

Next generation sequencing technologies: Methods and applications in animal virology

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Abstract

Recent advancement in next-generation sequencing (NGS) technologies has revolutionized the sequencing technology for research and diagnostic applications by virtue of its high throughput and accuracy of data generation. In animal virology, NGS has been successfully used for metagenomics based discovery of previously unknown viruses. Moreover, NGS technologies are also employed for study of viral dynamics and genetic characterization of viral genomes. The absence of proof reading during genome replication in several viruses along with high replication rate, results in formation of several genetically related viral variants known as quasi-species which in turn, got selected and established itself as new virus variant by antiviral drugs or immune system itself. The identification of viral quasi species having biological significance is difficult using conventional sequencing approach. However, NGS may provide exact sequence information about these virus clones. NGS is a powerful tool to investigate deeper insights of virus activities such as viral genetic diversity, vaccine candidate selection, identification of viral reservoirs in nature, re-emergence of viral disease after treatment interruptions, development of drug resistance etc.

Keywords: Virus, NGS, Ion Torrent, Illumina sequencing

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Introduction

Viruses are omnipresent creatures and responsible for severe diseases in humans, animals and plants. Several animal viruses are of zoonotic nature and important from public health point of view. Livestock is directly or indirectly remain in contact with humans and they are also part of food sources for humans. Therefore, the specific diagnoses of the viral diseases and their etiological agents especially in livestock are of prime importance (Lambe et al., 2016). The early diagnosis of the viral pathogen at the primary level of infection through molecular diagnostics techniques such as Real-Time PCR and Next-generation sequencing (NGS) techniques, etc. is essential to control the infection before the

maximum population is affected which may result in decreased losses to human health and livestock industry (Vishwaradhya et al., 2013; Stephen et al., 2015).

Recent advancement in sequencing technologies has initiated a revolution and new perspectives for research and diagnostic in field of virology (Minakshi et al., 2012). The NGS technologies have hallmark features of high throughput sequencing at a modest cost, lesser time, and huge amount of sequence data (in Gigabases) generation in a single run of reaction. The first commercially NGS platform was made available by 454 Life Sciences in 2005. Subsequently, several NGS technologies such as HiSeq sequencers (Illumina, USA), Genome Sequencer (GS) FLX (454 Life Sciences,

USA), Heliscope platform (HelicosBioSciences, USA), Ion Torrent (Applied Biosystems), SOLiD technology (Applied Biosystems, USA), and PacBio RS (Pacific Biosciences, USA) came in the market for commercial use (Capobianchi et al., 2013). All these NGS platforms have their specific advantages and disadvantages. However, with the decreasing costs of sequencing, the NGS techniques have allowed several achievements in virology research such as diagnosis of emerging viral infections, the study of molecular epidemiology of viruses, the study of viral drug-resistance, and basic and clinical research (Radford et al., 2012). In the current review paper, we have discussed the various NGS techniques and their applications in the field of animal virology.

Virus as a potent pathogen

Viruses constitute serious form of pathogens found in diverse form of ecosystems and hosts such as human, animal, birds, plant and marine ecosystems. Several metagenomics studies have shown that viruses are the dominant species of our living system (Vibin et al., 2018; Schulz et al., 2020). The deep sequencing of natural samples shows that approximately 90% of the sequences obtained did not encode any known proteins, which are already reported in other organisms, including viruses that have been characterized recently. This clearly indicates that the actual viral diversity has not been explored so far (Chalkias et al., 2018). Recently, the major emphasis has been given to study on economic as well as zoonotic important viral infections.

World Health Organization reported that communicable diseases (including major culprit as viral diseases) is approximately 15 million annually (Dye et al., 2013).

Viruses play a central role among infectious diseases due to its smallest size, short generation time, large population size and high mutation rates. Moreover, variation in nature of genome (DNA/RNA), genome size, assembly of virion particles make viruses an ideal subject for evolutionary study of living system (Koonin and Dolja, 2013). It is well known that viruses use all the known replication and expression strategies dynamically to adapt the continuously changing environments. Viruses possess several molecular mechanisms to escape from host defense mechanism which can be deciphered through NGS based genome sequencing and subsequent bioinformatics analyses.

