

Today's quote

“You know you're in love when you can't fall asleep because reality is finally better than your dreams.”

— Dr. Seuss

The Eastern Today

Voice of the Periphery

Lessons from another jailbreak

The daring escape of six prisoners, including the self-styled commander of a Khalistani militant group, from the Nabha Jail in Punjab is another wake-up call for the security establishment. This is the second major jailbreak in the country in the space of weeks involving high-profile prisoners jailed on terrorism charges. Both were well planned and executed. While the jailbreak by members of the Students' Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) from the Bhopal Central Prison last month was planned inside and executed largely by the prisoners on their own, the incident in Nabha was aided by a group of armed men from outside wearing police uniforms. Shortly after the Bhopal jailbreak, all those who had escaped were gunned down in an alleged encounter. And a day after the Punjab incident, Khalistan Liberation Front chief Harjinder Minto was nabbed in Delhi, while the alleged mastermind, Parminder Singh, was arrested in Shamli district in western Uttar Pradesh. Apart from Minto, the five others who escaped are still at large. They are identified as Kashmira Singh, an alleged terrorist, and Vicky Gaundar, Amandeep Dhonian, Gurpreet Sekhon and Nita Deol, all described as dreaded gangsters. It is not clear if the plan was to release the militants or the gangsters, or all of them. Whatever the aim, it is evident that the so-called high security prisons are hardly fool-proof. Those incarcerated have enough scope to hatch a conspiracy, keep in touch with accomplices outside and finalise escape plans in meticulous detail.

What is also troubling is that even before the jailbreak has been thoroughly investigated and as the hunt for the escaped men is still on, the incident has taken on political overtones. With Punjab due for an Assembly election early next year, the suspicion that these men were breaking out of jail to disturb the peace in the run-up to the polls will naturally arise. However, while voicing this suspicion, Punjab Deputy Chief Minister Sukhbir Singh Badal has alleged a Pakistani hand. State Director-General of Police Suresh Arora has voiced suspicion of official connivance, noting that retaliatory firing by the police at the armed men was completely ineffective. Former Chief Minister and Congress leader Amarinder Singh has called the incident a sign of breakdown of law and order and alleged official complicity at the highest level.

The Effects of Antibiotics in Poultry in India

India is one the top five consumers of antibiotics in food-animals in 2010 in the world. This was found by researchers at Princeton University and the Centre for Disease Dynamics, Economics and Policy. According to the study, the level of antibiotic use is projected to double between 2010 and 2030 in India and the country is reported to remain a top consumer till 2030 as well. However there are no statistics on antibiotic use in the production of food animals in the country. WHO reports that so little resistance data were available from important countries like India. Therefore hence it is difficult to estimate the current level of antibiotic use in food animals or the approximate time that India needs to reach a target of 50 mg of antibiotic use/kg of livestock or fish.

There is a need to monitor antibiotic use in food animals in India and it would be helpful to monitor antibiotic use at species level.

Globally, India is a hub for manufacturing Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients. High levels of several broad-spectrum antibiotics in effluent are often released to ground or water in India causing great environmental problems. High use of antibiotics among food-producing animals leads to entry of antibiotics in the environment through animal excreta

Public knowledge about antibiotic resistance is still weak in India and this is something we should worry about. In India, only 58 per cent of respondents know that they should stop taking antibiotics only when they finish the course.

The World Health Organization (WHO) is scaling

up its fight against antibiotic resistance in the last couple of years. Antibiotic resistance occurs when bacteria undergo change and become resistant to antibiotics used for treatment of infections. Sometimes, over-use and misuse of antibiotics can increase the development of resistant bacteria.

A survey by WHO was carried out across 12 countries which includes India on this issue. Almost two thirds (64 per cent) of around 10,000 people surveyed said that they knew antibiotic resistance was an issue that could affect them and their families, but admitted that how it affected them and what they can do to address it were not well understood. For instance, 64 per cent of respondents believe that antibiotics can be used to treat common cold and flu, despite the fact that antibiotics have no impact on viruses. Close to one third (32%) of the people surveyed believe they should stop taking antibiotics when they feel better, rather than completing the prescribed course of treatment.

The survey shows how ignorance or lack of sufficient knowledge leads to popular misconception about antibiotic resistance. About 76 per cent of the respondents think that antibiotic resistance happens when the body becomes resistant to antibiotics. They think that bacteria—not humans and animals—become resistant to antibiotics and their spread causes infections.

