

The pecking order

Lack of hygiene and cruelty towards birds (poultry), such as confining them in battery cages, has impacted those who consume meat or eggs. The health hazards include a rise in diseases such as cancer.

The Law Commission of India, in its 269th report, drafted two new laws to end the cruelty to birds and pave the way for more compassionate processes in the poultry industry. The rules are the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Egg Laying Hens) Rules of 2017 and the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Broiler Chicken) Rules of 2017.

The rules mandate that a more natural environment of housing that allows hens to perch and move about freely is a better alternative to the existing practice of battery cages. They call for better farming techniques.

The report condemns practices such as the breaking of beaks and the killing of young male chicks in the poultry industry. It recognises that the practice of unnecessary feeding of non-therapeutic antibiotics to the birds (which eventually leads to antibiotic resistance) directly impacts human health.

The Law Commission notes that the Indian poultry industry is unable to cater to an increasing consumer base which is demanding cruelty-free meat/organically-produced eggs. The lack of such an existing trend in the larger market has made it difficult for sellers and the hospitality industry to cater to the business.

On certification

The Commission's report, published in July, further recommends certification of poultry farms by State animal husbandry departments. The certification should make a distinction between produce obtained from cage free egg farming and that obtained from battery cage farming.

In the draft Egg Laying Hens Rules, the onus is on a farmer to immediately report the "outbreak or suspected outbreak of any zoonotic or contagious disease or infection to the local authority, the State Board and the State government. Every farm shall have at least one room or enclosure for quarantining sick hens, or hens suspected to be sick".

In the draft Broiler Chicken Rules, the Commission recommends that chickens should not be housed in cages or kept on wire or slatted floors. "Chickens shall be provided sufficient space for movement without any difficulty, to stand normally, turn around and stretch their wings."

The Rules also mandate that indoor chickens should be provided with a "stimulating environment" to keep them active.

These include ramps, low perches, pecking blocks and straw bales to stimulate exploratory, foraging and locomotive behaviour and to minimise injurious pecking. Besides, poultry farms should sell chickens only to licensed slaughter houses.

The definition of harassment needs to be constantly updated, and the process for justice made more robust

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