President, People for Better Treatment (PBT), Commercial Point (Ground Floor), 79 Lenin Sarani, Kolkata, India, Tel: 9958744305;
E-mail: anku@aol.com

Received: 21 Dec 2021

Accepted: 03 Jan 2022

Published: 10 Jan 2022

J Short Name: JCMI

Copyright:

©2022 Kunal Saha, This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and build upon your work non-commercially.

Citation:

Kunal Saha, Silencing The Media: COVID-19 Death Controversy in India. J Clin Med Img. 2022; V6(1): 1-2

The Amnesty International has recently reported that pressure on the media and healthcare workers by the government in different countries oppressing free expression of necessary medical facts for the public likely have contributed to the enormous death toll during the COVID-19 pandemic [1]. There is no denying that global devastation by the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic that has already caused almost five million deaths worldwide could have been less damaging but for the widespread dissemination of misinformation or deliberate coverup of essential public health information, often condoned by devious governmental authorities. On one hand, baseless and unscientific information about COVID-19 were spread wildly through the social media, often by ordinary people misguided by their political leaders, on the other hand, voices of bona fide healthcare professionals and journalists were muzzled by malevolent governmental forces in many parts of the world thwarting disclosure of public information necessary to effectively combat massive pandemics like COVID-19. While fabricated and distorted facts about COVID-19 were touted as “news” by many authoritarian governments like Russia and China, deliberate spread of misinformation and disinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic was also prevalent in other democratic countries including the two largest democracies of the globe, USA and India [2].

As reported by the Amnesty International, although the exact number of people who may have lost their lives needlessly due to the “silencing” of healthcare workers and journalists may never be known, we all perhaps share some responsibility for such a horrific human tragedy taking place in the modern era. Interestingly, the biggest suppression of truth in regard to the number of people

succumbed to COVID-19 may have transpired not in any communist or despotic country but in the largest democratic nation in the world, India. According to the latest figure obtained from the official website of Indian Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (www.mohfw.in), the total number of people died in India due to COVID-19 till December 20, 2021 is only 477,554. In sharp contrast, using three different metrics of measurement, a study published in July, 2021 estimated that the number of people died from COVID-19 in India would be 4.9 million, i.e. almost 10 times the official number of deaths acknowledged by the Indian government [3]. Although the case fatality rate (CFR) due to COVID-19 may vary widely from country to country and also depends on other variable factors including comorbidity and age of the infected patients, an overall death rate between 1-2% from COVID-19 is generally accepted by the world scientific community [4,5]. Indian health minister has claimed recently that India has one of the lowest mortality rates in the world at around 1.1%5. With a population of over 1.2 billion, Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), highest health regulatory authority in India to control COVID-19, released data of a large serological survey in June-July, 2021 and reported that more than 67% of the population were positive for COVID-19 antibodies [6]. In other words, two-thirds of Indian population were either already vaccinated against COVID-19 or developed natural antibodies after being infected with COVID-19. According to data released by Indian government, 440 million or about one-third of Indian population had received at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine by July, 2021 [7]. Thus, at least one-third of all Indians or about 400,000,000 Indians were naturally infected with COVID-19 by July, 2021 and developed natural antibodies

ies based on the numbers reported by the Indian health authorities. Needless to say that patients who had already perished from COVID-19 were possibly not included in the sero-survey reported by the ICMR. But even considering that at least 400,000,000 Indians were infected with COVID-19 and with 1.1% mortality rate as claimed by the Indian health minister⁵, there is likely to be around 4,400,000 deaths in India which is also about 10 times COVID-19 deaths acknowledged by the Indian government. Leading international medical journals also raised serious doubts about the underreporting of COVID-19 deaths by the governmental authorities in India [8,9]. The shocking undercounting of people died due to COVID-19 in India was also highlighted by the leading media groups across the globe [10,11]. Despite these astonishing reports of grossly deflated number of COVID-19 deaths in India by major international medical and news groups, hardly any news media in India carried this story keeping the vast majority of the ordinary India residents totally unaware about the colossal COVID-19 fatalities in India. The muted response by the Indian media to the distorted figures of COVID-19 deaths by healthcare authorities may not come as a total surprise to those who are familiar with the firm grip that the ruling political parties generally maintain over the Indian media. Months before the reports of enormous COVID-19 mortalities in India surfaced, India's health minister had already taken a victory lap as he made a boisterous claim that the country is in the "end game of the COVID-19 pandemic" [12].

While most Indian people were kept in dark about high number of COVID-19 deaths perhaps by silencing the media through extraneous influence from the governmental health authorities, ordinary residents of India could not be shielded from watching on TV countless COVID-19 patients perishing from sheer lack of oxygen supply as large hospitals in the major cities in India ran out of adequate oxygen [13]. Despite such indubitable evidence displayed on live television, Indian governmental authorities brazenly and almost comically claimed that not a single COVID-19 patient had died due to oxygen shortage [14]. No government, autocratic or democratic, can do anything worse for its citizens than deliberately spreading untrue and unscientific information or by suppressing necessary public health information through the media to combat any pandemic. Social awareness through the mainstream media and public knowledge of unaltered scientific facts from responsible healthcare leaders are essential to win over the ongoing COVID-19 public health catastrophe. Unfortunately, unscrupulous elected leaders across the globe with vested political interests did not hesitate to put the lives of their own citizens at serious peril of COVID-19 by promoting disinformation and muting reasonable voices in the media and healthcare workers. While India may not be the only nation guilty of politicizing COVID-19 pandemic by stifling free expression by the media or pressuring healthcare workers not to divulge truthful scientific facts about COVID-19 pandemic that may hurt government's own interests, suppression

of the enormous number of COVID-19 deaths from the ordinary people in India for short-term political convenience may backfire in the long-run for the Indian government. Even worse, shrouding the Truthful number of COVID-19 fatalities by the government may also instill a false sense of cavalier attitude for the ordinary citizens in India with ravaging consequences in the long run.

References

1. Taylor L. COVID-19: Silencing health workers, researchers and journalists caused unnecessary deaths, says Amnesty. *BMJ* 2021; 375: n2552.
2. Saha, K. Doctor-patient relationship and public trust in health science in post-COVID world: Lessons from USA and India. *Med. Res. Archives*. 2021; 9: 8.
3. Anand A, Sandefur J, Subramanian A. Three new estimates of deaths in India during the pandemic. Center for Global Development. 2021.
4. Sorci, G, Faivre, V, Morand, S. Explaining among-country variation in COVID-19 case fatality rate. *Nature*. 2020; 10: 18909.
5. India has one of the lowest mortality rates but each death painful: Vardhan. *India Today* April. 2021.
6. ICMR sero survey says two-thirds of Indians exposed to COVID. *BBC News* July 21. 2021.
7. COVID-19 vaccination rate improves in all states between June-July, 2021. *The Hindu* July. 2021.
8. Chatterjee P. Is India missing COVID-19 deaths? *Lancet*. 2020; 396: 657.
9. Dyer O. COVID-19: Two-thirds in India carry antibodies, while research suggests country's death toll 10 times official figures. *BMJ*. 2021; 374: n1856.
10. India's excess deaths during pandemic up to 4.9 mln, study shows. *Reuters*. 2021.
11. COVID-19: India excess death cross four millions, says study. *BBC* July. 2021.
12. Harsh Vardhan says India is in the endgame of COVID-19 pandemic. *Hindustan Times*. March. 2021.
13. India COVID: Delhi hospitals plead for oxygen as more patients die. *BBC News*, May. 2021.
14. States join Center in saying no one died due to oxygen shortage: Who said what. *India Today*. 2021.