

Today's quote

“Make art, make change and change the world.”

— Alysia Reiner

The Eastern Today

Voice of the Periphery

Questions from a washout

That the winter session would be washed out had been clear for a while. With the Opposition parties mustering all their disruptive tactics to stall the functioning of both Houses, insisting on maximalist demands on just how the debate on demonetisation should be structured, hopes for any substantive work had diminished. In the event, the session also left a hysterical afterglow, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi telling a gathering in Gujarat that he had to speak his mind in a “jan sabha” (people’s meet) as the Opposition wouldn’t let him do so in Parliament; and Rahul Gandhi, vice-president of the Congress party, complaining that he was not allowed to make earth-shattering disclosures on the floor of the House, but then keeping them close to his chest outside. With theatrics such as these, both the Government and the Opposition have left a question hanging in the politically charged air: what was the point? What did either side gain by bringing Indian parliamentary democracy’s most deliberative process to a grinding halt? Just two bills were passed, one of them a money bill that did not need the Rajya Sabha’s nod. According to the think tank PRS Legislative Research, less than 1 per cent of the 330 questions listed for Question Hour in the Rajya Sabha were answered orally. The Lok Sabha looked better only in comparison, with 11 per cent.

Given what was at stake in the session, the abandonment of the spirit of give-and-take that keeps the legislative schedule humming was baffling. The government has staked much political capital on key financial reforms that need cooperation across the aisles. It lost the chance to pass bills critical to the April 1, 2017, deadline for the rollout of the Goods and Services Tax. It also failed to end the session on a note of federal cooperation to set up the shift to Budget day to February 1 from next year. The Opposition, for its part, has clearly taken its cue from the BJP’s playbook. By forcing adjournments while in opposition, it was successful in reinforcing the impression of a policy paralysis in the second UPA government. But the Congress has a point to prove other than what the BJP did then. To re-establish itself as a viable option for voters, the Congress needs to share its vision and road map in the Rahul Gandhi era. The floor of the House, with a tempered debate and questioning as a constructive party of opposition, is a key venue for that. Basic self-interest demands that government and opposition avert the possibility of the Budget session meeting the same fate as this one.

Use of antibiotics among broiler chickens in Assam and North Eastern states

Assam and other North Eastern states are one of the most meat consuming states of India. Apart from livestock, poultry constitutes a major portion of the meat intake by the people of these states. However, due to growing population and declining local flocks of chickens, the majority of the poultry for this region is in the form of broiler chickens and they are supplied from Andhra Pradesh. Day-old chicks are transported by air daily to Guwahati and are further sent to various places by road. The broiler farms, spread across every corner of this entire region grows the day-old chicks to full grown chickens measuring up to 3-4 kgs in weight. Among the other poultry feeds, the farm keepers use antibiotics widely among the broilers. The most wide spread of these antibiotics is Cephalixin Monohydrate. It is prescribed to treat a wide variety of bacterial infections in chickens.

The medication operates by disrupting cell wall maintenance to destroy sensitive bacteria while preventing reproduction to stop the spread of infection allowing the immune system to destroy it naturally. This action makes it useful for treating conditions such as infections affecting the gums, joints, bones, respiratory tract, soft tissues, skin, urinary tract, or the ear (otitis media). For the broiler chicken this antibiotic is used to prevent early chick mortality and for the treatment of E. coli, Salmonella, Fowl Cholera, Coryza, and Gangrenous Dermatitis.

Assam and the North-eastern states has been consuming the broiler chicken for last two and half decade and the side effects of this antibiotic used among this poultry are now visible. An entire new generation of young population is seen having developed the signs of the most common adverse effects of cephalixin-gastrointestinal (stomach area) disturbances and hypersensitivity reactions, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea.

Rakib Ahmed, a broiler farmer from Mangaldai of Darrang district of Assam uses to get one thousand day old broiler chicks from Andhra Pradesh twice in a week. The consignment comes in paper baskets by air and is carried by road for 70 kms from

Farhana Ahmed

LGBL Airport, Guwahati. During transit, some of the chicks die due to exposure to outside heat and constant shaking in the vehicle in which they are transported. Rakib either sale the chicks in higher prices to other smaller broiler farmers or keeps them to be grown up. To meet the losses on the transit, he takes all the cares for the chicks to be grown up and being sold in market prices. For that Rakib administers all kinds of poultry feeds including antibiotics to save his chicks. In doing so he unknowingly contributes towards an impending health disaster that has begun to show its signs among the consumers.

In the cases of other poultry farmers like Derek Roy in Shillong in Meghalaya and Biren Ibotomba Singh in Imphal, Manipur the story is almost same. In case of Roy the loss in transit is much higher than that of Rakib Ahmed as his consignment has to travel more distance from the same airport. But the most significant part of poultry farming or precisely the broiler chicken farming in the entire North-East India is the use of some cheap and low quality poultry feeds. As feed plays vital role in poultry farming and is the major cost of poultry production

which seriously affects the production output of the birds. So the feed and feeding management is the major important consideration for efficient commercial poultry farming. Improper feeding causes several deficiency disease which results in poor production performance. But for all these poultry farmers the concern for low cost in production along with meeting

the losses in the transit have made them to ignore some of the vital ingredients of the poultry feed with the required nutrients (carbohydrates, fats, protein, minerals & vitamins) in right proportion for better growth of the birds. In addition to the regular

nutrients, some additives are required to facilitate digestion and growth and is usually added in reputed commercial feed. But lesser importance to this aspect often leads to diseases among the chickens for which antibiotics are administered heavily.

