



# Waste Watch

A Newsletter by Chintan-Bharti Waste Resource Centre

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## Avian Flu

One of the most severe global threats in the last few years has been from Avian flu, or bird flu. What happens here is that the H5N1 virus, usually only harmful for birds, mutates and attacks human beings. The resulting flu is so serious it can kill. It is also highly infectious and a pandemic is easily possible if the disease is not controlled early. One of the weakest links in this is the poultry excreta, where the virus is found and survives for a long time. Waste, therefore, become more of a danger to mankind than ever before.

In India, chicken is the most common poultry. We look after it very badly. Stuffed birds, their droppings all over their cages, already immune-compromised are the norm. Many of these birds fight, pecking at each other, and possibly, spreading infection. When the owners of these unhappy birds clean up, the waste is all disposed off in the trash. This finally lands up on a landfill, rich with disease. The cleaners are also in contact with the waste, exposing themselves to great risk. Every way you look at it, our waste is contributing to a global problem and raising the risks.

Ideally, the waste must be disposed off by composting at high temperatures, a process that ensures that pathogens are killed. This can be done centrally under controlled conditions, but the transportation makes it more risky and more likely to fail, judging by poor transportation and haulage of waste. One good option is to initiate ward level

anaerobic composting, with intense local training. In order to increase the incentive to bring the waste to one point, it may even be useful to combine awareness and a small financial incentive. This is exactly the kind of initiative that can be low cost but long term, under the present circumstances.

No one must be in touch with the waste and if they do happen to touch it, washing is the best option. But can this ever be a reality in India? Unlikely.



This forces one to ask what can be done to protect people from this, given the current circumstances. The important thing is to distinguish between the informal and formal chicken rearing sector. The formal sector comprises huge, capital intensive farming. Standards, incentives and capacity could work here. But there is a sizeable informal sector too and investment here is inevitable. There is no choice. To start with, the poultry keepers must be given licenses on condition they follow basic safety measures. These licenses should enable them to access better cages, training and even medical care for their birds. But in order to keep the licenses, handling the poultry waste safely, as trained, must be a non-negotiable. We know it's being handled well if it reaches the local composting site in a secure manner, in small batches. When waste is so directly threatening to global health, we need to realize that poultry waste is no chicken-shit.

Picture Source: U.S. Civilian Research & Development Foundation