



GRAIN
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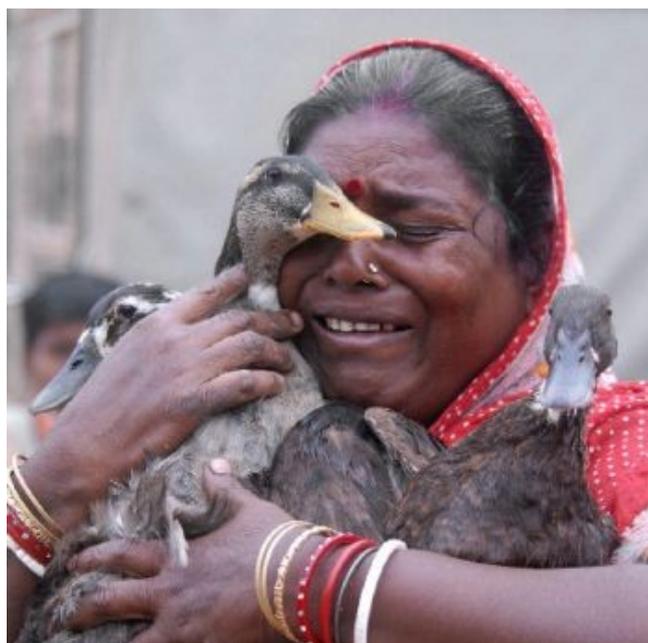
Bird flu in eastern India another senseless slaughter

The carnage of poultry in the eastern Indian state of West Bengal (abutting Bangladesh's western border) is a striking testament to the failure of the global response to the bird flu crisis. Years have now gone by since the H5N1 strain of the disease emerged, and yet today in West Bengal we see that things have not moved from square one.

In a flash, one of the world's most dynamic areas of poultry farming has been practically ruined, a priceless stock of biodiversity wiped out, and the livelihoods of millions of poor families pushed to the brink. This has been caused not so much by bird flu as by the response to it. Three weeks after bird flu was officially confirmed on 15 January 2008, when massive culling operations were launched, the death toll stood at a shocking 3.7 million birds.

More is yet to come. The central government has now issued a directive to neighbouring states to cull all poultry in a 5-km-wide belt surrounding West Bengal. Those affected by this "pre-emptive" cull are understandably outraged. Poultry farmers in Orissa, one such neighbouring state, are taking their protests to the streets and to the state's High Court. They say that the culls will destroy their livelihoods and the area's rich poultry diversity. They also point out that such culls will only encourage an influx of smuggled poultry imports from elsewhere.

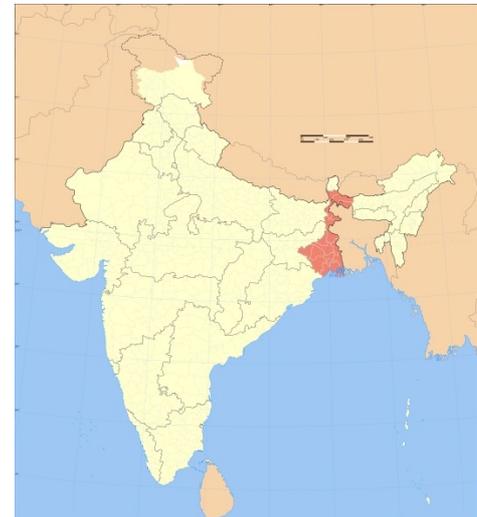
There was heavy resistance to the culls in West Bengal too. During the first wave of culls, when it may have been possible to contain the disease, poultry owners refused to participate because of low



A resident of Jhero village in Hooghly district of West Bengal bursts into tears before handing over her pets to health workers for culling (<http://tinyurl.com/3442sz>)

compensation rates and, most disturbingly, because some local officials were taking a big cut of the compensation. A few culling teams even stopped work to protest against pressure from local officials to sign false cull certificates to boost their compensation claims. Reports also came in of culling teams leaving sacks of birds to rot in fields and unprotected villagers gathering near to or even participating in the cullings, putting into question the merits of culling as a means of safeguarding human health. The situation appears to be even worse in neighbouring Bangladesh, where, despite a mass culling campaign, bird flu has spread to more than half of the country's 64 districts since March 2007.

The response to bird flu in West Bengal needs to be seen for what it is: a political decision to safeguard the interests of the big poultry producers at the expense of the small-scale sector. In India as a whole, thanks to heavy government support, poultry production has been growing at a rate of nearly 20% per year, with most of the growth occurring through the expansion of large-scale integrated production, largely for export and largely in the midst of areas with thriving backyard and small-scale poultry producers. The situation is no different in West Bengal, where a number of big integrated poultry firms have set up in recent years. The largest, Arambagh Hatcheries, part of the B.K. Roy agribusiness group, is now an important player in major export markets, such as Japan and the Middle East, and politically very well connected at home. To keep its trade lines open, a company like Arambagh cannot operate where bird flu is present – hence the drive to stamp the disease out by a mass cull. This is a reality of corporate poultry farming that all communities need to be aware of: if a big poultry company sets up in or near to your community, when a disease like bird flu breaks out, whether or not your birds are affected, they will be culled and your traditional poultry practices may even be outlawed. The culls in West Bengal have now been followed by a 3-month ban on small-scale poultry production.



