

**PETA**



# **FROM SHELL TO HELL:**

**The Plight of Chicks in the Indian  
Egg and Meat Industries**

A Report by PETA India and Anonymous for Animal Rights



## **INTRODUCTION**

Between February and April 2016, an investigator from Anonymous for Animal Rights visited several hatcheries (where chicks hatch before being sent to a farm where they'll be raised) as well as farms raising chickens for meat and eggs, all located in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. Now, for the first time, PETA India and Anonymous for Animal Rights are able to reveal the shocking methods routinely used to kill chicks in the Indian egg and meat industries, among other atrocities.

India is the world's third-largest producer of eggs and fourth-largest producer of chicken meat, and yields of both are particularly high in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. Many of the companies investigated have a strong presence in these markets, and some also operate facilities in other states. The findings in these two states can, therefore, be considered representative of the conditions for chicks in these industries nationwide.

The investigator found evidence that chicks' lives begin and end with pain and suffering. Problems with incubators can cause birds' organs to protrude as well as other health complications, and rough methods of sex determination cause distress. The beaks of newly hatched females who will be used for egg production are partially cut off with red-hot blades. Meanwhile, male chicks – and others who are sick or otherwise considered unprofitable for meat or egg production – are killed in gruesome, disturbing ways, including by grinding, drowning, burning, crushing and suffocation, or feeding them live to fish. These living, feeling baby birds are treated like waste and are even tossed into rubbish bins.

The only way for consumers to ensure they're not contributing to the abuse and slaughter of chicks is by eating a strictly plant-based diet.

## LOCATIONS

The investigator visited hatcheries as well as farms housing chickens raised for eggs or meat, which are operated and used by the following companies:

### Venkateshwara Hatcheries Pvt Ltd

Commonly referred to as Venky's, Venkateshwara Hatcheries operates facilities that breed chicks for both egg and meat production in Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and other southern states. The company supplies Kentucky Fried Chicken, McDonald's, Pizza Hut, and Domino's, and it claims to have pioneered the concept of parent franchisee operations in addition to popularising cage farming. The investigator visited a hatchery that supplies chickens for egg production as well as one which breeds birds to be raised for meat.

### Suguna Foods

Suguna conducts its business using the integration model, or contract farming, which means it hatches chicks and gives them to independent farmers to raise. When the chickens reach an ideal weight for slaughter, the company buys them back to kill them and sell their



Chicks born in the meat and egg industries experience misery from the moment they hatch.

flesh. This large enterprise has a presence in 16 states, and its brands are household names. The investigator visited a hatchery that supplies the meat industry and contract farms.

### **SR Group**

SR Group owns multiple brands that raise chickens for meat, sell eggs for hatching and human consumption, and produce feed for birds raised for meat, eggs, and breeding. The investigator toured a meat-production hatchery, a research and development facility, and a feed mill and farm owned by an SR Group employee.

### **Skylark Hatcheries Pvt Ltd**

Skylark Group is one of the largest poultry producers in India. According to its website, its operations cover “all poultry activities which [include] Grand Parent (G.P.) operations, Parent Stock (P.S.) operations, Hatcheries, Feed milling, broiler contract farming, poultry equipments, poultry processing and retail marketing”. The investigator wasn’t allowed to go inside the hatchery but, while outside, videotaped the transport of baby chicks from the facility.



Unwanted chicks are crushed inside a truck.

### **SH Group**

This group is involved with meat and egg production as well as hatcheries. Srinivasa Hatcheries Ltd, a subsidiary, is one of the largest hatcheries in the world. The investigator met with

K Senthil Kumar, the senior technical manager.

### **Diamond Group**

Diamond Group takes its breeding stock from Venkateshwara Hatcheries. It runs hatcheries and raises chickens for meat. The investigator visited a hatchery and a breeding farm.



The distress of severe crowding can be seen on some chicks' faces.

