

# OPINION

## India's spice scare a wake-up call

India wants to ramp up its food exports, but for this to happen it must overhaul its rickety regulatory system to ensure what is sold is safe to consume.



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KOLKATA – The allure of Indian spices has been timeless. They attracted European colonial traders to the country several centuries ago and helped lay the ground for ancient maritime trade. Even today they remain in demand, powering India's rise as the world's largest spice exporter, with more than \$5.6 billion worth of masala shipped worldwide each year.

But that longstanding image of India as a coveted source of spices took a wallop recently when certain spice products from two well-known Indian brands were recalled in Singapore and Hong Kong for containing unsafe levels of ethylene oxide.

The gaseous chemical is used as an effective fumigant against microbial contamination for spices but can also be harmful as it is a known carcinogen. While Singapore says ethylene oxide should not exceed 50mg per kg in spices, Hong Kong has "zero tolerance" for the chemical. The recall's fallout was hot and unsavoury, with Indian spices either banned or coming under scrutiny in countries ranging from Nepal to New Zealand.

It is not just Indian spices that have been in the public glare. Other edible items exported from India such as rice and peanuts have fallen short of standards at various destinations, including the key markets of the United States and European Union.

In fact, India – along with Mexico and China – were among the countries with the highest rejection rates of food imports by the US between October 2019 and September 2023. Reasons included the presence of unsafe levels of pesticide and salmonella. According to a report in The Indian Express, India's rejection rate in the US was seven times that of China's and six times of Mexico's.

For a country that aspires to nearly double its agricultural



Two well-known Indian brands, MDH and Everest, were involved in product recalls in Singapore and Hong Kong in April due to the presence of unsafe levels of ethylene oxide. The incident damaged the longstanding image of India as a coveted source of spices, with Indian spices either banned or coming under scrutiny in other countries in the wake of the recalls. PHOTO: REUTERS

exports to US\$100 billion (S\$135 billion) by 2030, from the current figure of around US\$53 billion, the spice controversy in April should be a wake-up call to thoroughly review procedures so as to strengthen the country's food safety apparatus.

"Definitely, it negatively affects the image of the country, there is no doubt about it," said Dr M.J. Khan, chairman of the Indian Chamber of Food and Agriculture. "There's a need for proactive steps instead of denial, proactive steps in terms of cleaning up the operation so that the image of the country is restored and maintained."

This scrutiny of India's food exports comes not long after the tragic deaths of more than a hundred children in the Gambia, Uzbekistan and Cameroon after they consumed contaminated cough syrup imported from India, also casting its lax drug regulatory mechanism in an unfavourable light.

### A DANGEROUS MENU

Food safety-related controversies

recur with worrying regularity in India. Antibiotics in chicken and honey, harmful dyes in lentils, dangerous levels of pesticide residues in vegetables, heavy metals such as lead in spices – the list is frightening enough to kill your appetite.

Adulteration has also been a bugbear, such as sugar solution in honey or papaya seeds that masquerade as black pepper. So pervasive is this problem that even schoolchildren are taught about common adulterants.

In fact, nearly one-fourth of the food samples tested by India's food regulator, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), between fiscal years 2019 and 2023 did not conform to the necessary standards.

India has a two-tier food safety apparatus. While the FSSAI provides policy intervention and coordination at the national level, states conduct food safety operations and appoint the officers they need to do so, leading to varying degrees of enforcement.

Exports are handled separately by federal agencies under the

Ministry of Commerce and Industry, which are meant to ensure Indian exports meet import conditions set by their respective destination markets.

But the recurring scandals have dented the image of India's federal and state food safety authorities. Back home, a survey in April on LocalCircles.com, an online community platform and pollster, showed 73 per cent have either no or low confidence in them to ensure food safety.

Some Indian consumers such as Ms Yasmin Rahman, a 43-year-old editorial consultant, have adopted a fatalistic attitude towards the potentially unsafe nature of the food they eat.

"I think we are living under this sham that we Indians have very good immunity; that is the consolation we give ourselves," she said.

Given this low level of trust, it is likely that not many were persuaded by the FSSAI's statement that it did not detect any ethylene oxide in the spice samples it collected after the recalls overseas.

More spice-related worry came

from Rajasthan in May, when food safety authorities in the western Indian state found "very high" amounts of pesticide and insecticide in some samples, including from MDH and Everest, the two popular brands hauled up in Singapore and Hong Kong in April.

### WHY INDIA FAILS TO KEEP ITS FOOD SAFE

Inadequate food safety is a bane that arises from multiple factors, including harmful farming practices, such as indiscriminate use of pesticide and other chemicals, the lack of adequate cold storage infrastructure, and a poor sense of hygiene.

