

Food inspectors may get body cams

Food safety officers often complain of being manhandled during raids; vendors allege inspectors sometimes ask for pay-offs.

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Rhythmia Kaul

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Food Inspector inspecting the Paneer at H.N 2576 at Sector 22(File Photo)

The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) plans to arm food safety officers with body cameras to address allegations of corruption during food inspections and to also protect inspectors from being manhandled.

“We are exploring the idea of fitting their jackets with a portable mini camera so that chances of fraud are less and also it will act as a deterrent for those manhandling the inspectors while they lift samples. The in-camera inspection will help maintain transparency,” said Pawan Agarwal, CEO, FSSAI, the country’s top food regulator.

Food safety officers often complain of being manhandled by food vendors during raids; vendors, in turn, allege that inspectors sometimes ask for pay-offs.

“Earlier the episodes used to be very frequent but even now I’d say in about 2-3% cases our food safety officers face violence from the vendors, especially during festive season when

the frequency of raids increases. We are always outnumbered during a raid, as one inspector is almost always faced with a huge crowd and at times gets even beaten up. The guilty ones come up with false allegations against the inspectors to save their skin,” said a food inspector in Delhi, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

“There are times when we need to revisit the place to collect more samples for legal purposes. It is dreadful; so the camera should act as a deterrent to some extent. Also, we can prove our innocence,” he added.

On average, each of Delhi’s 22 food safety officers picks about 15-20 samples in a month, and put in 12-15 hours of work a day.

In Gujarat, 122 food inspectors have been given the target of picking at least nine samples each in a month.

“Most inspections happen after receiving a tip-off but there is also routine sample collection from manufacturing units, roadside vendors, restaurants, etc. Our team is practically at work 24x7,” a senior official in the Gujarat Food Safety department said on condition of anonymity.

On World Food Day last month, FSSAI launched “eat right” jackets for its field staff, largely food safety officers, to be worn during inspections.

The special jacket has been designed to hold devices such as tablets and smart phones. It also has a QR code and RFID (radio-frequency identification) tag for identification and tracking of the inspector on field.

“These are smartly designed jackets to hold gadgets, including a camera, with an aim to bring transparency to the whole process. There are sometimes allegations of corruption against food inspectors, or against food vendors of misbehaviour with inspectors, so having things recorded should help,” said Agarwal. “Those who have the facility of scanning QR

code can also check the authenticity of the inspector. The idea of specially-designed jacket for food safety officers was inspired from Canada, and the police in the US have mounted cameras while on duty. We are looking at the feasibility of having something similar for our field staff," he added.

Experts hailed the move, saying video recording of the food inspection process was in the interest of all sides.

"Complaints have always been there, against the food business operators as well as against the food inspectors, so camera recording of the inspection is in the interest of both parties. However, ideally, it would be best to outsource the job entirely to a third-party audit agency," said Pradip Chakraborty, senior advisor, Centre for Public Health & Food Safety.

The apex food regulator has discussed the idea with the food safety commissioners of the states, and there has largely been a positive response.

Delhi is the first to get the smart jackets. "There are about 3,500 inspectors in all, and we will be providing each one of them a pair. Providing cameras, however, will take some time but it surely is on the cards," said Agarwal.