Rise of food delivery apps and the need to strengthen regulation

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In 2018, Maharashtra FDA had raided about 350 food outlets in Mumbai listed on food delivery platforms such as Swiggy, Zomato, Uber Eats and Foodpanda, among others There are no two thoughts about stringent regulation of food and medicine as both go directly into the body and can cause havoc to a person's health if their quality and hygiene standards do not meet a certain level.

Indian drug regulation is separate story, which is for a later day. Let's discuss food for now. In 2018, the Maharashtra Food and Drug Administration (FDA) had raided about 350 food outlets in Mumbai listed on food delivery platforms such as Swiggy, Zomato, Uber Eats and Foodpanda, among others.

The results were shocking as around one-third of them had not registered with the authority. To be sure, online food delivery platforms have to verify the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) license of the food outlet listed on their food platform. The presence of so many unregistered food outlets indicate, either it is a case of poor oversight or the outlets are gaming the system.

Even the registered outlets were not any impressive. Around 74 percent of the eateries were found serving food from kitchens with unhygienic conditions.

The water used for cooking was not tested, no pest controls were done, no periodic health check-up reports of people cooking food, poor sanitation, there was lack of cleanliness and ventilation in the kitchens. It was found that some of the restaurants are cooking food out of makeshift shacks with appalling hygiene. The problem is not restricted to Mumbai alone. As many as 10,500 restaurants have been de-listed by food delivery platforms, after they were found to be unregistered or unhygienic, according to FSSAI.

Pallavi Darade, Commissioner of Food Safety, FDA Maharashtra at a recent conference said that the consumers are more bothered about the discounts, packaging and delivery time of the food, than important things like where it is made and how it is made. With more people, especially millennials, are relying on online food delivery applications, it has become increasingly important that we have a robust audit system in place to check the quality and hygiene of the food being served.

There is no doubt that online food delivery companies have given new lease of life to the food industry. There are proliferation of eateries of all sizes. However, we cannot allow operators to play with the lives of the people by cutting corners.

It is unfair to completely blame the online food delivery companies. The government is also responsible. The government must strengthen surveillance and increase the number of food inspectors. For instance, Maharashtra has a shortage of 300 food inspectors. The same would be the case with the rest of the country.

The government can work with online food delivery companies and restaurant bodies to come up with mechanisms to increase surveillance and weed out bad players.