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON CHICKENS**

Like all animals, chickens value their own lives. Ethologists (animal behaviourists) describe them as social, sensitive, and intelligent. For example, they use over 30 distinct vocalisations that express a wide range of information about mating, nesting, danger, fear, and the discovery of food. In nature, chicks peep to their mothers even before they hatch, and the hens reply with comforting sounds. They also communicate with their unhatched siblings, and sometimes as a result, they all hatch at the same time.

Within days of hatching, they develop expertise at complex skills that don't surface in humans until they're toddlers, such as basic arithmetic and structural engineering as well as self-control. They can also recognise more than 100 individual faces, even after several months of separation. In addition, they're able to consider the future and exercise self-restraint in order to obtain a later reward, a skill that was previously



Chicks in commercial hatcheries like this one never get to meet their mothers.

thought to be exclusive to humans and other primates.

A study by the University of Bristol demonstrated both physiologically and behaviourally that when chicks are distressed, their mothers feel

empathy for them. When given the opportunity, hens also teach their young the ways of the world, including lessons in safety, such as which foods to eat and which to avoid.

Chickens can also distinguish among humans, remember how they were treated by them, and develop expectations based on past experiences. They're so smart, in fact, that ethologist Dr Lesley Rogers said that "it is now clear that birds have cognitive capacities equivalent to those of mammals, even primates".

## INVESTIGATION DETAILS

Following are descriptions of the cruelty to animals found by the eyewitness.

### Incubation

Instead of allowing hens to incubate their offspring as nature intended, hatcheries place eggs in incubators. Hatched chicks never meet their mothers, and many are forced into the same vicious cycle of egg laying and slaughter.

Large-scale commercial incubators are controlled by company officers and have automatic back-up systems. However, problems can still occur, including causing chicks to be born with organ deformities and other health problems.



Problems with the incubator can mean that some chicks are born with organ deformities.

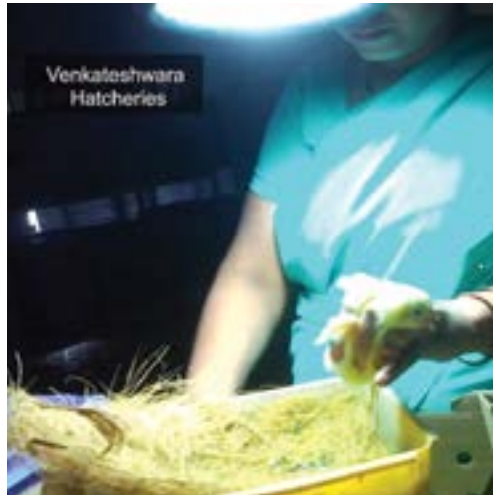
These animals are then discarded. At SR Group's meat-production hatchery, the investigator observed chicks who had organs protruding from their bodies.

According to KG Anand, general manager of Venkateshwara's egg-production hatchery, a single incubator can hold as many as 90,000 eggs. At Diamond Group's meat-production hatchery, incubator crates hold up to 180 eggs, and they are extremely crowded when all the chicks emerge. The investigator found that chicks sometimes trampled and pecked each other during the hatching process.

## Sexing

Shortly after birth, male chicks are separated from females via a process known as "sexing". This is typically extremely distressing to them, as they're handled roughly by workers, who

usually press hard on their sensitive genitals in order to determine their sex. Hatcheries that supply the egg industry carry out sexing because only females can lay eggs. Males are therefore considered useless and unprofitable and are typically killed in horrific ways, as outlined below.



Many chicks undergo a distressing sex-determination procedure.

At Venkateshwara's egg-production hatchery, the investigator discovered that workers used the "vent sexing" method, whereby chicks' faeces are squeezed out and their anal vents are spread open in order to determine their sex. According to Anand, 7 lakh chicks hatch every month at this facility and 50 per cent are males.

