

Bird Flu: Awareness Should Precede Alarm

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A sudden spurt in the incidences of Bird Flu, all across the world, has once again raised alarm, a shrieking one this time, in the poultry sector. Indian Poultry Review (IPR) has been frequently and objectively highlighting this critical subject through informed perspective. In fact, the February edition of IPR had impressed upon all to avoid panic driven decisions and be guided by science and empirical data before making choices. Similarly, more than four years ago too it had been emphatically advised to shun myths and misgivings regarding Avian Influenza, commonly called the Bird Flu as such responses cause immense harm to the poultry sector, and in turn the nutritional security, not to mention the loss to economy. The World Organisation of Animal Health (WOAH), in its inaugural publication the State of World's Animal Health has endorsed what IPR has been proclaiming for long. "The risk of human infection remains low" despite ever increasing instances of the disease amongst poultry, as also its widening geographical area. IPR would like to reiterate that as the name itself suggests, Avian Influenza or Bird Flu, is a disease of birds not humans. There are negligible chances of transmission of this virus into humans. The only vulnerable section of

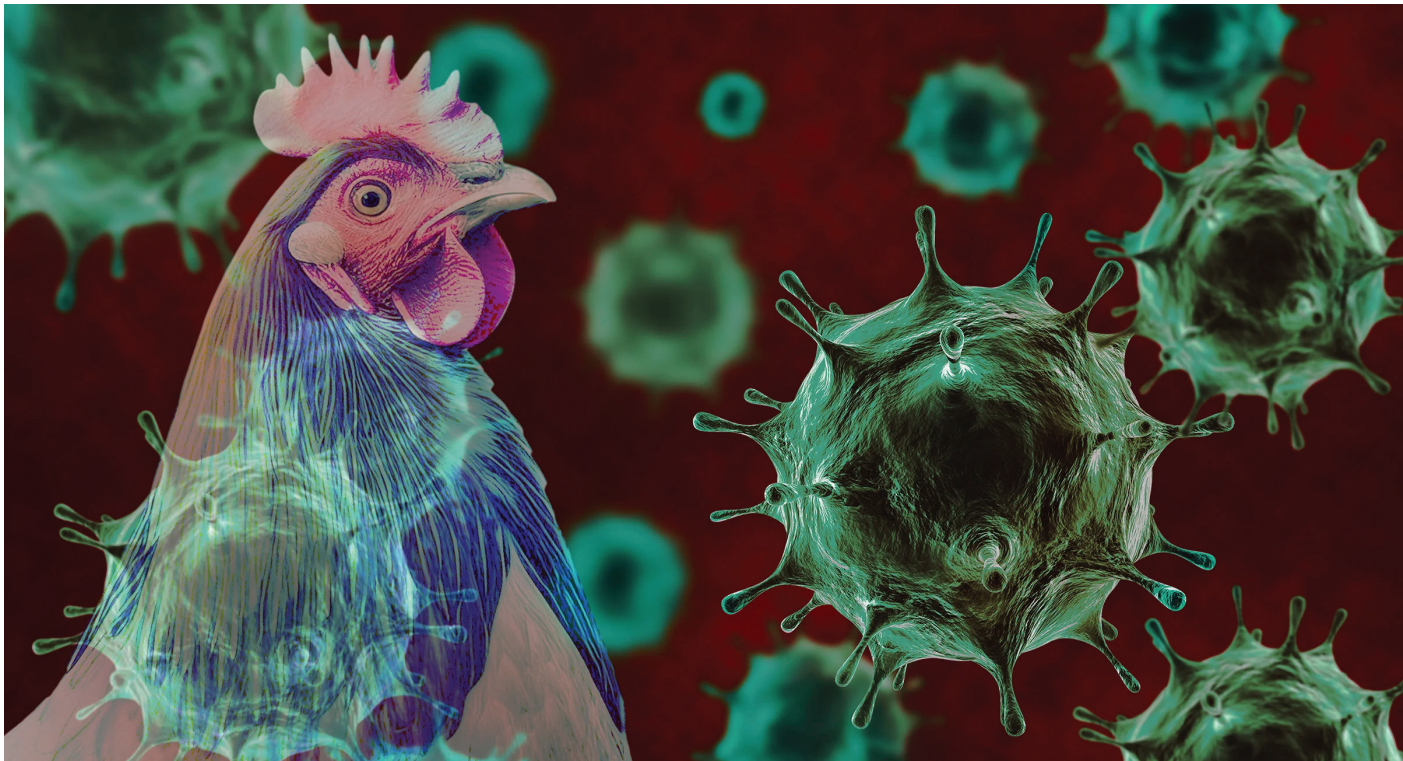
people is those who handle and thus are in close proximity of infected birds over long periods of time. The data published by the World Health Organisation (WHO) is an eye opener. In the seventeen year period between 2003 to 2024 there have been only 963 "confirmed human cases" of Avian Influenza all over the globe, and this disease has been attributed as the cause of 465 deaths in the world during this period. Not a single confirmed human case of either infection of Bird Flu or death has been reported in India till now." While humans are safe, as of now, the birds are not. So, the poultry industry is definitely at risk as the recent developments indicate; in fact, the avian biodiversity also stands threatened. Let me elaborate how?