Classically antibiotics have been considered a boon because it could cure all the diseases which some seven decades ago was un-

thinkable where a simple cut or wound could kill anyone of a bacterial infection. These remarkable drugs are capable of killing off biological organisms in our body without harming us. Under the illusion that taking antibiotics is essential for every sneeze and cold (which

Farhana Ahmed

by the way, are unaffected by antibiotics), we have collectively overused antibiotics. Similarly the use of antibiotics in food animals—livestock and poultry, used with the objective of making them disease free, has contributed negatively and making the consumers antibiotic resistant. There has been growing reports of people growing resistant to a series of antibiotics in India.

Drugs, mostly antibiotics mixed with chicken feed, used to serve as growth promoters across poultry, were being passed on to humans through broiler meat and eggs. Residue of these medicines were turning consumers resistant to antibiotics, including those used to treat digestive and urological disorders apart from common cold and infections, reports various doctors across the country. Many doctors are forced to resort to a higher dosage to make these drugs effective.

In Northeast states and Assam which produces 40 lakh chickens per week, 40% of which is consumed in capital cities like Guwahati, Shillong and Imphal. In these states poultry farms the feed conversion ratio is high, which means a small amount of fodder triggers quick growth in chickens. A chick grows into an adult chicken in just five weeks.

This is made possible by tempering the feed with antibiotics that help in quick digestion and accumulation of weight. The study reveals that the drugs make it possible to produce 1 kg meat with just 1.8 kg of chicken feed. An average broiler chicken which weighs around 2 kg consumes just 3.6 kg of feed till it is slaughtered.

This is what intensive poultry farming has done in most of states in the country. A farmer needs to invest just Rs 110 kg per chicken, which is sold for around Rs 150. The cost of production would be higher without the antibiotic-tempered feed that hastens growth. While this has translated into more profit for poultry farmers, unsuspecting consumers are getting adversely affected.

Among the antibiotics which have turned less effective over the years are tetracycline, erythromycin, oxytetracycline, neomycin and streptomycin, to name a few. There may be other reasons which have contributed to this antibiotic resistance, but it has been observed that poultry products are majorly responsible.

Preventive medicine specialists confirmed the finding. Scores of drugs now have reduced efficacy which has forced them to alter dosage, many doctors observe here. They point drugs like azithromycin, roxithromycin and trioxycyclin are cases in point. Previously, it would suffice to take them for three days. But now the doctors prescribe it for a minimum of six days. It is sad that patients now have to take medicines for common cough for close to a week, says a doctor.

Many medicine specialists have pointed out that residual antibiotics in chicken and eggs could affect liver, kidneys and bone marrow. The pre-scheduled dose proves ineffective for bacteria and microbes that have already developed resistance in human system. Also, an enhanced dose could lead to side-effects. This is a major challenge for health practitioners presently.

While antibiotics are banned in chicken feed across USA and Europe, India is yet to frame a policy. The Drugs Controller General of India (DCGI) has admitted to concerns over rampant use of non-therapeutic antibiotics in poultry and other animals meant for human consumption. The DCGI office has requested drugs controllers in all states and Union Territories (UT) to alert their inspectors and to take stringent action to ensure that animal feed does not contain antibiotics. The circular also mentions that any action taken on this issue may be forwarded to the office of DCGI.

DCGI had issued similar instructions to drugs controllers to curtail the misuse of antibiotics in food producing animals. This was against the backdrop of a circular issued by the Department of Animal Husbandry, Dairying and Fisheries (DADF), addressed to directors/commissioners for animal health of all states and UTs on the maintenance of withdrawal periods. It also advised state veterinarians, feed manufacturers and others to stop the use of antibiotics in feed and maintain withdrawal periods.

The latest circular issued by the DCGI follows a letter written by the Union Minister for Women and Child Development, Maneka Gandhi, to the Union health minister on the rampant use of non-therapeutic antibiotics as mentioned in a news article. The news article was based on a study conducted by the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), indicating the indiscriminate use of antibiotics on poultry farms for growth promotion and disease prevention.

CSE recommends that antibiotics should be banned from being used for non-therapeutic purposes, for growth promotion and disease prevention in poultry and other food-producing animals. In addition, antibiotics critical to human health (as termed by the World Health Organization) should not be allowed for use in animals. CSE's study has also prompted the Indian Medical Association expressed its concern over misuse of antibiotics in poultry. The IMA said it will demand a ban on the use of antibiotics for growth promotion and mass disease prevention. The association said that antibiotics should be used only to cure sick chicken, based on prescription of veterinarians.

Many researchers are of the opinion that there are alternatives that could substitute antibiotics in poultry feed and cut out the harmful effects. Organic acidifiers and biotechnologically developed enzymes could serve the same purpose without triggering resistance. Some herbal preparations could also be tried. But for that government should frame rules.

(Under the aegis CSE Media Fellowship)