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It is time to rethink the way humans treat animals

It is time to rethink how chickens are bred, treated and eaten, too. There is a whole new generation of people who care about where their food comes from, and how it is grown

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From the moment they are born, these birds spend all their lives in total confinement. Broiler chickens are born in large incubators with hundreds of others; crammed into small, often filthy spaces(Pratik Chorge/HT Photo)

On May 4 each year, since 2005, a non-profit in the United States (US) called United Poultry Concerns celebrates

International Respect for Chickens Day. It spreads the message that we need to rethink how we treat all food animals, especially chickens, since poultry is the most consumed meat in the world.

The rest of the world needs to join them in celebrating May 4 as International Chicken Day.

Astonishingly, 60 billion chickens are reared for meat globally each year. India produces about three billion, in an industry valued at close to \$20 billion. The broiler and layer industry that perfected itself in the US has spread globally, and so have all its practices, both good and bad. In India, it has created economies of scale, given livelihoods to thousands of farmers, and become an important source of protein.

But animal rights activists have long tried to sensitise people that chickens are arguably the most abused animals on the planet. Broilers and layers undergo a lot of suffering so that humans can get low-cost protein. They also save other forms of wildlife from being trapped and slaughtered for food.

From the moment they are born, these birds spend all their lives in total confinement. Broiler chickens are born in large incubators with hundreds of others; crammed into small, often filthy spaces. They are fed and drugged to become very large very quickly. They can become crippled under their own weight; they can get heart attacks and have organ failure. Many die because their baby-sized hearts cannot keep up with their adult-sized bodies.

Sometimes, they, especially the layer hens, can't even move; sometimes, their bodies grow outside and around their tightly packed wire cages.

Broiler babies are slaughtered at around 42 days, though their natural lifespan can be 10-15 years. When they are ready to be killed, there is more agony waiting for them. They are roughly handled in small crates on the way to the slaughterhouse. Sometimes, they are immersed alive in hot water to remove their feathers. Sometimes, when there is no market for them, as during this pandemic, they are just buried alive in mass trenches.

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Yet, there is enough evidence to show that chickens are inquisitive, intelligent and highly social animals. Mother hens spend a lot of time teaching young ones and vocalising to them. Some studies have shown they could feel empathy and also jealousy. In experiments, they have shown they can count, and can even recognise human faces. Certainly, they feel fear and pain.

Maybe it is time to rethink how chickens are bred, treated and eaten, too. There is a whole new generation of people who care about where their food comes from, and how it is grown. More people are turning vegetarian. There is also

an increasing demand world over, and now in India, for humane meat, for free-range chickens and organic eggs.

The recent pandemic has reminded us once again, this time with deadly urgency, about the threat of zoonotic disease that spread from the animal world to the human. People deserve to know more about the connection between the industrial processes at poultry farms and the spread of diseases.

We now know exactly how much our well-being is intertwined with that of animals and birds. Maybe it is time to honour the sacrifice that they, and chickens especially, make for us all, including vegetarians. Let's mark May 4 on our calendars, not just for the partial end of the lockdown, but for the end of misery for the animals we depend on for food.

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