Viral gene and genome sequencing

Sanger sequencing

Sanger sequencing is first-generation DNA sequencing protocol. This technique is based on principle of selective incorporation of chain-terminating dideoxynucleotides (ddNTPs) during in vitro DNA replication in a DNA strand (Sanger et al., 1977a). Once these ddNTPs are incorporated in DNA, the chain elongation gets termination. The radio-labeled (^{32}P) nucleotide bases and addition of one out of four modified nucleotide (ddNTP) bases per reaction allows the determination of nucleic acid sequence on polyacrylamide gel by X-ray films based autoradiography. The introduction of thermostable DNA polymerases (Saiki et al., 1985) in molecular biology, fluorescent labeled dideoxynucleotides followed by capillary sequencing technique (Marsh et al., 1997) allowed the automation of Sanger's method of sequencing. This led to major breakthrough in unraveling of genomes of several model organisms. Later on it was commercialized by Applied Biosystems (ABI) in 1986 (Adams, 2008). The ABI system (3030xL genetic analyzer) was used for molecular characterization several Bluetongue virus serotypes in India (Ranjan et al., 2013; 2014; 2015a; Dadawala et al., 2013; Kumar et al., 2013).

Next-Generation Sequencing

The story of complete genome sequencing of viruses starts from complete genome sequencing of bacteriophage MS2 having RNA genome of 3,569 nucleotides long (Fiers et al., 1976). Next year complete genome sequence of a DNA bacteriophage ΦX174 of approximately 5,375 nucleotides was sequenced using Sanger's shotgun sequencing technique (Sanger et al., 1977b). The major objective of early days genome sequencing was to characterize the genomic content of an organism in terms of its amino acid coding. In last decades, the sequencing technologies have grown tremendously and apart from viral genome several other eukaryotic species genomes are also sequenced. Later on, several platforms of next generation sequencing technologies such as Ion torrent, Illumina etc. have been developed to generate complete genome sequence data of any organisms. The huge scale of generating the genome sequence data became a reality today, which was unimaginable previously. The major advantages of NGS technique over the conventional capillary sequencing are the rapid generation of complete genome sequencing data on a very massive scale and at relatively lower cost. NGS also provides tools for several types of molecular studies including single-nucleotide polymorphism, RNA profiling, transcriptomics, gene expression and regulation etc. Viral genome

sequencing has important role in development of newer vaccines, to understand and predict the spread of viral epidemics (Kasibhatla et al., 2016). Several NGS based techniques such as Ion Torrent (<https://www.lifetechnologies.com>), Illumina(<http://www.illumina.com/>),Roche 454 (<http://www.454.com/>), and recently developed fourth-generation sequencing methodologies such as single-cell sequencing, including Oxford Nanopore (<https://www.nanoporetech.com/>) and Pacific Biosciences (<http://www.pacificbiosciences.com/>) are available for complete genome sequencing.

Different platforms for NGS technology

Although chemistry of different NGS technologies varies but their basic workflow is similar (Figure 1). Based on chemistry involved, NGS technologies can be classified into sequencing by ligation, sequencing by synthesis and single molecule sequencing. The basic principles, advantages and disadvantages of various sequencing platforms are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Comparisons of different sequencing platforms (Minakshi et al., 2014; <https://nanoporetech.com/products/comparison>)

Sequencing Platforms Parameters	Ion Torrent (Ion semi-conductor)	Roche 454 (Pyrosequencing)	Illumina (Sequencing by synthesis)	SOLiD (Sequencing by ligation)	Pacific Bio (Single-molecule real-time sequencing)	Helicos (True Single Molecule Sequencing)	Oxford Nanopore Technology (Real-time sequencing)	Sanger method (Chain termination)
Sequencing chemistry	Detection of released H ⁺	Pyrosequencing	Reversible terminators	Ligation	Fluorescently labelled dNTPs	Reversible terminators	Nanopore sequencing	Di- deoxy Chain termination
Amplification method	Emulsion PCR	Emulsion PCR	Bridge amplification in situ	Emulsion PCR	Linear amplification	No amplification	Amplification free approach	Sequencing PCR
Separation method	Ion Spheres and high density array	Microbeads and 'picotitre' plate	Glass slide hybridization	Beads on glass slide	Captured by DNA polymerase in microcell	Flow-cell hybridization	Changes to electrical current as nucleic acids passed through protein nanopore	Electrophoresis
Read length	200 -400bp	700 bp	50 to 250 bp	50-75 bp	1000 bp	25bp	Up to 2Mb	400 to 900 bp
Reads per run	up to 5 million	1 million	up to 3 billion	1.2 to 1.4 billion	35-75 thousand	1 billion	7-12 million	Not available
Maximum data output per run	1 Gb	700 Mb	600 Gb	20 Gb	Not available	35 Gb	2 Gb to 5.2 Tb	Not available
Accuracy	98%	99.9%	98%	99.9%	99%	99%	98-87%	99.9%
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equipment relatively less expensive •Fast reaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Long read size. • Fast reaction. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •High sequence yield 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Low cost per base of sequencing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Longest read length. •Less time consuming 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •No PCR induced bias and errors •Tolerates degraded samples 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Portable machine •Less time consuming •Real-time result 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Long individual reads. •Applied in many sequence based research.
Disadvantages	Homopolymer error.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Homopolymer error. •Runs relatively expensive. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •High DNA concentration required •Very expensive equipment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Slower than other sequencing methods. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Low yield at high accuracy. • Equipment very expensive. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •More time to sequence a single nucleotide •High error rate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •High error rate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Higher cost per base of sequencing. •Impractical in whole genome sequencing

