'RAJASTHAN'S ZIKA STRAIN CLOSE TO BRAZILIAN ONE'

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'Outbreak clearly seems to be triggered due to mosquito breeding'.

The Zika virus behind the ongoing outbreak in Rajasthan is closely related to the virus that caused the Brazilian outbreak, according to Balram Bhargava, Director General of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR). Dr. Bhargava told *The Hindu* that the National Institute of Virology (NIV) had fully sequenced the Rajasthan virus' genome, and this is the first time a Brazilian-like strain has been detected in India. Before this, a strain from a patient in Gujarat, sequenced partially by the NIV, was found to be close to a Malaysian Zika strain, isolated in 1966.

Different from Gujarat

The Rajasthan outbreak is different from the Gujarat cases in several important ways. Firstly, this is the largest in India, having affected 72 people. Before this, only four Zika cases were detected by the NIV in 2016-17, despite widespread surveillance. These included three cases in Gujarat and one in Tamil Nadu. Secondly, in Gujarat and Tamil Nadu, the virus did not seem to be moving efficiently from person to person, via mosquitoes. Though researchers tested several people apart from the confirmed cases then, they were unable to find other infections, said Arunkumar Govindakarnavar, who heads Karnataka's Manipal Centre for Virus Research. Thirdly, even though the ICMR has screened 50,000 mosquitoes at 8 sites across India since 2016, it did not detect the virus in mosquitoes until the Rajasthan outbreak, Dr. Bhargava said.

"The current outbreak seems to be triggered due to uncontrolled mosquito breeding. Vector control is the key to prevention of outbreaks in future," he said.

Though the virus is spreading quickly, most Zika cases have been mild, with 60 out of 72 patients healthy after treatment.

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