Yes, there are rules that many say match international benchmarks, but enforcement is stymied by a weak regulatory set-up that remains vulnerable to corruption.

"India's diverse food landscape also poses substantial challenges," said Ms Simi T.B., an analyst with the Consumer Unity and Trust Society International, a public policy research and advocacy

group, "with many companies struggling to trace ingredients, especially raw agricultural commodities, due to inadequate record-keeping and intentional food adulteration."

She told The Straits Times: "This lack of traceability compromises the safety of the entire food supply chain, particularly for small and medium-sized businesses with limited resources."

This is further complicated by the shortage and uneven distribution of trusted food-testing laboratories across India. In 2023, there were about 250 of such recognised facilities, most of which were concentrated in the bigger and richer states.

"Even recognised labs often operate under severe manpower constraints, which compromise their effectiveness in ensuring food safety standards are met," added Ms Simi.

It is not just the lack of lab infrastructure; there's also a dearth of food safety officers – foot soldiers responsible for

CONTINUED ON PAGE B2

## India faces challenges in improving food safety

FROM B1

inspections and sample collection. The country had just 2,574 such officers in 2022, a far cry from the 17,003 necessary to cover the country, according to a 2017 government audit.

Even the number of designated officers – those who can cancel the licences of food business operators or prohibit the sale of any non-conforming food – falls short. The country has 690 designated officers, including part-time ones, when it has to have one for each of the country's 800-plus districts.

This scarcity of manpower and resources leads to inconsistent enforcement and encourages

non-compliance, said Mr Ashwin Bhadri, founder and chief executive of Equinox Labs, an Indian food, water and air testing laboratory. "As a result, businesses cutting corners can outcompete those prioritising safety, perpetuating unsafe food practices and increasing the risk of food-borne illnesses."

### WHAT INDIA NEEDS TO DO

The recipe for India to improve its food safety has obvious ingredients such as boosting its laboratory infrastructure for accurate and frequent testing, as well as ramping up the number of food safety officers and providing them with necessary training and

resources for better regulation.

The trouble is part of this responsibility, including the appointment of food safety officers, lies with states that are not always resource-rich.

"Most of the states are cash-strapped... and they cannot implement it (the Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006) thoroughly in their states. That is the problem," Dr Pradip Chakraborty, a former FSSAI director, told ST.

Indian food and beverage manufacturers also present a challenge, given their focus on keeping costs down to attract price-sensitive consumers. What is sacrificed is usually food safety.

Mr Bhadri suggests subsidies could help small producers hold down prices without lowering safety standards.

Public awareness campaigns can also target consumers and push up the demand for safer food, while farmers can be made more aware about good

agricultural practices, such as keeping the necessary gap between the last spray of pesticides and harvesting.

### THE HURDLES AHEAD

The government and other stakeholders have been making efforts to enhance food safety but challenges abound, especially when working with perishable agricultural products and millions of marginal farmers and small-scale food manufacturers. One need not look further than the spice industry for an indication of these hurdles.

Mr Ramkumar Menon, chairman of the World Spice Organisation, told ST it can be difficult getting small-scale and less educated growers to change their practices. "Their awareness of new technology, modern methods of cultivation... all that is fairly limited. That is what we are trying to overcome." Testing for safety presents

different challenges too. Indian spice exporters must now test their consignments destined for Singapore and Hong Kong for ethylene oxide. This is in addition to the many other specifications spices have to be tested for before export from India.

Spice exporter AB Mauri India's commercial director Prakash Namboodiri said the "process has become slightly more difficult and longer" with the additional test requirement. Variations in test results of the same product from one lab to another can also arise, something exporters described as a nightmare.

To further complicate matters, preliminary evidence from ongoing research points to "natural occurrence" of ethylene oxide in spices, said Mr Menon. This suggests that even products untreated with the chemical can test positive for it.

For all the difficulties, there are many more compelling reasons for India's officials at all levels to

pay greater attention to food safety. If India wants to be a major farm produce exporter, it needs to show it is serious in seeding the necessary resources to ensure its products are safe.

By doing so, it is more likely to attract investors, thereby encouraging the growth of more public-private partnerships, and also expand the market for its products.

At the individual level, lives, livelihoods and good health are at stake too. Spices not only impart flavour, they also have medicinal properties. It would be a shame and ironic if such a well-known Indian export ends up with a reputation of being harmful to consumers.

Given its size, not to mention its historic links with the spice trade, India has everything to gain from restoring trust and living up to its potential as a trustworthy food supplier.

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