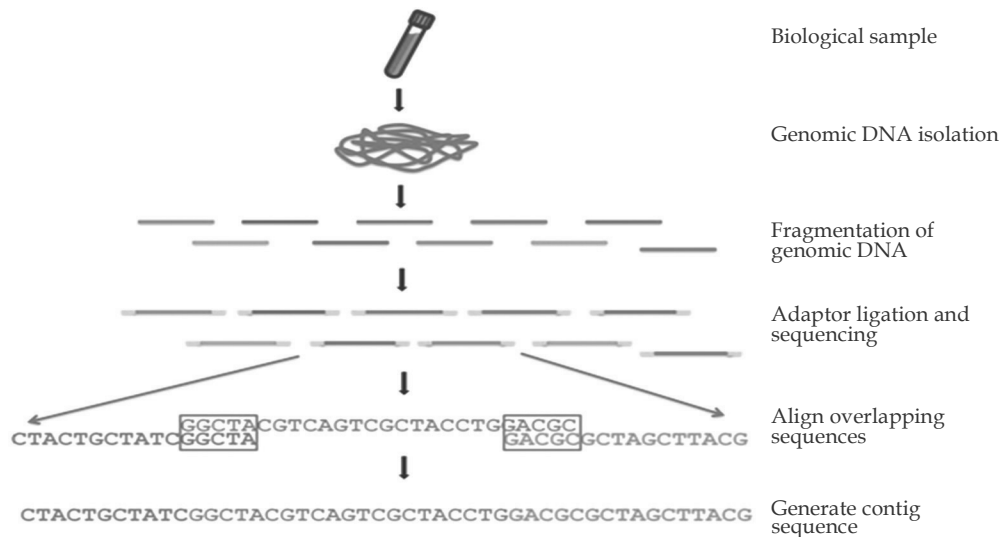


Fig. 1: Basic workflow of next generation sequencing technologies (Ranjan et al., 2015b)

Sequencing by ligation

This method of DNA sequencing uses DNA ligase enzyme to identify the position of a particular nucleotide in a DNA sequence. It does not require DNA polymerase enzyme to create a second strand. The target DNA sequence is determined by the mismatch sensitivity of DNA ligase enzyme. The SOLiD (Sequencing by Oligonucleotide Ligation and Detection) sequencing platform is based on the principle of sequencing by ligation (Valouev et al., 2008).

In this method of sequencing, clonal magnetic bead based library of DNA fragments is prepared from the sample in such a way that only one fragment will be present on surface of each bead. Emulsion PCR is allowed to run using primers against the P1 adaptor attached to terminal end of each fragment on beads. The resulting PCR products attached to the beads are allowed to covalently bind to glass slide.

Later on, primers hybridize to P1 adapter in library template. A set of four fluorescently labeled di-base probes compete for ligation to sequencing primer. Specificity of the di-base probe is achieved by searching every 1st and 2nd nucleotide base in each ligation reaction. For complete sequencing of nucleic acid strand, multiple cycles of ligation, detection and cleavage are required. In subsequent ligation cycle, the extension product is removed and the nucleic acid template is reset with primer complementary to the n-1 position and second round of ligation cycle starts. Although this technique got popularity in early days but later on short read length of 75 bp only reduces its use over other NGS techniques.

Sequencing by synthesis

In this technique library is prepared from nucleic acid (DNA) fragment by fragmentation of DNA strand, adaptor ligation and clonal amplification called as library preparation. Later on, clonally amplified products are purified and allowed for sequencing. During sequencing reaction, new nucleotides are added by the polymerase enzyme and generate signals which are detected and read by the NGS machine.

Sequencing by synthesis can be of two type viz., single nucleotide addition and cyclic reversible termination. Single nucleotide addition approach is used in Ion Torrent and 454 pyrosequencing techniques. The Ion Torrent is a unique technique for sequencing because it is based on detection of pH change during newer dNTP incorporation which releases of H⁺ ions (Rothberg et al., 2011). It utilizes an ion semiconductor sensor to identify the H⁺ ions released. The Ion-Torrent platform was used for complete genome sequencing of Bluetongue virus (BTV) serotype 16 from India (Minakshi et al., 2012). However, the Pyrosequencing method is based on detection of bioluminescence signal which is generated due to release of pyrophosphate upon fresh nucleotide incorporation (Margulies et al., 2005).

