

# SOUTH ASIA REMAINS AN OUTLIER IN INFECTIONS

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Health & Sanitation and related issues

Moot point: People ignoring social distancing norms in Patna. Lockdown and low testing rates are among the reasons cited for the low number of cases in South Asia. PTI-

Not just India but the SAARC region as a whole is seeing a slower increase in novel coronavirus infections, particularly in terms of critical cases. If the trend persists, this may be worth a deeper study, experts say.

While low testing rates are clearly one reason for the low figures, experts are pointing to the need to study the effects of immunity and the strict lockdown and social distancing measures adopted in India and other South Asian countries — Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives.

“All governments in South Asia have responded rapidly to the crisis, but their task is daunting. Governments have imposed social-distancing measures, introduced relief packages to secure access to food, and provided for delays in payments on taxes, rent, utilities and debt service,” said a “South Asia Economic Focus” study, published by the World Bank this week.

The study predicted a sharp fall in the economic growth rates of all SAARC countries, even as it recorded much lower infection rates in the region.

According to the latest figures, the eight SAARC nations account 1.1% approximately of the world total of 22,65,727 COVID-19 cases. In terms of fatalities, the SAARC total is 0.49% or 768 of the total of 155,145 people who died of the infection.

India has the largest number of cases in the region at 14,651 with Pakistan next at 7,481 while Bhutan has the lowest number with just five cases in the subcontinent. The numbers are particularly low when one considers that South Asia accounts for a fifth (21%) of the world’s population, living in dense conditions on 3% of the world’s land mass.

“It appears that our neighbourhood has shown very low number of cases and fatalities per million population as well,” P.S. Raghavan, Convener of the National Security Advisory Board, told *The Hindu*. “It is worth studying the causes for this trend in South Asia. Is it efficient handling by the governments, low testing rates or are there other underlying reasons for this,” he asked.

Experts worldwide have pointed to the low testing rates in the region as a valid reason to question the idea that South Asia has fewer infections.

A look at the testing figures by *The Hindu*’s data team shows that as opposed to countries such as the U.S., which has tested 10,874 per million people of its population, and Italy, which has tested 20590 per million people, India has only tested about 247 persons per million. Pakistan (369.5 per million people), Bangladesh (132) and Sri Lanka (220), also record considerably lower testing figures.

Yet a study tweeted by the NITI Ayog CEO Amitabh Kant pointed out that the number of positive cases from the tests are also much lower in India. While the U.S. showed 19.8% positive cases, France showed 41.8% and Italy showed 15.1% positive cases, according to the NITI Aayog study, India showed about 4.7%.

*The Hindu* tracked the number of positives among tests in Pakistan (9.54%), Bangladesh (10.06%) and Sri Lanka (5.12%), again recording figures much lower than those in Europe and the U.S., although experts point out that as the number of tests increase, the positive percentage might also increase.

The NITI Aayog CEO also pointed to the slower rate of growth in infections. While Italy, the U.S. and India all saw their first COVID-19 cases within 10 days of each other, cases in Italy were “1,300 times” India’s daily cases on Day 46, and on Day 65, the U.S. daily cases were 25 times India’s cases.

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