### Grading

Workers are trained to check for unhealthy chicks in a procedure known as "grading". At Venkateshwara's egg-production hatchery, the investigator was told that 5 to 10 per cent of chicks are graded as "poor quality". Some may be kept and sold at a reduced price, but more often than not, they're discarded and killed.

Suguna Foods' meat-production hatchery also apparently rejects 5 to 10 per cent of newly hatched chicks for reasons that



include early or late hatching, lameness, organ deformities, and general weakness. Once rejected, living, dead, and still-hatching chicks are all thrown into the same crates. Those who are still alive sometimes, in desperation, begin to eat other chicks' carcasses.



Chicks like these, who are sick or otherwise unwanted, are disposed of like garbage.

## Debeaking

When female chicks in the egg industry are just a few days old, farm workers cut off a large portion of their beaks with a searing-hot blade, without giving them any painkillers. This is done in order to reduce the risk of injury when they peck each other out of frustration at being confined to tiny cages – rather than just giving them more space. Unable to eat or drink because of the pain following debeaking, many die from dehydration and a weakened immune system.



Parts of chicks' sensitive beaks are cut off without any painkillers.

Sometimes chicks used for other purposes are debeaked, too. Eight or nine days after chicks who'll be used to breed more chickens for the meat industry are born, Diamond Group uses a machine to cut off their beaks. A supposedly trained worker sits in front of the machine,

picks them up one-by-one, and holds their beaks to the burning-hot blade. Many birds defecate in distress during this procedure and scream in fear and pain. The worker – who has a white sheet covering his lap in order to protect his clothes from the waste – told the investigator that newly debeaked chicks don't eat or drink anything for many days because of the pain and discomfort.

**Grinding**

Suguna Foods dumps live chicks, including injured ones, those suffering from prolapsed organs, and partially hatched ones, into large grinders along with eggshells and dead birds. Workers claimed that the ground-up chicks could be used to produce food



Live chicks, along with eggshells and dead birds, are dumped into grinders.

for fish, companion animals, and even other chickens.

## Drowning

Rejected chicks at Diamond Group's meat-production facility are often drowned. The investigator saw them try desperately to keep their heads above water and to climb up the sides of the barrels as workers poured soapy water over them. According to one employee, it takes up to 30 minutes for them to drown in this way.



Chicks are drowned in drums of water. According to one employee, it can take up to 30 minutes for them to die in this way.

## Burning

SR Group's meat-production hatchery kills chicks by burning them, but the procedure was sloppily executed, and the investigator



Chicks are slowly burned, and partially burned birds often survive and die gradually later.

observed burned chicks trying to escape the fire. Diamond Group also uses burning, which a worker said was done to prevent infection. The manager told the investigator that burning birds to death is a slow process. Some survive the first attempt and are therefore burned a second time – but not until the next day. For every day of hatching, there will also be a fire.

## Crushing and Suffocation

At Suguna Foods, workers were observed callously dumping “waste” chicks into large drums. Those at the bottom suffocated or were crushed under the weight of the chicks on top, and workers crushed more of them by stacking the chick-filled containers, which did not have lids, or by rolling them over chicks on the ground. In video footage, terrified chicks’ heads can be seen sticking out from between stacked drums as they are being crushed. Others were smashed underneath the drums and tossed into the waste bin.

A truck driver informed the investigator that Skylark’s hatchery sells rejected chicks to fish farms. The company allowed this driver to load thousands of newly hatched chicks on top of one another for transport to the place where they would be killed. Those on the bottom layers were already suffocating or being crushed to death.



“Waste” chicks are dumped by careless workers, causing the ones at the bottom to suffocate or be crushed under the weight of the others.

At SH Group’s egg-production hatchery, workers were seen unloading drums full of live male chicks into trucks, crushing them under the weight of the others while also trampling them with their feet. The investigator saw some who were so badly injured that their organs protruded from their bodies.

