

India's diaspora boosts virus fight from afar

by [Sudhin Thanawala](#) in the [June 3, 2021](#) issue



People take part in a 48-hour, nonstop static relay cycle challenge on May 1 at the Neasden Temple, the largest Hindu Temple in the UK, to raise money to help coronavirus relief efforts in India. (AP Photo / Matt Dunham)

India's large diaspora—long a boon to India's economy—is tapping its wealth, political clout, and expertise to help its home country combat the catastrophic coronavirus surge that has left people to die outside overwhelmed hospitals.

Around the world, people of Indian descent are donating money, setting up telehealth consultations and information sessions, and personally delivering desperately needed oxygen equipment in hopes of beating back the outbreak.

In Britain, volunteers at three Hindu temples raised more than £600,000 (\$830,000) in early May by racking up 12,506 miles on stationary bikes, or roughly three times

the distance from London to New Delhi. In Canada, Sikhs have donated between \$700 and \$2,000 to each of dozens of people in need of costly oxygen cylinders.

India's official count of coronavirus cases surpassed 20 million in early May, and deaths officially topped 220,000. The true numbers are believed to be much higher.

"Mother India is in dire need of the non-resident Indians to step up," Hemant Patel, a hotel developer from Miami, said in an appeal for aid on WhatsApp. His efforts helped generate more than \$300,000 in medical donations, he said.

In March, after he got vaccinated, Patel traveled to his hometown of Navsari in the state of Gujarat. He is now serving as a liaison between local hospitals and Indians in the US.

He has also donated eight oxygen machines—the first time, he held a religious ceremony to bless the machine—and paid to have a van outfitted with a stretcher and oxygen.

"God has put me in the right place at the right time," he said.

Some members of the overseas Indian community have appended harsh words to their support efforts, accusing the Indian government of botching the fight against the virus.

Sunil Tolani, CEO of a hotel and real estate company in California, said he donated \$300,000 to help people in India during the surge. "If India would have put their act together, they wouldn't need this help in the first place," he said, accusing the government there of "total complacency and incompetence."

The surge in infections since February has been blamed on more contagious variants of the virus as well as on government decisions to allow huge crowds to gather for Hindu religious festivals and political rallies.

A spokesman for the Indian government, Prakash Javadekar, said it is ramping up hospital capacity and supplies of oxygen and drugs but is facing a "once-in-a-century crisis."

Prominent Indian Americans have also pressed the White House for action. In April, the United States began delivering treatments, rapid virus tests, and oxygen, along with materials needed for India to boost production of COVID-19 vaccines. Britain is

also sending a substantial amount of aid.

More than 6 million people of Indian descent live in the two countries—part of a diaspora the Indian government estimates at over 32 million, including nearly 3.5 million in the United Arab Emirates and just under 3 million in Malaysia. Donations are pouring in from non-Indians and corporations as well.

Sikhs for Justice, an advocacy group that calls for an independent state for Sikhs in India, said the Indian government blocked its COVID-19 relief website, oxygenfund.org, that aimed to connect Indians who can't afford surging prices for oxygen to Sikhs in the US, Canada, and other countries willing to send them money.

The group turned to WhatsApp, where it managed to provide assistance to nearly 150 people, said its general counsel, Gurpatwant Singh Pannun.

An email to the Indian Embassy in Washington went unanswered. The Indian government has classified Sikhs for Justice as a terrorist group and banned it, Anshuman Gaur, India's deputy high commissioner to Canada, told the Canadian Press.

The virus's rapid spread in India has left few people in the diaspora untouched by tragedy. Sajal Rohatgi, cofounder of Subziwalla.com, a US-based South Asian grocery delivery service, said dozens of friends and family in India have contracted the virus and two have died.

He and the company's other founder, Manav Thaker, arranged for a US virologist to give a talk on Instagram about India's COVID-19 crisis and how people there can try to stay safe—information they say is lacking in India.

Their hope is that Indian Americans will convey the importance of masks, social distancing, and vaccinations to their friends and family in India.

"We really just want to give the right, credible information," Thaker said. "Then maybe we'll get some relief." —Associated Press