Another important practice used by broiler chicken farmers in Assam and other North-Eastern states is E.M. It is a brown colour concentrated liquid produced from the cultivation of 80 strains of beneficial microorganisms collected from natural environment. It reduces cost inputs more efficiently and improves gain in body weight. It maintains better health condition of chicks. It helps clean shed, less flies, ticks and less disease incidence. E.M. in broiler feed on daily basis is administered with water and other broiler feeds. In many cases it was found that EM solution is being mixed with antibiotics. This causes a problem as cautioned in user manual.

However, most of the veterinary drug dealers and retailers in the North-Eastern states say in an united voice that the administration of antibiotics in broiler chickens originates from their breeding farms in South India, mostly in Andhra Pradesh and Telengana. Dr. Prabir Saikia, a practicing veterinarian in Lakhimpur district, who has made some investigation over this use of antibiotics in broiler chickens says that Enrofloxacin and a similar drug levofloxacin are found to be administered in broiler chicks in large farms and hatcheries in Andhra Pradesh and Telengana from where all the day old chicks and eggs come to Assam and the North East-

ern states. He said that these antibiotics are added to water and given to chicks as young as 1 day old to stave off disease. A solution combining enrofloxacin, ciprofloxacin and colistin are usually administered for six days mixed in drinking water for the prevention of respiratory infections of day old chicks, Dr Saikia says.

Usually the preparation of meat, mostly pork in all the tribal societies of the North-Eastern states is based on traditional methods using no spices. Any local menu consisting meat is made of herbs and other natural ingredients. The menus like chicken curry, chicken masala, tandoori chicken-all are brought from North India to this region. The locals mostly the youth have a craze for these chicken items and are usually they are served in hotels and restaurants and dhabas. Over the years, the organic chicken, known as the local chicken have become sparsely available and its prices also skyrocketed making the common consumers hard to buy them. This void has been filled by the broiler chickens in North-East over the years. They are cheaper than the organic one and contain more flesh. Thus it has occupied the major position in the dishes like chicken curry, chicken masala or tandoori chicken across North East.

Daily consumption of broiler meat along with liquor has already taken its toll among the consumers in this region. Facial obesity, weight gain and overall obesity have been noticed among the youth born after 1990-the time from when broiler chickens were brought from South India to the North-East. Now the use of antibiotics in this poultry has causing an entire generation to become antibiotic resistant. Reports of resistance to antibiotics are daily coming out from various places of this region on cases like viral fever and some minor disease. Reports

of gastrointestinal (stomach area) disturbances and hypersensitivity reactions, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhoea are increasing in Assam and other neighbouring states of this region. However no official records of such increase of diseases in these states have been found. India is the single largest consumer of antibiotics in the world (2010), followed by China and the US. There have been reports highlighting an increasing resistance to carbapenems and polymyxins, two classes of drugs long considered “last-resort” antibiotics for illnesses without any other known treatment in India. Doctors monitoring these trends are of the view that lack of a regulatory system is responsible for this unchecked use of antibiotics in broiler chickens and its effects on human health.

It may be recalled that Randeep Guleria, professor of medicine at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, and a member of the Union health ministry’s 2011 task force to frame the National Policy for Containment of Antimicrobial Resistance observed the lack of regulatory provisions in India to prevent use of antibiotics as growth promoters in poultry and livestock. He said that antibiotics are heavily used in poultry and can easily enter the human chain and the environment, making pathogens resistant to such antibiotics. The policy recommended gathering data by undertaking studies on the use of antimicrobials as animal growth promoters, specifying antibiotics for use in livestock, developing regulations on usage of antimicrobials in poultry and other animals, as well as the requisite labelling requirements in food. But nothing has been done so far.

In 1950, scientists in the US discovered that adding antibiotics to livestock feed accelerated animals’ growth and cost less than conventional feed supplements. This discovery pushed farmers around the world to

use antibiotics as growth boosters. However, the problem started when farmers started using antibiotics used to fight microbial infections in humans to accelerate the growth of livestock.

With increasing awareness of the dangers of using antibiotics as growth promoters, the US and several European countries have designed policies to phase out or ban their use in the poultry industry. But the antibiotics used by large poultry farmers in Andhra Pradesh and Telengana are among those which have been banned in US, EU and Australia.

Like most of the other places in India, antibiotics meant for poultry and livestock are sold openly in veterinary shops across Assam and the North-East without any prescription. Any report of disease in broiler chickens in this region is quickly responded by the administration of antibiotics by vets. As a result a time-bomb is ticking for disastrous public health sector of this region which is known for its underdeveloped state in India.

In 1997, a World Health Organization (WHO) report had said that national policies on the use of antimicrobials in animals must balance the possible benefits to livestock production against the medical risk and public health consequences of their use. It further recommended that the use of any antimicrobial agent for growth promotion in animals should be terminated if it is used in human therapeutics.

But the mostly non-vegetarian population of Assam and the North-East, who has a craze for chicken dishes, an unaware position is threatening their future. If a strict regulatory mechanism is not introduced and enforced the region may witness a health disaster in coming years due to antibiotic resistance. (On the auspices of CSE fellowship)