**Fish Food**

Trucks leaving SH Group’s egg-production hatchery pulled right up to the water at a fish farm, and workers threw chicks, both living and dead, directly into the ponds. The investigator watched as the terrified chicks tried to hide under rocks or run for their lives, but many were kicked into the water. Workers’ feet were covered with body parts and feathers as they callously walked all



Thousands of newly hatched chicks are carelessly loaded on top of one another and walked on in this truck on its way to a fish farm – where the baby birds will be used as fish food.

over a truck bed full of thousands of live baby birds who were being dumped into the water.

At SH Group’s egg-production hatchery, the investigator watched as an estimated 70,000 male chicks were loaded onto a single truck bound for a fish farm. A worker informed the investigator that another lakh of chicks would be dumped on top of

the already excessive load. This was a typical day for SH Group, for which one truckload of newly hatched chicks destined to become fish food is worth approximately Rs 40,000 – about 25 paise per chick. The facility apparently hatches and kills 5 million males each month.



Workers dump or throw chicks – live, dying, or dead – from the trucks directly into the fish ponds.

## ABUSING CHICKS IS AGAINST THE LAW

Every citizen of this country has a fundamental responsibility to protect animals. Article 51A(g) of the Indian Constitution states, “It shall be the duty of every citizen of India to protect and improve the natural environment including forests, lakes, rivers and wildlife and to have compassion for living creatures”.

Section 3 of The Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (PCA) Act, 1960, outlines the following duties:

**Duties of persons having charge of animals:** It shall be the duty of every person having the care or charge of any animal to take all reasonable measures to ensure the well-being of such animal and to prevent the infliction upon such animal of unnecessary pain or suffering.

The cruel ways in which the investigated companies transport, kill, and debeak chicks clearly cause unnecessary pain and suffering,

which means they are in apparent violation of the PCA Act, 1960; the Indian Penal Code; the Food Safety and Standards (Licensing and Registration of Food Businesses) Regulations, 2011; and the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Slaughter House) Rules, 2001.

According to Section 11(1)(l) of the PCA Act, 1960, it's an offence when any human "mutilates any animal or **kills any animal** (including stray dogs) ... **in any ... unnecessarily cruel manner**" [*emphasis added*]. The only exemption applies, under Section 11(3)(e), to the "preparation for destruction of any animal as food for mankind **unless such destruction or preparation was accompanied by the infliction of unnecessary pain or suffering**" [*emphasis added*].

Section 11 of the PCA Act, 1960, also makes it illegal for a person to behave in any of the following ways:

(a) beats, kicks, over-rides, over-drives, over-loads, tortures or otherwise treats any animal so as to subject [him or her] to unnecessary pain or suffering or causes, or being the owner permits, any animal to be so treated; or . . .

(d) conveys or carries, whether in or upon any vehicle or not, any animal in such a manner or position as to subject [him or her] to unnecessary pain or suffering; or

(e) keeps or confines any animal in any cage or other receptacle which does not measure sufficiently in height, length and breadth to permit the animal a reasonable opportunity for movement; or . . .

(h) being the owner of (any animal) fails to provide such

animal with sufficient food, drink or shelter; or

(i) without reasonable cause, abandons any animal in circumstances which tender it likely that [he or she] will suffer pain by reason of starvation [or] thirst ...

Under sections 428 and 429 of the Indian Penal Code, killing animals is a punishable offence. Section 429 makes the following provisions:

**429. Mischief by killing or maiming cattle, etc., of any value or any animal of the value of fifty rupees.** Whoever commits mischief by killing, poisoning, maiming or rendering useless, any elephant, camel, horse, mule, buffalo, bull, cow or ox, whatever may be the value thereof, or any other animal of the value of fifty rupees or upwards, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to five years, or with fine, or with both.

Section 428 sets out similar guidelines for animals of the value of at least 10 rupees, but the punishment for infringement is a prison term of up to two years, a fine, or both.

