

No clarity over how humans get bird flu

By Savita Verma in New Delhi

THE SCIENTIFIC community is still baffled about how humans contract the dreaded bird flu virus.

According to a new report, almost one-fourth of human cases reported around the world have no clear source of infection.

In some cases, people may have got the H5N1 infection from live poultry market, while there are also indications of some degree of human-to-human transmission and genetic susceptibility of some people.

This report of the second World Health Organisation consultation on clinical aspects of human infection with avian influenza A (H5N1) virus was carried in *The New England Journal of Medicine* on Thursday. Experts reviewed all the human cases of H5N1 infection to reach these conclusions.

Though most patients acquired the infection from poultry raised inside or outside houses, ambiguities persist in about 25 per cent of cases.

"In one quarter or more of patients with influenza A (H5N1) virus infection, the source of exposure is unclear, and environment-to-human transmission remains possible," the report stated. In some cases, the scientists also felt the only way a person could have got infected was by visiting a live poultry market.

Most humans get infected from poultry near homes

Fertiliser containing poultry feces and virus-contaminated fomites could also have been plausible transmission routes, the report observed.

Though, no human case was reported in the past two Indian outbreaks in Maharashtra and Manipur, authorities had tested human samples for asymptomatic infection. However, no infection with H5N1 was found, scientists said.

The report stated that though it is not known whether H5N1 virus infection can begin in the digestive tract of humans, in several patients, diarrheal symptoms preceded respiratory symptoms and virus was detected in faeces. Thus, drinking potable water and eating properly cooked food are not risk factors, but ingestion of virus-contaminated products or swimming or bathing in virus-contaminated water might pose a risk.

Generally H5N1 infection in humans begins through inhalation of the virus. Handling of sick or dead poultry during the week before the onset of illness emerged as the most common risk factor in getting infection. Slaughtering, de-feathering or preparing sick poultry for cooking, playing with or holding diseased or dead poultry, handling fighting cocks or ducks that appear to be well, and consuming raw or undercooked poultry or its products are risk factors, according to scientists.

The report also asked doctors in countries not affected with H5N1 to take into account the travel history of a patient while making evaluations, though no case of H5N1 infection has been identified among short-term travellers visiting countries affected by outbreaks among poultry or wild birds.

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FIT TO EAT: Vendors in Bhubaneswar proclaim their chickens are devoid of avian flu.

Migratory birds under lens

THE ROLE of migratory birds in spreading bird flu has been under scanner in India and elsewhere following the death of several wild birds in Mongolia and China in 2005.

However, international agencies in charge of bird flu control measures and wildlife agencies differ on the exact role of wild birds in spreading the disease across continents.

About 90 migratory birds died in two lakes in northern Mongolia in August 2005, while over 6,000 wild birds reportedly died in the Qinghai Lake Nature Reserve in China, the same year. In both the cases, the culprit was found to be H5N1. The virus was also detected in some birds which died in Tibet.

These incidents raised the alarm over possibilities of the infection spreading to countries along the migratory pathways of wild birds. Since even droppings of infected birds could carry the virus, theoretically this puts poultry farms in all countries along migratory path at risk.

Wild waterfowl are considered natural reservoir of several influenza viruses. These birds have perhaps carried flu viruses for centuries, with no visible symptoms. In assessment of the World Health Organisation (WHO), "considerable circumstantial evidence" exists to suggest that migratory birds could transmit low pathogenic viruses to poultry birds. These viruses can then mutate to the highly pathogenic forms.

An investigation of the Qinghai Lake outbreak by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) found that H5N1 viruses are transmitted between migratory birds. Subsequent outbreaks in poultry and wild birds in Russia, Kazakhstan, Western China and Mongolia indicated that migratory birds probably acted as carriers for the transport of HPAI over longer distances, says FAO.

