

Animal slaughter and public health

Naseem Salahuddin

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Naeem Sadiq

Unnoticed by many, their migration begins in the early hours of the morning of every Eid ul Azha. Two distinct categories of individuals begin to descend upon the city in droves to occupy passages leading to mosques, graveyards, city intersections, and around residences that appear more like 'animal markets' than human dwellings. One of these is a group of professional beggars - a family business jointly operated by husbands, wives, children, uncles and grandparents. The other is an amateur group of clueless 'one-day-butchers' - novices who are eager to make a one-time 'killing'. This group is equipped with hurriedly assembled mobile slaughter kits consisting of knives and machetes of various sizes.

The struggle for control and slaughter of the helpless animals is initiated almost immediately after the Eid prayers. A tussle that involves a disarrayed crowd grappling, restraining, lashing, collapsing and firmly holding an animal from all angles - before the knives can get to the jugular. Unfortunately, these dithering part-time butchers greatly add to the brutality of the process and suffering of the animals.

The physical act of slaughter is accomplished on 'as is - where is' principle. There are no laws, norms or compulsions to restrain this uncontrolled passionate spirituality. It can be performed inside a house, outside a house, in front of one's own gate, in front of a neighbour's gate, on a sidewalk, a main road, an empty plot, a footpath or in the middle of a narrow street. When performed at a raised or sloping location, the resultant fluids travel far beyond their intended coordinates. The gutters either get choked with coagulated blood, or simply shift the high protein burden to the nearby ocean waters, further harming the already distressed aquatic life.

In most western as well as Islamic countries, it is unlawful to slaughter animals at homes, on roads, at public spaces or in residential areas. This can be done only in designated areas approved as slaughter houses and located well away from dwellings. These purpose-built premises include facilities for housing and movement of animals, veterinary care, professional slaughtering methods, segregation and disposal of waste and body parts such as blood, hides, skins, hooves, heads, horns, offal, guts and other inedible parts. Many of these are sold and recycled.

Slaughter in places other than approved and licensed locations carries great hygiene and public health risks. Congo Crimean haemorrhagic Fever (CCHF) has recently hit the headlines because of the growing incidence of this highly fatal disease. It is caused by the virus that is carried inside the Hyalomma tick that lives on the skin of farm animals. The information has reached only a fraction of the people who are likely to acquire the infection. Thus, the vast number of adults and children who are in contact with cattle, know or understand little, or wish not to know, trusting their lives to fate.

CCHF is just one of the zoonotic diseases (infectious diseases transmitted from animal to man) commonly known to most lay persons or practicing doctors. There are at least several dozen viral, bacterial, fungal and protozoal infections that are responsible for serious infections in humans. These infections are difficult to diagnose and even more difficult to treat. Unrecognized illnesses lead to mistreatment, complications, and prolonged and chronic ill health.

The Eid ul Azha of 2016 has come and gone. The rivers of blood may have been washed away or absorbed into the earth. Stray cats and dogs, crows and eagles will scavenge the left over flesh, and one may get accustomed to the city's perpetual stink. Days, weeks, even months later, diseases will start surfacing. Unreported by the press, many sick adults and children will enter hospital 'outpatients' and clinics with fever and body pain, perhaps bleeding from internal organs. Others may suffer from fever and liver disease due to the parasitic that causes hydatid disease; prolonged, indolent fever from brucella, pneumonia from Coxiella, bovine TB, chronic intestinal infections from parasites (worms) and skin infections from anthrax.

Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia where animal sacrifice is in largest numbers (specially after Hajj), roadside slaughter is unheard of. The Gulf countries do not have CCHF or zoonotic infections because they handle animal sacrifices in a civilized and hygienic manner. Pakistan too could learn from these examples. Keeping, breeding or entry, let alone slaughter of farm animals in or around residential areas, roadsides or public spaces ought to be declared unlawful. This would however call for establishing organised, scientific, licensed and hygienic abattoirs in all cities and urban centres. If our government is genuinely sympathetic and prudent towards the health and hygiene of its citizens it could begin in earnest to build abattoirs close to all urban residential areas in a manner that caters to both public health as well as convenience of citizens.