

Making FSSAI a household name: ways and challenges



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Food safety is everybody's concern and it refers to limiting the presence of those potentially severe health hazards that may make food injurious to the health of the consumer.

However, according to the global food source monitoring company Food Sentry, India was the world's worst food violator in 2013. Data from the US Food and Drug Administration published in February 2015 shows that over half of the entire snack products banned in US originated from India, on account of the presence of pesticides, molds and bacteria.

Adulteration can be intentional, unintentional and in some cases even natural. However, data shows that 25-30 per cent of the edible food items sold in India are intentionally adulterated. The challenges of feeding a large geographically dispersed population, millions of whom are poor and malnourished, are immense. This has led to the proliferation of illegal and dishonest suppliers, who follow unethical means to make profit, making use of the weak enforcement mechanisms. This has raised severe public health concerns, particularly for vulnerable communities.

Food Safety and Standards Act: FSSA (2006)

Initiating a new era in food safety, the FSSA was passed in 2006, and the rules and regulations came into force across the country on August 5, 2011. FSSA (2006) is a landmark act, because it consolidated all laws related to food and initiated harmonisation of India's food

regulations as per international standards. It also established a national regulatory body, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), to develop science-based standards for food and to regulate/monitor the manufacture, processing, storage, distribution, sale and import of food, so as to ensure the availability of safe and wholesome food for human consumption. However, even after 10 years of enactment of the act and five years after its enforcement, there is a long way to go in ensuring food safety.

Herculean Task

To know the regulatory responsibility of FSSAI, we need to better understand the magnitude and volume of food consumption in India. As per FICCI (2013), more than two billion meals are consumed per day in the country, which has to be safe. Street food vendors provide cheap and enjoyable food to millions of consumers. However, it is difficult to ensure the safety of street food, since there are many contributing factors associated with it.

It is estimated that there are about 1.81 crore Food Business Operators (FBOs) in the country, including small, micro and even temporary vendors in streets, who need to be registered and issued licenses as per FSSA, to ensure food safety. However, out of this, about 40 lakh, which comes to 22.1 per cent only, is only registered so far (FSSAI, May 21, 2016). Imports of food products have grown several fold in the recent years; however out of the 600 entry

points to the country, FSSAI is present only in seven locations.

Inadequate infrastructure is another major concern. Testing and analytical capacity of the regulatory body is inadequate to manage a supply system that feeds nearly 1.3 billion people. 72 public labs and five Central Food Labs (plus two extension labs) is very inadequate to handle the envisaged increase in number of food samples and the newer types of foods for testing. Moreover, state governments lack commitment.

Awareness Generation as a Key Strategy

"India's way is not Europe's. India is not Calcutta and Bombay. India lives in her seven hundred thousand villages", said Mahatma Gandhi in 1926. Even today, about 70 per cent of India's population lives in rural areas. Of the 121 crore Indians, 83.3 crore live in rural areas, while 37.7 crore stay in urban areas, as per the Census (2011). The National Council of Applied Economic Research survey report says that there are 720 million consumers across the villages in rural India.

Awareness generation is a big challenge, since the gap is so huge and requires unlimited resources. As per the 'State of the Indian Consumer 2012' published by Consumer Unity and Trust Society (CUTS), in partnership with Department of Consumer Affairs, Government of India, only 16 percent of people in India have heard about FSSAI and know its functions as a food regulator, and for rural India, the percentage is only four. Only 33 percent in rural areas have heard about the high profile "Jago GrahakJago" campaign.

Gram panchayats are a readily available constitutional mechanism across the country spread in all 627 districts. Hence, Panchayati Raj institutions can be utilised to deal with the issue of food safety. Gram Sabha is the best forum to educate rural masses, which are attended by most of villagers. On the specific issue of food safety, meeting of the Gram Sabha can be convened, where villagers could properly be educated.

Consumer organisations and other civil society organisations need to be roped in the process of awareness generation on a time bound manner with state specific plan of action.

A selected group, consisting of Sarpanch, PRI members, Gram Sacheev, teachers, youth,

office bearers of self-help groups etc. can be created and trained as 'barefoot food safety activists' for awareness generation. Gram panchayats issue licences for manufacturing units in the jurisdiction of the Panchayat. This can be effectively utilised for monitoring units, if any, involved in manufacturing of counterfeit/fake food products.

Appropriate technology and creative media could be used to raise awareness. The relevant resource materials in regional languages could be made available to elected representatives and citizens. Gram panchayats can also consider using media, such as documentary films, street plays, puppet shows, competitions in schools etc. to spread awareness.

Making FSSAI a Household Name

There is a need to educate consumers on aspects relating to food safety, quality, standards of food and food adulteration, contamination, detecting food adulteration, FSSA 2006 etc. These are important in the process of making FSSAI a household name. India's top celebrities can also play a meaningful role in promoting healthy food habits.

Ensuring food safety should become a people's movement instead of a government-run campaign. The government, consumer organisations and media can play a significant role in mass awareness towards promotion of food safety.