In cyclic reversible termination method cleavable fluorescent terminator molecule blocks the chain elongation (Guo et al., 2008). GeneReader and Illumina platform utilize this technique with certain modifications. In this technique the mixture of all the four nucleotide bases along with di-deoxy dNTP's are added each time of reaction. The unbound dNTP's are removed by washing.

The detection of fluorescent signal determines the specificity incorporated dNTP.

Single-molecule sequencing

The recent advancement in sequencing technology allows real-time sequencing of single molecule of nucleic acid. The Oxford Nanopore Technology and Pacific Biosciences utilize this technique. Both the sequencing platforms can read 10 to 100 kb of ssDNA (single-stranded DNA) strand. The single-stranded DNA molecule is made to pass through a protein pore in presence of electric current. Nanopore sequencing technique does not utilize the labeled dNTP. The DNA strand translocation into the pore causes a significant change in voltage which can be measured. The change in voltage is characteristic of specific DNA sequence. This technique can be used for sequencing of about 70 bp per second. The latest modification to nanopore sequencing is CsgG bacterial amyloid secretion pore based sequencer which can achieve DNA translocation rate upto 250 bases per second (Carter and Hussain, 2017) with much higher sequencing accuracy (Brown and Clarke, 2016). Nanopore platform was successfully used in monitoring of Ebola hemorrhagic fever outbreaks (Quick et al., 2016). Oxford Nanopore Technologies Limited Company has developed MinION machine (a portable DNA sequencer) for the direct analysis of single DNA molecules even in spacecraft and space (Spaceref, 2016). However, the Pacific Biosciences platform uses the phospho-linked fluorescent nucleotides. The signal produced by incorporation of such nucleotide is monitored by a zero mode waveguide detector (Eid et al., 2009). Although the sequencing errors are higher than other techniques, the nanopore sequencer has several additional benefits such as its low cost of equipment, portable size and real-time data generation.

Application of NGS in Animal Virology

The high-throughput sequencing methods can be used for sequencing of all the organisms available in a sample. It can assist in metagenomics level of study. It has several applications in animal virology which are mentioned below.

Diagnosis of viral diseases

Conventionally, diagnosis of viral disease is done by symptomatic study of disease, virological assays or immunological assays etc. Compared to conventional methods, molecular assays have higher sensitivity and specificity. However, the knowledge of complete genome sequence of the virus is a prerequisite for molecular assays such

as PCR, RT-PCR or nucleic acid sequencing etc. Moreover, conventional diagnosis depends on availability of agent-specific diagnostics reagents whereas, NGS can be used for metagenomics study of a biological sample and can identify several types of infectious agents such as bacteria, viruses, fungus etc. NGS can also be used for diagnosis of mixed infections especially of those that are immunosuppressive in nature with no clear clinical symptoms. Pyrosequencing technique was used to identify torque teno virus and a novel bocavirus-like parvovirus along with causative agent porcine circovirus 2 in pig lymph node (Blomstrom et al., 2010). Furthermore, NGS can also be used for molecular identification and epidemiological characterization of non-cultivable viral infectious agents such as retrovirus infection leading to Jaagsiekte in sheep (Spencer and Palmarini, 2012).

Bluetongue viruses (BTV) from field samples are regularly genotyped using conventional cell culture, vp2 gene specific RT-PCR followed by nucleic acid sequencing (Ranjan et al., 2013; 2014; 2015; Dadawala et al., 2013; Kumar et al., 2013). Now a day, NGS techniques are regularly used for typing of newer BTV isolates to identify new serotypes and genomic reassortants (Minakshi et al., 2012). Different NGS platforms had also been used for diagnosis of several animal viruses in India such as Bluetongue virus (Minakshi et al., 2012), foot and mouth disease virus (Mahapatra et al., 2016) etc.

Vaccine development

The NGS data could be of help at different levels in vaccine industry. NGS has shown its importance in selection of vaccine candidate and preparation as well as testing of viral vaccines. Apart from identification of candidate vaccine strains, NGS can also establish the vaccine contaminating agents. Live attenuated vaccines have major problem with reversion to virulence strains. Nucleic acid based assays including NGS can be used to identify the virulent markers in candidate vaccine strains. The genetic mutations in poliovirus, necessary for attenuation have been identified by complete genome sequence based study using NGS (Victoria et al., 2010). Similarly, NGS can also be used for detection of virulent markers in vaccine viruses. It will improve the safety of viral vaccines.

