



The Flames Bear Witness

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“The flames bear witness to the devastation wrought by India’s Covid-19 crisis.” These words in a recent [New York Times article](#) brought tears to my eyes as I read of the crematory flames that reflect the devastation and suffering happening in India, as a second Covid-19 wave overwhelms the nation. The recent spike caused by Covid-19 variants has been drastic as infection rates soar and supplies are in short supply. The state of [Goa last week reported a positivity rates of 51.4%](#), and it is likely that all cases across the country are being significantly underreported.

Years ago, I witnessed the flames and smoke of the funeral pyre, a sensory and spiritual experience I will never forget. I was a seminary student studying in India for a summer and had unknowingly booked a hotel room overlooking the funeral pyres along the Ganges River in the city of Varanasi. Hindu families, some of whom would walk hundreds of miles to get there, met at the riverbank to cremate their loved ones and scatter their ashes into the sacred water. Although I tried to avert my eyes out of respect for the families, I could neither avoid witnessing the ritual processions that went by my window all night nor ignore the smell of the pyres that burned just outside my window.

Funeral pyres that are supposed to take place in sacred spaces are now happening in public areas across India, filling streets with smoke and tears of all that has been lost to this pandemic. Having myself buried a family member in the past year, I know too well the grief of having even our funeral rites taken away by Covid-19.

As a global community we cannot avert our eyes from this suffering, nor should we. India’s devastating challenge is what what lies ahead for many countries if we do not do more.

The “[vaccine apartheid](#)” that many have warned of for months is taking shape. It is the systemic result of wealthy nations being able to cut deals to acquire vaccines at higher rates than poor countries. These high-income countries (representing only 16 percent of the world’s population) have now [distributed over 45 percent](#) of

global vaccines and are on track to [stockpile 1.3 billion](#) more in surplus while poor countries across Africa and Asia have vaccinated [less than one percent](#) of their populations.

Fortunately, last week brought a major breakthrough in vaccine equity as the U.S. announced it would [support a temporary waiver on intellectual property rights for Covid-19 vaccines](#). This reversal is the result of months of advocacy from faith, labor, and trade advocates, including [UCC advocates who called on President Biden to support this waiver](#) and put lives over profit.

Loosening these intellectual property restrictions is a critical step – but is not enough. As the [gulf between rich and poor nations is grows](#) wider, more work must be done to support vaccine equity and share global stockpiles. We cannot turn away from the suffering of our global neighbors. Check out how [Global Ministries partners in India are responding](#) to the Covid-19 crisis and consider donating today.

The flames will bear witness to the devastation, and to our response.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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