

Joseph
KeveFarida
AkhtarBenny
HaerlinCarlos
CorreaDavid
QuistJohnson
EkpereFrancisca
RodriguezGerman
VelezHope
ShandIbrahim
OuedraogoJack
KloppenborgJoseph
Keve

Laxman

The bird flu outbreak - what in your opinion actually happened?

What happened, how and why remains a mystery. In all probability the flu had its origin in either the feed, the weight-gain hormones or the medicines that come from outside and are used by the poultry factory. Closed, unhygienic poultry conditions and improper handling and disposal of poultry wastes like stale food, dead birds and bird excreta make these poultry factories stink. It is probably a combination of these factors that led to this outbreak and its spread.

In your opinion, how did the bird flu outbreak begin in India?

Commercial poultry production is seen as one more easy way to [make] quick money and huge profits. These poultry are treated as machines for eggs and meat. These are no rules or regulations in place, there are no prescribed standards for setting up and maintaining poultry farms, and there is no system for inspection and corrections. Thus it was a tragedy long waiting to happen. As soon as the reports of the flu appeared in the media, Venkateshwara Hatcheries, which claims to own the largest network of poultry factories, denied the outbreak even though information was available that thousands of birds were found dead and buried in their backyards. Neither these factory farms nor the government came out with any information about the causes of the flu or what they did to contain it.

How did the government and industry respond?

Both the government and the industry wanted to protect their own self-interests. The government, after initial efforts to heap the blame on the industry, ordered a clean-up operation quoting WHO stipulations, paid paltry amount as compensation to farms and farmers whose birds were culled and then went silent as though the issue was settled for ever. There has been no effort to enquire into the



I am a farmer by choice, not by birth. Departing from the family business, on completion of my master's degree I taught at the University of Mumbai for a while before moving

on to training bank staff and again into urban and rural development work. Finally I found what my soul was looking for: sustainable agriculture and being with nature. During the last ten years, I have focused my attention on the livelihood systems of the poor and one of its components on which I have done a lot of learning from the people and experimenting is the rearing of traditional fowls. I divide my time between working as a journalist when I am in Mumbai and looking after the farm which is located in a tribal village in Palghar Taluka of Thane district in Maharashtra.

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real causes and deal with the culprits or to educate the public about the causes and how to be better prepared for the future. The government lost a wonderful opportunity to:

- 1) Insist on stricter standards for the poultry industry
- 2) Institute health, hygiene and environmental standards for poultry farms as well as transport-processing-sales outlets
- 3) Set up a system for regular monitoring of all these points
- 4) Examine the long term sustainability of various systems of poultry-farming.

The industry's focus was on safeguarding the present system of doing whatever they please and to protect the interests of the supply-line down to the customers so that they could continue with their lucrative business. Even though the industry had the most information, they shared the least and hid the information from both the government and the public. The National Egg Coordination Committee (NECC) placed several advertisements in the television and print medium only to exhort people to eat more eggs and chicken. They went to the extent of blackmailing the government with exaggerated claims of losses to the industry, the

food chain and to the country's economy in general.

What have been the consequences for small-scale farmers?

We live in times when there is growing disinterest in anything rural, especially agriculture and rural livelihoods. Even among the farmers, most are in it as they do not see any alternatives. There is a general disconnection with the past, with traditional knowledge, skill systems and above all with the dignity of labour. For thousands of years, the traditional birds and animals were part of the family, part of the family economy, a safety mechanism in case of emergencies, especially for the women of the family. In today's context chickens are one more source of quick income; the bigger and quicker the better. Advice of government and poultry 'experts' on the radio, television and print media further add to this fascination for quick money through new breeds which convert the bird into an egg and meat machine. Loss of traditional wisdom and fascination for the advertised breeds, feeds and medicines lead to total dependency on the outside world and the advice of experts who have no connection with and no commitment to rural realities. When the media came out with reports of the flu, there was panic among the people. When the government came out to cull their birds, they were literally lost for words. How could they resist? Many hid their birds, others took the compensation. The story ended there. There was no popular discussion and sharing in the village as was the tradition for centuries. Hardly anyone knows what happened, how, and how it can be prevented. Even where NGOs and other organisations are involved, their own staff are disconnected from the day-to-day struggles of the farmers and under the guidance of so called experts, they too are promoting the new breeds, feeds and vaccinations. Local farmers have lost even such basic knowledge as how to deal with inbreeding in local birds and animals. The result is constant impoverishment of the traditional breeds and their productivity.

What is your own experience in managing poultry disease and local knowledge?

Like life itself, agriculture and even poultry management has to be viewed and dealt with holistically. Like human beings, birds need a safe and secure environment, with adequate ventilation, good quality food including the various herbs and grasses, and plenty of clean water. Holistic food that contains proteins, vitamins, minerals and immunity-building home remedies like turmeric, onions, garlic and tamarind that enable the birds to resist most diseases. Working with and learning from farmers around India as well as Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Philippines and Vietnam, I manage to deal with all the diseases through ordinary home remedies. If people continue to envisage poultry as mere egg and meat factories, there is no future for the industry. Adequate physical exercise is a must for any living creature. Chickens are no exception. The poultry factory farms breed unhealthy birds which in turn produce unhealthy eggs and meat.

What about local poultry diversity?

There are still about two dozen indigenous varieties of fowl in India. Varieties like the long-legged Aseel, which is generally used for cockfights, and the Kadaknath which is famous for its taste, intrinsic power to resist diseases and for its medicinal properties would compare well with the best varieties from anywhere in the world. The Kadaknath with black feathers is the most delicious of all fowl varieties. They are almost extinct today. It took me four years to locate and secure a couple of pure Kadaknaths and I have over a dozen adult birds. Fowl diversity is in constant decline. There has been so much of unplanned mixed breeding that it is already difficult to locate pure blood lines.

What is special about your farm?

After being involved with several NGOs, donor agencies and development projects for over two decades, I wanted to connect with rural reality again: the

real situation of the poor, their livelihood, and their struggle. So I bought a small piece of arid and stony land in a village called Khadkoli (about 110 kilometres from Mumbai) which in the 1990s was labelled as the most dangerous village in the district due to all the crimes and murders that took place there. I did all the ploughing, planting and nurturing of small birds and animals. They were years of lots of experiences, lessons, successes, and failures. Today it is a fully integrated farm with over 35 species of trees (fruit, fodder, timber, fuel, medicine, etc...), quite a few varieties of chickens, ducks, guinea fowls, cows, dogs, cats, turtles, snakes, frogs etc. For farmers from nearly two dozen villages around, it is a model of what is possible with low resources and lot of labour, where they can come to learn about sustainable agriculture, backyard poultry, animal husbandry and above all, planning for self-sufficiency. Every new day brings us new lessons, for ourselves and those around.

What threats and opportunities do you see today?

The fascination for a laid-back easy life is killing people's creativity, possibilities and the very idea of a sustainable future for mankind. Ideas like self-sufficiency, being connected with nature and creatures and evolving with one's environment have no followers today. The search for pleasures, easy-profits and self-glorification are leading people to unhappiness, sickness, despair, diseases and death. We need to recapture the meaning of a common sustainable future for all of humanity. For thousands of years, farming communities looked after and nurtured their back-yard poultry which in turn enabled them to survive through emergencies and difficult days. The bird flu and all the damage it did was a great opportunity to initiate a popular discourse on sustainable methods of poultry-farming, its connection with nature, livelihood, food, nutrition, health and well-being. Unfortunately we have lost that opportunity. We can wait for another calamity to strike or can proactively analyse our goals and directions.