The vaccine should be devoid of anything other than the vaccine specific antigenic material (Kumar et al., 2012). The vaccine materials must be free from contaminating agents such as bacteria, virus, fungi, rickettsia, protozoa etc. Several contaminating viruses in vaccines have been reported (Table 2).

Table 2: Major viral contamination to human and animal vaccines.

S.n.	Vaccine against	Contamination	Reference(s)
1	Canine vaccines	Bluetongue virus	Akita et al., 1994
2	Rotavirus	Porcine circovirus 1	Victoria et al., 2010
3	Yellow fever	Avian retroviruses	Hussain et al., 2003
4	Lumpy skin disease and sheep pox	Bluetongue virus	Bumbarov et al., 2016
5	Marek's disease	Reticuloendotheliosis virus	Takagi et al., 1996
6	Measles, mumps and Rubella (MMR)	Bovine viral diarrhoea virus	Studer et al., 2002
7	Poliovirus and adenovirus	Simian virus-40	Lewis, 1998
8	Poliovirus and MMR	Bacteriophage (ϕ V-1)	Haselkorn et al., 1978
9	Measles and mumps	Avian leucosis virus	Tsang et al., 1999
10	Swine fever	Bovine viral diarrhoea virus	Wensvoort and Terpstra, 1988

Identification of exotic viral pathogens

Many of the animal diseases are spread from territory of one country to another through import of live animals, their products and live attenuated vaccines. To control trans-boundary movement of diseases, various serological and molecular assays along with post-import quarantine measure is being practiced by most of the nations. In India, imported animals are quarantined for 30 days to develop disease symptoms. Several viruses such as RNA virus where, where nucleic acid diversity is high (e.g. BTV), primers designed for diagnosis specific to one territory may not diagnose the viruses from other territory (Kumar et al., 2013; Shafiq et al., 2013). Apart from that, the test needs to be done against pathogens. Despite strict measure of animal import, several exotic viral pathogens have already been entered to India such as BTV (Gollapalli et al., 2012). Introduction of exotic pathogens to previously unexposed population lead to severe disease outbreak, mortality and economic losses. These exotic pathogens can be easily diagnosed by NGS technique and complete genome sequencing based analysis.

Transcriptome analysis

The transcriptome analysis refers to study of complete set of expressed RNA which are produced by a genome of specific cells, microbes etc under specific condition. This technique can be employed to study the loss and gain of specific function of a mutant strain of pathogens, disease diagnosis, functional characterization of genes, detection of molecular pathways inside a cell which may improve the environmental stress tolerance capability, in biomedical research field such as biomarker discovery, risk assessment related to newer medicines etc. Moreover, RNA-Seq analysis can also be used to detect single nucleotide

polymorphisms in pathogens and host, allele specific gene expression etc.

In one of the study, RNA-Seq based transcriptome analysis using various tools such as Kyoto Encyclopedia of Genes and Genomes (KEGG) and gene ontology (GO) in cattle vaccinated with killed Bovine viral diarrhoea virus I (BVDV-I) vaccine was performed to identify the immune response related differentially expressed genes (DEGs) (Lopez et al., 2020). The study identified the several genes related with immune response, interferon- γ production and MHC class I genes with up and downregulated activities indicating the immune response against the BVDV-I in cattle which potentiates the application of RNA-Seq in animal improvement programs by selection of specific animals with improved efficacy of the vaccine.

Common tools for NGS data analysis

The complex genomic research demand deep insight of information which is beyond the capacity of traditional sequencing platforms. The NGS has filled the gap and became a regular research tool to address specific problems. However, NGS machines generates huge amount of data which again needs high computing power and specific dedicated software tools for data analysis. For NGS data analysis several bioinformatics tools are available. Some of these tools are commercially available for various computer operating systems.

Conclusion

The current revolution in field of virology is primarily driven by advancement in sequencing technology especially by development of massive parallel sequencing technology or NGS. NGS

has led to high throughput genome sequencing with accuracy at reduced cost in comparison to conventional Sanger's sequencing technology. In Animal virology, NGS may play a crucial role in early disease diagnosis and control. However, in current scenario, NGS techniques are too expensive to use in animal disease diagnosis. The high cost of NGS machine and its reagents along with need of skilled molecular biology and bioinformatics staffs limits its application in routine veterinary applications. However, the recent advancement in NGS technologies such as fast and portable Nanopore sequencing platform may replace currently used other molecular diagnostic techniques in animal virology.

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