

Swine flu engulfs India as pig-headed govt fumbles, fails its people

WSN Bureau
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What did you expect when a virus as deadly as Swine Flu hit a country as poorly equipped to deal with even a minor healthcare emergency as India? Complete breakdown of all so-called arrangements, chaos, panic coupled with failure to disseminate information, lethargic official machinery and a shameful record of coping with a crisis.

Well, all of this happened, and more. Worse: worse will happen.

News of deaths are pouring in from Pune, Delhi and Mumbai, ten people have died till the time this WSN edition went to the press, tens of new cases are coming out as positive, number of suspected are going up by hundreds and the queues outside the hospitals across the country are now running into their thousands.

India is in panic. In certain cities, including Pune, schools, colleges, theatres, tuition centres are being shut down for a week, and may be more. The Indian Council of Medical Research said the Pune situation had been declared a pandemic with transmissibility at the highest level (Level 6) but virulence still at the lowest (Level 1) — a "community spread" to denote that the flu virus was circulating freely in the city.

"By community spread, we mean that you can now pick up the virus anywhere and not necessarily by exposure to a known case. Health authorities there will not wait for confirmation of results but will administer Tamiflu if a person reports with symptoms and the

doctor thinks it is a suspected H1N1 case," said Dr V M Katoch, Director General of ICMR and Secretary, Health Research.

It took the government massive public and media outcry to even think of authorising private hospitals to carry out tests to confirm swine flu. After the two designated hospitals crumbled under the burden of testing thousands, and state government was found clearly ill

equipped to deal with the situation, the Prime Minister's Office got into the act, terse messages went out and some damage control was put in action.

Maharashtra then marked a few private hospitals where treatment for H1N1 virus will now be available in addition to the existing facilities at Naidu Hospital, Aundh General Hospital and the Sassoon General Hospital.

Now, the centre has decided to involve central, state and local government establishments, including medical colleges and institutions and private health institutes, in flu management.

But crisis may get a new and drastic turn as people gather in hundreds of thousands for a Hindu festival called Srikrishna Jayanti (Dahi Handi) on August 14 another big-ticket event Ganesh

Chaturthi on August 23. The Ramzan period also starts thereafter.

Samples for verification of the flu are now taking 48 hours. Fresh guidelines from the government are missing. Doctors want guidelines like in Mexico, where gatherings have been curbed.

Hundreds of people in many cities are being seen with homemade masks which could be washed and used again.

With a sharp rise in the numbers for testing, the government is planning to manufacture an indigenous reagent to bring down costs. The ICMR is looking at the possibility of developing a low-cost testing kit which can bring the cost down to a tenth of the current cost. Each positive test costs the government Rs 10,000 and a negative Rs 5,000.

In India, in keeping with the way the country is being run, masks have already become the hot property in black market, TamilFlu is something for which states are fighting, and medical opinion being dished out by TV is often contradictory. As for the health minister, he actually made a statement about the first victim of swine flu, Reeda, that she may have given the deadly disease to 85 people before dying herself. What sympathy can you seek from a system like this?



Adieu Patwant Singh: Liberal aristocrat of many parts

WSN Network
NEW DELHI

Patwant Singh, the liberal aristocrat of many parts who dabbled in writing about international affairs, was one time known for bringing out a path-breaking journal on design and then tried to find his destiny in identifying himself with Sikh community affairs, passed away last Saturday. He was 84.

Patwant Singh was a constant figure alongside late Lt General (retd) Jagjit Singh Aurora and Justice R S Nirula after the 1984 anti-Sikh genocide and kept up the initiative with meetings of Sikh Forum at the Constitution Club in Delhi. In recent months, he was working closely with lawyer activist H S Phoolka in certain education initiatives trying to democratise the education delivery system by using technology to increase the reach and bring in rural children to schools.

Patwant Singh suffered a fatal heart attack a week after he had returned from an American sojourn during which his latest book on Sikh history had been released at the Library of Congress in Washington.

Son of a major contractor involved in the construction of New Delhi, Patwant's bungalow on Amita Shergil Marg had for decades served as the hub of his intellectual and cultural pursuits as also his social activism. Delhi was a recurring theme in some of the books he had written on history, politics and international affairs. His 1989 book "Delhi: The Deepening Urban Christies" was a study on the Capital's "descent from a gracious city which embodied the best in civic grace and elegant planning to a crowded polluted and unlivable city in which basic



amenities are not available to the almost half its population"

Driven as he was by his passion for aesthetics and concern about inequities, Patwant was at the time of his death working on another book on his beloved city, "Beyond Forgiveness: The Destruction of Delhi's Priceless heritage".

He is survived by his wife Meher, Sister Rasil Basu, nieces Amrita and Rekha and his adopted son Satjit Singh Chahil.

Patwant Singh's role in backing Sant Longowal for entering into an accord with Rajiv Gandhi came in for some sharp criticism. He was often also seen as somehow remaining a part of the establishment, notwithstanding his collection of essays in 1985 under the title "Punjab: The Fatal Miscalculation".

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