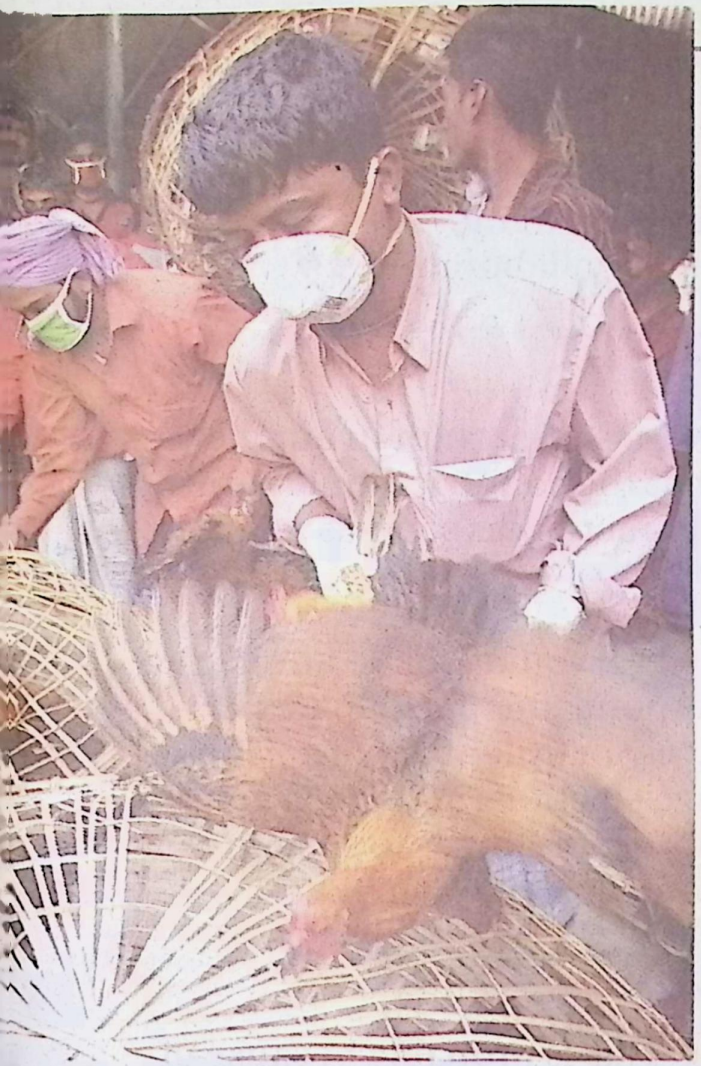


Bird Flu and Tipping Point

One thing a lot of people ask is why "educated" consumers have stopped eating chicken. Of course, the experts tell us, there is no risk of contracting the strain from cooked food. When you ask them about the risk of contracting a strain from the handling of the chicken prior to cooking, they tell you that the strain does not jump from fowl to human. Yet how long would it take for a mutated strain to develop, especially in an unregulated, unhygienic, food culture such as ours.

The government should understand that consumers are loath to trust assurances from officials about "safety" given the long history of suppressing facts from consumers, including government's continued policy of denial about the extent of bird flu.

Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries in the world. It is only chance that has prevented us from falling victim to health outbreaks on surrounding countries such as India's HIV epidemic and the SARS outbreak in East Asia. But this good luck will not last, and the bird flu epidemic shows us the shape of possible future outbreaks. Eric Schlosser's excellent book "Fast Food Nation" documents the insanely unhygienic conditions that exist in the US food industry. This has gone unchecked due to the economic and political muscle of agro-business and food lobby. As the food needs of crowded Bangladeshi cities explode, we will rapidly industrialise food processing with associated health risks.

One immediate step that is needed is Consumer Watchdog groups that can monitor health conditions in food production, sanitation, water supply, industrial sewage, etc that are poisoning our cities. In the US, the crusade of Ralph Nader's consumer safety group forced the entire auto industry to change its safety standards in the 1960s. That was the beginning of that country's consumer rights movement. We need a similar movement in this country. Before the next health crisis arrives.

Indrajit Dasgupta
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

★ ★ ★

The outbreak of bird flu once again points to the lack of preparation, arrangement and awareness procedure about an already known winter occurrence which has been affecting one of the most thriving industries by bringing about a disaster of financial investment of so many rising entrepreneurs across the country.

Though there are no proper vaccinations, several arrangements should have been made to stop the disease from being spread to the neighbouring farms and households which would at least lessen the financial loss of the struggling and panicking entrepreneurs.

Biosecurity, though an expensive mechanism for small entrepreneurs, is one of the most effective, practical and environment-friendly process by which this epidemic could be brought under control. The government can also start subsidising for this sector so that the small farms can afford it.

Of course the most devastating tragedy will be if the flu attacks humans especially in third world countries. The government supported by the researchers, poultry farm owners and other beneficiaries must implement biosecurity and other effective bird flu prevention and awareness mechanisms to sustain a hygienic atmosphere within the farm compounds and peripherals which will help reduce the risk of spreading bird flu, stabilise the advancement of this flourishing industry and ensure a proper compensation for the unfortunate farms in order to minimise the great financial havoc.

Amit Abdullah
Convener of DPELS, Dania Pathagar, Dhaka
Department Of Finance, University Of Dhaka