The avian flu virus has adapted to the environment and is using water for survival and

By Dinesh C. Sharma in New Delhi

spreading. The water in turn influences movement, social behaviour and migration patterns of water bird species. In view of this, FAO has funded several research projects to study wild birds which can carry influenza viruses and act as shedders and transporters of the virus, as well as to map migratory patterns of wild birds and their landing habitats. One of the ways of wild bird surveillance is to tag birds with tiny satellite transmitters and then map their migratory path using geographical positioning system. FAO has deployed about 100 satellite transmitters on 14 species of migratory waterfowl in Mongolia, China, Mali, Malawi and Nigeria. In the second phase, India, Siberia and Black Sea Basin would be covered.

The first outbreak of bird flu in India at Navapur town in Nandurbar district in Maharashtra and Uchhal in Surat district of Gujarat in February 2006 was studied by wild bird experts from the Bombay Natural History Society. They monitored 12 wetlands in Nandurbar, two in Nashik and two in Aurangabad districts. In all, 46 species of birds were observed. The team concluded that no wild birds — especially waterfowl in Navapur and Nandurbar — had died due to the infection and the outbreak was restricted to poultry farms only. In some villages where poultry birds were culled, wild birds such as house sparrow, house crow and cattle egrets were alive and showed no symptoms of sickness.

The ministry of agriculture also recently sponsored a project to map wetlands in India to assess their risk in spreading the infection through migratory birds that land there. Local agriculture officials are also being trained in surveillance and handling of wild birds in case of an outbreak.

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Culling in Bengal slow as CPM men stall work

By Romita Datta in Kolkata

AFTER BIRD flu spread in three West Bengal districts, culling operations began immediately. But against a target of 3.75 lakh, only 10,500 diseased birds have been culled in two days.

If the current pace continues, the target would take minimum 30 days for completion. Diseased birds, if left uncultured for so long, would put humans at the risk of infection, said vet experts in the animal resources development (ARD) department.

By that time, the bird flu, which has spread to Birbhum, South Dinajpur and Murshidabad, threatening to fan out in three more districts, would acquire the dimension of an outbreak.

ARD minister Anisur Rahman said the dead birds in South 24 Parganas, Nadia and Burdwan were suffering from Ranikhet and not the deadly H5N1 virus. Without confirmation of bird flu in Murshidabad, Nadia and Barpukur, the minister has ordered culling there as well.

On Thursday, culling was stalled for hours due to agitation of the employees affiliated to the CPM employees' union — Coordination Committee.

Only 10,500 birds culled in two days

An employee, Swadesh Chakrabarty, was found urinating near Margam police station. Policemen stopped him and reminded him of the bird flu virus. As news spread, Chakrabarty gathered 400 comrades, who threatened to cease work if the officer-in-charge (OC) didn't apologise. However, it was only after a few hours that the OC apologised and the culling work began.

Meanwhile, a team from the ministry of health and family welfare visited the state health officials. The additional director of health and family welfare, Shibal and joint secretary of the ministry, Praveen Kumar, said they were satisfied by the West Bengal government's role in tackling the spread. It was decided that a six-member team would visit the affected areas for special precautionary measures against human contamination.

When asked why there was delay in informing the Centre and sending blood samples of affected birds to the laboratory, Rahman said: "The Centre had declared India a bird-flu free area. We have acted promptly and taken precautions after reports of the virus spreading were confirmed, without wasting even a day."

Meanwhile, a bird flu alert has been sounded in other states like Bihar, Kerala, Assam, Manipur and Sikkim.

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Relief for Punjab ex-DGP as HC orders fresh probe



Former police chief S.S. Virk.

IN A MAJOR blow to the Punjab vigilance bureau (VB) probing the cases against former Punjab police chief S.S. Virk, the Punjab and Haryana High Court disbanded the investigation team and ordered a fresh probe.

The order issued by Justice H.S. Bhalla has come as a major relief for Virk, a suspended Maharashtra cadre IPS officer, who had sought CBI probe into the cases against him alleging political vendetta.