An unusually high number of cases of Avian Influenza have been reported, in Europe, in birds such as ducks, seagulls, seabirds and even falcons. Though reporting is not diligent, such reports are in circulation from Asia too. What should further be of great concern to the sector is the spread, in recent years, of H5N1, a subtype of the influenza virus, from birds to mammals. A couple of years ago, Peru reported the deaths of 585 sea lions from H5N1; around the same time, an outbreak was detected in a mink farm in Spain; and in Britain the virus was found in foxes and otters. Even though these cases, as yet, are few and scattered, they have caused enough scare; the poultry sector would be well advised not to ignore these happenings and respond effectively or else globally the poultry may earn the ignominy of a disease carrier. Please be informed that Dr. Tedros, Director General (DG) of the World Health Organisation (WHO), has warned that the world should prepare for a possible Bird-Flu pandemic. The provocation for the warning is the spread of this virus from birds to mammals, thus "heightening the risk to humans."

"Will Avian Flu Be the Next Human Pandemic?" is an alarmist title of an article published some time back in the Economist. However, despite documenting the cases of spread of the virus to mammals, this very article reassures that "these cases, however, do not provide evidence that the virus is about to spill over into humans. H5N1 is not well adapted to infect the upper respiratory tract of mammals: people tend to contract it only after handling birds." The widening range of species and increasing geographic spread shows that the threat is increasing. The DG of WHO, while agreeing that the risk to humans is low, has cautioned that it may not stay that way.

The WOAHA expresses its anxiety thus, "the world is facing an unprecedented battle against high pathogenicity avian influenza (HPAI): a disease that has devastated poultry production, disrupted ecosystems and threatened global food security. In the last 20 years, over 633 million birds have been lost due to infection or culling efforts aimed at controlling the spread of the virus. The economic fallout has been severe, with major disruptions in international trade, affecting local poultry industries, and consumers of poultry products." Even in its anxiety the WOAHA renders practical wisdom, "the scale and complexity of this ongoing epizootic require urgent action beyond traditional control measures. For years, strict biosecurity and active surveillance have been the primary tools in preventing and containing avian influenza outbreaks. These remain essential, but the relentless spread of the virus, despite aggressive containment efforts, demonstrates that more must be done. Vaccination has emerged as a potential tool to complement existing measures, reducing both the spread and severity of infections."

Due to the global rise in outbreaks and



the growing genetic diversity of the virus strains, vaccination against the virus is being seriously considered as an effective complementary tool in disease management. Traditional sanitary control measures, such as mass culling, are prohibitively costly, both economically and socially; their long-term sustainability is also questionable. "While biosecurity, surveillance, and movement controls remain essential, vaccination can complement these efforts by reducing virus circulation within and between flocks, minimising economic losses, lowering the risk of spillover to wildlife and humans. Furthermore, when properly implemented, vaccination aligns with international trade standards, ensuring that poultry products remain marketable. Encouraging the development of effective vaccines also drives innovation in disease prevention, reinforcing an anticipatory rather than reactive approach to managing HPAI", explains WOAHA in its inaugural publication. According to Julian Madeley, Director General of the World Egg Organisation, when used in conjunction with biosecurity and surveillance, vaccination could be a very useful tool to control the spread of HPAI in poultry.

Are we staring at a real crisis as is being alarmingly projected? The answer is both Yes and No. A balanced perspective, and that is what the industry should adopt, would recognise the threat, evaluate its severity and then give a measured

response while steadfastly staying clear of scaremongering.

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income, livelihood of the players in the entire production and value chain. Yes, there is threat to wild birds, thus a threat to avian biodiversity; threat also to other species, including mammals. The sectoral economy too gets repeatedly threatened and so do the markets through periodic disruption. Even a single outbreak affects consumer confidence resulting in a crash of prices; everyone ends up a loser. And the biggest crisis could be a compromise

of nutritional security should the poultry be questioned.

No, there is no cause for alarm; what is called for is caution and a rational approach. What needs to be hammered home, yes hammered, is that the threat of the flu is only to the birds and sundry animal species, not to humans. The recent phenomenon of spread to mammals calls for surveillance and a medical response, certainly not panic. The doomsayers too have admitted that the risk to humans is "low". And let it be strongly stated once again that even this "low risk" is to the close handlers of poultry birds. No, there is no threat of contamination of the poultry products; hence there is not even an outside chance of spread of any bird flu virus through food.

The evolution of viruses, whether influenza or Covid or for that matter any other epidemic, is hard to predict. Therefore, it is wise to plan for the worst case scenario. Since the signs of Bird Flu are worrying enough, it should warrant a planning for the extreme situations, even if the risks seem low. In the unlikely event of high risk, poultry and its products would remain perfectly safe for our consumption for we habitually eat food well cooked; this message needs affirmation and reaffirmation over and over again. Who, other than us, boils to the brim, even pasteurised milk before consuming it? Imagine the heat to which we'd subject the eggs and meat to!