A map showing West Bengal (dark shading) bordering Bangladesh (<http://tinyurl.com/3b2dge>)

If there's one thing that people in West Bengal can be sure of, it is that bird flu will strike again, if it ever leaves. The virus, like many other diseases, is entrenched in the poultry industry in Asia. Thailand and Indonesia now know this, as do China and Vietnam. India, faced with its third bout of bird flu in two years, should also now understand. Bird flu cannot be completely eradicated: it has to be managed.

Paradoxically, the key to effective management of bird flu lies with the very small-scale poultry systems that have been so devastated by the responses to the disease so far. The great advantages of these traditional systems when it comes to bird flu are that they are small-scale and local – serving mainly local markets and utilising local breeds and feeds. All this keeps the disease contained and at low levels. In these circumstances, highly pathogenic diseases like bird flu, in the rare cases where they enter smallholdings, tend to burn themselves out quickly. Disease can, of course, still be a problem, but, with some minimal support, farmers can easily handle it, as has been shown with another poultry killer – New Castle Disease (Ranikhet).

Unfortunately, in West Bengal, as in most places around the world, governments provide virtually no support to this sector, dismissing it as “backyard” and not worthy of the tremendous support provided to the poultry companies, even though these small-scale systems have served the food needs of rural and urban markets for generations. Instead, the goal of almost all poultry development programmes worldwide is to scale-up small poultry holdings and push the farmers into using high-yielding varieties and costly feeds supplied by big poultry companies. It should not go unnoticed that the

outbreak of bird flu in West Bengal began in a big state-run hatchery. And this is typical of other outbreaks. Bird flu only shifts from an isolated incident to a major outbreak once it gets into a large farm, where it rapidly amplifies and spreads through the many channels emanating from it – the sale of eggs, chicks or spent layers, the trade in live birds, the dumping of waste, the movement of workers or even the aerial dispersal of the virus.

Yet in West Bengal, while the backyard sector was being crushed, the big farms, even those in affected districts, were given special treatment. During the ban on the sale and movement of poultry in Kolkata (Calcutta), the state capital, which was later extended to the entire state, the 12 largest poultry companies had exclusive permission to continue supplying city markets and luxury hotels if they could show that they adhered to “biosafety” norms. Such norms, however, have not kept bird flu out of the big poultry farms in West Bengal, nor did they in the western state of Maharashtra during the 2006 outbreak, nor now in Bangladesh, where the disease is currently racing through the larger farms.



"Don't kill chicken" - resistance to the mass culling of fowl

Instead, in West Bengal there is reason for concern that outbreaks in these bigger farms may not be properly reported. A year ago, when news spread of an unusual die-off in a farm owned by Arambagh Hatcheries, the company denied access to inspectors, with the apparent blessing of the Animal Resources Development Minister, who told reporters, “Nobody can walk into a hatchery without prior permission”. Contrast this with the West Bengal government’s current mobilisation of a police squad to carry out search-and-destroy missions for backyard poultry in poor villages.

The official response to bird flu in West Bengal was very short-sighted. Other options could have been pursued, with a more nuanced approach, reflecting the importance and context of small-scale poultry in the state. The ban on the movement of poultry could have been followed by focused surveillance and education, combined with targeted culls at infected farms, and vaccination, especially in the early days of the outbreaks. This would also have helped to build long-term defences against future outbreaks. It might not have satisfied the big poultry companies, because the low-level persistence of the disease would keep export markets closed, but it would have safeguarded the interests of the millions in West Bengal whose livelihoods and food supply depend on small-scale poultry production.

One month before the outbreaks in West Bengal, these issues were on the table at a major international conference on bird flu in New Delhi. Yet, throughout the outbreaks in West Bengal, the international community and its UN agencies have hardly been visible. The US and Japan did meet with state officials, but only to check on their export supplies and, in the case of the US, to offer some technical support and equipment and to verify the global availability of stocks of Tamiflu syrup for children. Once again, the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) was silent about the irreparable loss of diversity that the cull would entail and the alternatives to indiscriminate culls that have been successfully deployed in other countries. The message raised at the conference in Delhi by some within the FAO ranks, about the need to consider the social impacts of responses and the importance of “targeted” culls, was quickly forgotten. Not that such matters are high on the agenda of the international community anyway, judging from the disturbing inability to resolve international disputes over the sharing of virus samples and vaccines. The row that flared up in February 2007 over patenting issues – between the powerful pharmaceutical interests, led by the US and the UK, and the

poor countries most vulnerable to bird flu, led by Indonesia – has yet to be resolved. The nasty politics even surfaced during the West Bengal outbreaks, when Indian officials accused Bangladesh of not sharing their bird flu virus samples.

Sadly, with not nearly enough being done to address the deeper structural issues at the root of the global bird flu crisis, the story in West Bengal will be repeated where and when the disease strikes next.

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Going Futher

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