

Testing, vaccine hesitancy, fears a big problem in villages, towns

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With Covid-19 cases and deaths raging across India, testing hesitancy among the rural population and small towns has emerged as a major obstacle. A considerable number of people living in the villages and small towns are rushing to “jhola chap” doctors (quacks) to get treated for their fever, cough and cold rather than going in for Covid tests. The fear that is stalking these sections is that “those testing positive would be shifted to Covid hospitals, from where no one comes out alive”.

Sandeep Sharma, a resident of a small village, Milak Khandera, in Uttar Pradesh, got himself test-

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ed only after a team of health workers reached the village on May 12. Speaking to this correspondent, he said: “We are not going for tests. It’s not safe to go to the hospitals for tests.” Sharma claimed that most of the

villagers believed that “*test karane gaye toh who pakar lenge aur hospital mein dal denge*” (If we go for tests, we will be forcibly admitted to the hospitals). Of the 500 villagers living in Milak Khandera, the team of health workers managed to test only 75 of them. Sharma was among those tested. They are still waiting for the reports.

Sharma virtually boasted that there had been “no Covid-19 cases” in his village. When asked how he would know since no one had got tested so far, he only said: “*Koi toh abhi tak mara nahi*” (No one has died so far).

A similar problem continues to plague Chausa, the village in Bihar which hit the headlines as

■ **Turn to Page 4**

Testing, fears a big problem

■ Continued from Page 1

several bloated and decomposed bodies were flushed out from the river in this particular region. Ashwini Varma, a social activist, lawyer and president of the Mahararishi Chausa Thermal Power Mazdoor Sangh, claimed that “log darke maare test nahi kara rahe hain” (People are not getting tested as they are scared). It’s the fear of testing positive which is apparently preventing the villagers from getting tested. Varma further claimed that besides fear, the lack of infrastructure in Buxar was another major reason for the lack of testing. “Shortage of oxygen, hospital beds and vaccines” continue to hit Buxar, Varma said.

In fact last year, a paper published on “Coronavirus Testing Hesitancy among the Masses in India”, by Priya Thappa and Kirtan Rana, had said clearly that “in spite of the clear instructions from the government that no loss of wages should be suffered by people undergoing quarantine, many people, especially the ones belonging to the economically weaker sections of society, still face the fear of losing their livelihood”. One of the other major factors contributing to the hesitation could be the long waiting period between the sample collection and declaration of reports. The paper further claimed that “apart from these spheres, the lesser discussed issue is the social stigma associated with it”.

In Jaipur, Deepak Khandelwal, a businessman, was facing a herculean task to get his workers tested. Even threats of “sacking” them have failed to work. “The workers are scared that if they go for tests, they would be forcibly quarantined in some centres and no one would come out alive.” Khandelwal claimed the majority of his workers were in a “denial mode”.

Deepak Methi and Amit Singhal, members of an NGO Om Foundation, came up with similar stories of testing hesitancy among people. Singhal claimed that NGO workers had found that a “majority” of people in Gijhore, a small village in Uttar Pradesh, were “refusing to be tested”. Methi felt “this was a major cause of concern, as the people refusing to get tested could be spreading the virus all across”. Similar reports of testing hesitancy continue to emerge from tribal-dominated areas in Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh.

In fact, the “fear” stalking villagers and even some urbanites which is driving them to refusing to be either vaccinated or tested was due to ignorance and the massive spread of fake news. Neelesh Misra of Gaon Connection, a media platform, wrote: “The massive wall of suspicion, rumours, fake news and fear were driving the hesitation or plain refusal to both vaccine and testing.”

For instance Chhavi Methi, a budding yoga instructor, who comes from an affluent back-

ground in Noida, felt that her “body has the ability to develop immunity on its own against the virus”. Chhavi is averse to the inoculation “at least for now” due to “serious side effects of the vaccine”. Even though her husband and daughter have got themselves vaccinated, Chhavi spoke of the reports about people “dying even after vaccination”.

Rajit Mehta, MD and CEO of Antara, while talking about this particular apprehension that people “die even after being vaccinated”, wrote in an article “no single vaccine provides 100 per cent protection”. He noted: “The annual influenza vaccine offers only 40-60 per cent protection and the measles vaccine offers only 97 per cent protection.” He went on to add: “Similarly, no Covid-19 vaccine developed in India or outside offers 100 per cent protection.”

To those refusing to get tested or vaccinated, Mehta said, while adding that the vaccination significantly “lowered the level of infection”, that “full vaccination protects from fatal infections”. The ICMR in a recent report also said that “only 2-4 people in 10,000 were found to get infected after getting both doses”.

While the government and the medical fraternity put “ignorance” behind the testing and vaccine hesitancy in India, social activists and a majority of doctors felt a massive awareness drive needs to be launched to counter these obstacles.