

BHOG THE REAL BLESSING

By Gouri Dange, Pune Mirror | Updated: Sep 2, 2019, 06:16 IST



The Project BHOG was launched to ensure that the prasada received by devotees is hygienic



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As festival season is upon us, it is prasada-making and distribution time. At many of our huge places of worship, thousands of people will soon stand in giant snaking queues for darshans, and then for the bhog, or prasada, distributed after prayers. Some of it utterly delicious, some of it not so much. Call me a suspicious and untrusting person, but I have for a while now been wary and chary of consuming prasadas, however well-meaningly they

have been brought to me by someone with way more faith and devoutness than I possess. While I am up for street food most of the times in most places, this prasada thing I wonder about because it is usually mass-produced by many, many hands in unknown, unchecked places, with iffy hygiene and questionable water sources — this is a clear and present food hazard in our country of over a billion people.

However, there's been a great initiative that's been in place for a couple of years now. The acronym for this programme is imaginatively called Project BHOG (Blissful Hygienic Offering to God), and places of worship in various states are being encouraged to adopt regulatory requirements for prasada that is prepared, offered and served on a large scale. The programme began with the Siddhivinayak Temple, Pandharpur Temple and Shirdi. Many, including the Swaminarayan Temple in Dadar and Ahemdabad, have followed suit.

The idea of a food safety management system at places of worship was first introduced by Dr Prabodh Halde, then president of the AFST (I) — Association of Food Scientists and Technologists (India) who designed and documented the project. The FSSAI (Food Safety and Standards Authority of India) and FDA Maharashtra supported the initiative.

What this means is that places of worship are provided with a list of food safety protocols to be followed. But this is not just some top to down 'firman' that was handed down. It has been put into place steadily, in consultation with experts as well as the specific temples and their different food production systems. For this, essential training programmes on food safety and hygiene are conducted for both the food handlers and the management of some of the biggest religious establishments across the country. For this, there are also on-going skills updating, training and awareness programmes conducted regularly.

This means that there is now a focus on education about food hazards, personal hygiene and the precautions to be taken in the preparation of this food — right from when the raw materials come in, the processes involved, through all the stages of the entire food supply chain, up until the prasada reaches the hands of the devout.

Focus is also placed on the importance of packaging and labelling, leftover management and ways to avoid food waste, disposal of flowers in the temple and dissemination of food safety messages to devotees, pilgrims and visitors. With this kind of professionalism in place, many temples are now able to export their prasada out of the country.

FDA Maharashtra commissioner Dr Pallavi Darade is taking all of this forward, with a special drive this year, with over 300 training programmes at various temples. It is turning into a pan-Indian movement, with various FDAs keen to adopt and implement the specially developed BHOG module for their states. Many places of worship across religions are happy to come into its ambit and comply.

With words such as best food processes and hygiene guidelines entering hallowed halls, there is a whole new meaning to mindfulness in these places of worship, perhaps. Gone are the days, hopefully, gradually, when flies and other organisms used to routinely add their own dubious blessings to the prasada that you consumed. Interestingly, the whole move has produced a new kind of network, and documentation of recipes of some of the most loved as well as revered prasadas are being made available. Perhaps an interfaith cookbook of prasadas from the big places of worship would make a fantastic compilation.

Someone would have to scale the recipes down, no doubt. After all, the astronomical proportions in which the ingredients are used in these daily mass productions would need to be re-proportioned, to become accessible to us mere mortals in our human-sized kadhais and kitchens! Anyone wanting to know more about the sheer size, numbers, reach, and thinking behind this project, can take a look at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p0hRopVqzvY>.