Allowing chicks to be crushed and suffocated in transit also apparently violates Chapter VII of the Transport of Animals (Amendment) Rules, 2001, which covers the “Transport of Poultry by Rail, Road and Air”. This contains provisions that are aimed at preventing such suffering and death.

The Food Safety and Standards (Licensing and Registration of Food Businesses) Regulations, 2011, require the protection of



animals during transportation to the slaughterhouse: “To avoid exhaustion, the animals shall be given humane treatment and care during transportation. The animals shall not be bound or chained during transit and space provided for them shall be large enough to stand or lie”.

When it comes to slaughter, the Food Safety and Standards (Licensing and Registration of Food Businesses) Regulations, 2011, are clear:

Stunning before slaughter should be mandatory. By inducing unconsciousness and insensibility, stunning can avoid and minimise reactions of fear and anxiety as well as pain, suffering and distress among the animals concerned. Stunning methods induce temporary loss of consciousness and rely on prompt and accurate sticking procedures to cause death.

The Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Slaughter House) Rules, 2001, also mandate stunning prior to slaughter, stating, “Every slaughter house as soon as possible shall provide a separate space for stunning of animals prior to slaughter, bleeding and dressing of the carcasses”.

Moreover, the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Slaughter House) Rules, 2001, state that animals “under the age of three months” are not to be slaughtered.

Even if the law permits the industry to kill chicks, the cruel methods used to debeak, transport, and kill them must at least be regarded as causing unnecessary pain and suffering.

It's clear that animal welfare isn't a priority for the companies that maim, kill, and sell chickens and their eggs and that the existing legislation needs to be more rigorously enforced.

## **A DIFFERENT SYSTEM**

Abroad, new *in ovo* sexing technology has been developed that can be used on the day that eggs are laid. While this doesn't address the issue of the industry's killing methods for unhealthy hatchlings, it can be used to prevent the killing of live male chicks.

## **EATING EGGS AND MEAT IS UNHEALTHY**

Chicken meat, which is often marketed as a healthy food, is full of saturated fat. By contrast, vegan foods are loaded with all the vitamins, minerals, and essential nutrients the body needs, without the cholesterol and saturated fat found in animal flesh. Researchers have found that people who don't eat meat are 50 per cent less likely to develop heart disease (which causes 35 per cent of all deaths in India). Their rate of cancer (which claims 5.6 lakh lives every year) is only 40 per cent of that of meat-eaters, and they tend to have considerably lower blood pressure.

Eggs, too, have a detrimental effect on human health. The human body naturally produces all the cholesterol it needs, and animal-derived foods are the only other source of the substance. An average-sized egg contains 186 milligrams of it – which is a lot, considering that doctors advise patients with diabetes, heart disease, and high cholesterol to limit their daily intake to less than 200 milligrams. Eggs also contain zero dietary fibre, and more than half their calories are from fat – a large portion of which is saturated fat. It's no surprise, then, that recent studies suggest that their

consumption can contribute to the development of heart disease, diabetes, and even cancer.

Another potential health hazard is contamination. Porous and fragile shells and filthy farm conditions mean that eggs are the perfect hosts for salmonella, which, if ingested, can result in abdominal cramps, diarrhoea, vomiting, and – in severe cases – organ failure or death. And animals on farms ingest toxins that are transferred to their flesh and eggs, which are then consumed by humans, leading to a range of health problems, including cancer and impaired mental functioning.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommend that the government require the egg industry to undertake research into the new *in ovo* sexing technology straight away and ultimately implement it so as to prevent the killing of live male chicks.

When it's necessary to euthanise unhealthy chicks to prevent suffering, the government should insist on veterinary euthanasia via a painless method. It's further recommended that the Animal Welfare Board of India develop a written standard for this procedure.

We also recommend that the industry ensure the humane transport of chicks and provide hens who are used for their eggs with more space to avoid debeaking.

The general public can help spare chicks these atrocious acts of violence and gruesome deaths by choosing plant-based foods, which are also good for human health and the environment.

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