The court ordered the Home principal secretary to constitute a new special investigation team (SIT) to probe the allega-

By Vikas Kahol in Chandigarh

tions of purchase and colonisation of plots against the former Punjab DGP. The court also ordered that no officer below the rank of SSP would hold the inquiry against Virk.

The court, however, declined Virk's request for a CBI inquiry. Virk, a 1970-batch IPS officer, had earlier submitted before the court that the cases against him were a result of blatant abuse of power by the vigilance chief, Sumedh Singh Salni.

The complaint of one FIR was Surinder Pal Singh, a DSP

with the VB, who was also investigating the case. Virk had said that the introductory allegations against him were related to purchase of plots and colonisation. However, the complainant and investigating officer had concealed his own role in the G. Valley Cooperative Housing Society.

Surinder's wife had purchased two plots in the society and the complainant was a beneficiary. These material facts put the investigation of one of the FIRs in serious doubt. The role of the investigating officer was a matter of scrutiny in light of his con-

cealment regarding the existence of the cooperative society.

Virk had averred in his petition that FIR no. 10, dated September 8, 2007, was registered against him at the behest of chief minister Parkash Singh Badal.

Following the registration of the FIR, Virk was arrested at Maharashtra Sadan in New Delhi and brought to Punjab.

Virk had been repatriated by the ministry of home affairs to his parent Maharashtra cadre in April this year. He joined the Maharashtra government services on April 27, last year.

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Picture: QAMAR SIBTAIN


(Above and below left) *The Legend of Chogyal Norzang*, directed by Suk Bahadur, is based on a Buddhist legend and uses Arunachal's Ajllamu dance technique

by **Karanjeet Kaur**

NSD's focus on the N-E gets lost in translation

The last time the North-Eastern part of India made news that was not related to the AFSPA, or otherwise militant activities, was when Prashant Tamang from Darjeeling had won the third edition of the *Indian Idol* contest. The other finalist on the show, Amit Paul also hailed from the North-Eastern state of Meghalaya and TV crews had gone hysterical, attributing to the event the status of a 'phenomenon'; perhaps the gradual assimilation of the most ignored part of the country into the 'mainstream' culture of India.

At the 10th edition of NSD's Theatre Utsav, no TV crews can be seen going wild, but a cursory glance at the itinerary will tell you that there are an overwhelming number of plays from the North-East this time. Find not just in Arunachali Hindi and Assamese, but also in Garo and Manipuri. This is not NSD's first brush with the North-East — a few months ago, they had organised a North-East children's theatre festival. But NSD's focus is perhaps, part of a larger politico-cultural scheme by the Ministry of Culture of the Government of India, which accords financial assistance for the "preservation and development of the cultural heritage of the Himalayas", and includes the North-Eastern region, besides Kashmir, Ladakh and the middle region of Uttar Pradesh.

While some of these plays have original scripts, some have played it safe by choosing established plays like *Ghashiram Kotwal* and *The Chairs*. Yet others have chosen to adapt from stories and legends from their own milieu. *The Final Countdown*, 35-year-old S. Thaninleima's play is structured as a common man's protest against terrorism and the plot centres on an 80-year-old artist, who argues that suicide is his protest against terrorism. Though topical to Manipur, it is a comment upon terrorism everywhere.

So has the Culture Ministry's focus on the North-East paid

Culture Ministry's N-E policy's skewed

off? Thanin has a bone to pick here, but refuses to complain. All she says is that despite working hard, it is tough for a straight-up woman director to survive. She claims that she has applied several times to the Ministry for production, salary and light and equipment grants, but has been unsuccessful. Several trips to the Shastri Bhawan have proven fruitless. So where have the grants been going? She keeps mum on the issue, but her


(Above, right) S. Thaninleima, seen here with the cast of her play, *The Final Countdown*, has realised that life as woman director, especially from the North-East, is not a bed of roses

face does the talking. "All I will say is, I don't want to use my contacts to approach the ministry," she says.

