OPINION by Shyam Bhat

Pigs flu

The most frightening thing about the swine flu epidemic is the alacrity with which a segment of the populace began wearing masks.

For all I know, you might have a mask on right now. If so, then please do yourself a favour and get rid of it. It’s useless. Firstly, if you bought the mask from one of those frantic looking men at a traffic signal, you should know that the mask began its life as a bra. (Those men could sell many more masks if they were upfront about its antecedents.) Secondly, even if you are wearing a surgical mask, you are still unprotected - the H1N1 virus is smaller than the pores on a surgical mask. Indeed, wearing an inappropriate mask might actually increase the risk of infection; after all there’s nothing like a bit of warmth and humidity to help make the virus feel at home.

If you really must wear a mask, then the only one that might do you any good is what people in the know call a “N95” mask. No, it’s not made by Nokia, and yes, it might protect you from swine flu, but only if it fits you as tightly as a muzzle on a crazed pit-bull.

But really, the point is not what kind of mask you are wearing, but why you are wearing one at all. One possible explanation is that you are wearing a mask because of a combination of fear and ignorance: the media did everything to scare you and very little to educate you. The reports in the newspaper, the frenzied, masked reporters on television describing another horrific death from swine flu, the name itself – “swine flu” – suggestive of some filthy post-apocalyptic disease, all of this caused you to overestimate two things: Your risk of dying from swine flu, and the ability of the mask to protect you. And that is why you wore the mask.

But there was something else, I was convinced, something more to your mask-wearing fetish. A few observations struck me initially:

You are young, and seem healthier than most people who are not wearing masks.

You are male. Either women are generally more sensible, or would rather not have a bra wrapped around their faces.

You have a strange way of assessing and minimising risk in your life: for example, you wear a mask to protect yourself from the unlikely event of dying from swine flu, but you ride your motorbike without a helmet.

And then I noticed that you seemed happier, more confident than usual. You looked at women, and laughed.

And then I realised that you were wearing a mask because it liberates you. Like alcohol and good dance music, wearing a mask decreases social inhibitions. You discovered the power of the mask, a power that people from all over the world have long known - from shamans in west Africa, to masked revellers at Mardi Gras, from people at masquerade balls, to Kabuki dancers in Japan. With your mask on, you feel empowered. With your mask on, you have found a new freedom. With your mask on, you have become more truly yourself.