Unlike Thanin, Dulal Roy is more forthcoming. Among the more senior directors, Roy staged *The Chairs* at the festival, choosing the tragic farce by Ionesco, since he felt its universal theme is a comment upon the human condition everywhere. "Besides, I am wary of projects where in the name of representing folk tradition, the director ends up representing himself," he says wryly. According to him,



the Culture Ministry should ensure that funds reach the people they are meant for; merely throwing money is not going to help. "It should not be a March-ending affair," he says.

With a dream to introduce theatre in a land barren of it so far, Suk Bahadur and Pabitra Rabha's plays are based in their cultural milieu. While Bahadur's *The Legend of Chogyal Norzang*, is based on a Buddhist legend and uses the technique of the Ajllamu dance form, Rabha's *A-Chik, A-Song*, the first Garo play ever, is based on a real incident

between 1870 and '72, where a Garo hero named Thogan, mobilised people against the British.

All of the directors agree that while the Ministry of Culture may be slacking, the NSD has been of great help. Except Roy, who feels that a step-motherly treatment is meted out to people from the North-East. He may not be too off the mark, given that almost all the plays from the north-east fell in the 4.30 pm and 9.30 pm slots at the festival; and not the premium 6 pm and 7 pm ones.

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Delhi thrives outside government grants

watch." It's a simple logic which works the other way round for the much-feted theatre personalities who get active only within the NSD orbit. "One play at the NSD festival and they get money to keep them satisfied for the rest of the year," adds Kumar. His group, Natsamrat, completes 10 years in April and has come to be known for its comedies. Adds Alam, "When we are so completely dependent on audience, we have to really work hard to hold people's attention for every single minute — our script, acting, direction have to be extremely tight."

Veteran theatre personality Arvind Gaur adds that the connect with the audience cannot be overemphasised. "At Asmita, it's the young campus energy and a direct link with the audience that keeps us going," says Gaur speaking to *Mall Today* from the Auto Expo, Pragati Maidan, where he was staging a street play on road safety. Gaur has been part of NSD's Theatre Utsav earlier and admits

that getting a berth in the hallowed festival is a different ball game altogether.

Spearheading Asmita for the past 15 years, Gaur says that the Delhi audience has not disappointed him at all. "You do a good play and people will pay to watch it," he says adding that all this is achieved by word-of-mouth publicity. It works for shows outside Delhi too, which all these groups undertake pretty frequently.

City's local theatre has great audience support

Another trait common to all these theatre groups is their sound script sense, rooted firmly in Delhi's environment. Sample, for instance, PT's *Ghailb In New Delhi* or its upcoming *Rahe Naam Pakistan Ka* (to be staged at Sri Ram Centre on Feb 3), Natsamrat's *Red Line Haazir Ho*

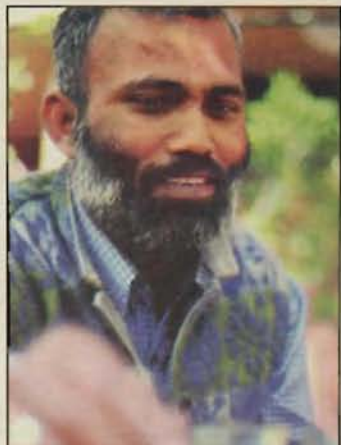
or *Kallu Nal M.B.B.S.* or Asmita's upcoming new play, *Dilli Ki Aurat Bhail Ramkali*, showing at Sri Ram Centre on Jan 27.

Is this audience support enough for proper survival of these theatre groups? No, is an honest answer. More audience support is needed for theatre to become a financially viable career option — only PT pays its members who have put in more than one year with the group. Gaur informs that contributions by Asmita's floating membership keeps it alive, ticket sales cover only the minimum cost of producing a play.

Despite such constraints, all of them refuse any government grant. Gaur sums it up emphatically: "Audience is the backbone of any thriving theatre culture. Government grants should be stopped totally in the the interest of theatre."

The survival of these theatre groups dispels at least one myth about Delhi — that its citizens don't buy tickets.

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Arvind Gaur says a paying audience has helped his theatre group survive