

“We hope to develop a more mature private sector food ecosystem for India”

Food Fortification is a scientifically proven, cost-effective, scalable and sustainable global intervention that addresses the issue of micronutrient deficiencies. In October 2016, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) operationalised the Food Safety and Standards (Fortification of Foods) Regulations, 2016 for fortifying staples namely Wheat Flour and Rice (with Iron, Vitamin B12 and Folic Acid), Milk and Edible Oil (with Vitamins A and D) and Double Fortified Salt (with Iodine and Iron) to reduce the high burden of micronutrient malnutrition in India. Further on, the '+F' logo was notified to identify fortified foods. At present, the Food Fortification Resource Centre (FFRC) is on a mission to motivate, nudge and facilitate the food industry to adopt Food Fortification as a norm. In conversation with NuFFooDS Spectrum, Rita Teatota, Chairperson, FSSAI, New Delhi shares more in this regard. **Edited excerpts;**

The FSSAI has been working on a war footing to fortify staples such as food grains, edible oil, salt etc. to battle hidden hunger. But, are consumers - in this case, the public - aware of the facts and benefits of fortification? What steps have been taken to raise public awareness on fortified foods?

Food fortification is the process of adding micronutrients to food items to improve the quality of diet for a group, community, or population. It is a scientifically proven, sustainable and cost-effective solution to address micronutrient deficiencies that has been adopted in over 100 countries. The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) released the standards of fortification for five staples, and unveiled the +F logo for consumer awareness and identification of fortified products in October 2016. FSSAI also set-up the Food Fortification Resource Centre (FFRC) with support from Tata Trusts, as a nodal point to provide required support to stakeholders. The FSSAI has conducted awareness campaigns like Swasth Bharat

Yatra where 2.5 crore citizens were engaged directly through a pan-India cyclothon. This has been followed up with advocacy efforts within Government, with industry and with key consumer groups.

Eat Right Melas have been organised to build awareness on safe food and healthy diets through an interactive and informative model. To generate awareness on vitamin D, project Dhoop was introduced in the schools of Delhi-NCR which urged schools to shift their morning assembly to noon time, mainly between 11

am and 1 pm to ensure maximum absorption of Vitamin D through natural sunlight.

FSSAI has organised a radio campaign by FFRC across 40 cities in India between July 19 and August

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20, 2021 to sensitise the public on fortified milk and popularising the + F logo. Efforts have been made to generate wider awareness amongst people through featured articles on fortified foods and their health benefits in leading magazines/ online media platforms.

Will fortification of milk and edible oil be mandatorily implemented across the nation? If so, how will such a huge undertaking be executed?

National level surveys indicate that a large section of our population remains deficient in essential nutrients such as Vitamin A and Vitamin D. This is a major health concern. Food Fortification is a complementary strategy that has been proven, cost-effective and sustainable to fight micronutrient malnutrition. FFRC is actively involved in providing training and building capacities of Food Safety Officers (FSO) with the support of Regional offices, State Food and Drug Administrations (FDAs) and development partners. This training programme ensures that the Food Safety and Standards (Fortification of Foods) regulations are well understood at the field level which in turn, will assure effective compliances to maintain quality of the fortified products available in the market. Till date, 668 FSOs have been trained and more such training are in the pipeline. The FSSAI has also conducted training for the lab personnel in 15 labs on method of analysis of fortificants in cereals and method of analysis of fortificants in oil in 21 labs. The industry is today voluntarily fortifying 7.5 Million Metric Tonnes (MMT) per day of edible Oil reaching 880 million people and 176 Lakh Litres Per Day (LLPD) of Milk which is reaching 117 million people.

The industry is ready with the infrastructure and technical capacity to fortify all the packaged milk and edible oil available in the market. The compliance procedures are also in place. A draft notification for mandatory fortification of milk and edible oil with vitamins A and D was released in December, 2020 and suggestions/ comments received are under consideration. However, a final decision on mandatory fortification will be implemented only if considered desirable from the public health point of view. Our entire process has been inclusive and the private players are being heard and taken along in the journey of food fortification. I am optimistic that fortification will improve the nutrition status of our country in the longer run.

How have private players responded to this push for fortification?

The industry has responded very well to the initiative. Staple specific advocacy meetings have been conducted at the States level for interacting with the industry to understand their challenges before bringing in the Gazette notification for voluntary fortification of key



staples. Since the Gazette notification for voluntary fortification was released in August 2018, a significant proportion of the milk and edible oil industry has voluntarily started with the fortification process which in itself indicates a positive response from the industry. Rice millers throughout the country are playing a pivotal role in making the centrally sponsored scheme on rice fortification a success. Currently 341 brands of oil; 40 brands of milk; 11 brands of flour; 2 brands of rice and 22 brands of salt are being fortified. Apart from Milk and Oil, the industry has adopted fortification of rice, wheat flour and salt. Distribution of fortified rice, wheat flour and double fortified salt through Midday Meal (MDM), Public Distribution System (PDS) and Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) has become possible because of the support extended by the industry and the decision by Government of India to implement fortification of staples in these key schemes.

Is the FSSAI working with ministries and other government bodies to address the impact of the pandemic on the health of women and girls? If yes, how?

COVID-19 has made a significant impact on the global population. In order to fight against diseases like COVID-19, it is really crucial to have stronger immunity. Micronutrients like iron are essential for fighting against anemia. At the same time, Folic acid and vitamin B12 help in maintaining normal functioning of the vital body systems and blood formation. Folic acid is an essential micronutrient, especially for pregnant women. These micronutrients further improve overall health and



immunity and help fight against diseases.

Government of India, under the PMGKAY (Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana) has distributed free ration to more than 80 crore people during the lockdown in 2020. Food commodities such as Wheat Flour, Rice, Oil, Milk and Salt are being fortified in various schemes like PDS, MDM and ICDS as a perfect vehicle for delivery of crucial micronutrients to the most vulnerable section of our society. FSSAI has been working towards inclusion of these fortified staples in Government safety net programmes with support from other line ministries like the Ministry of Consumer Affairs; Food and Public Distribution; Food Corporation of India; Ministry of Health and Family Welfare; Ministry of Women and Child Development; Ministry of Education and various other State departments.

The FSSAI, through FFRC, regularly conducts various advocacy and consultation meetings to provide technical support and address bottlenecks around scaling-up the distribution of fortified foods in the safety net programmes as many States are still struggling with the same. The FSSAI has stayed committed to ensure food safety even during the pandemic by promoting safe, healthy and sustainable diets through its Eat Right India initiatives.

How can the manufacturing industry and other food businesses partner with FSSAI under various programmes and efforts to converge their actions towards a 'Healthy India'?

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The FSSAI is following a 'graded' approach to address the entire spectrum of Food Business Operators (FBOs). For large food businesses, the approach is focused around traditional regulatory instruments and tools such as third-party audits. For small and medium food businesses, the focus is largely on capacity building and improving hygienic conditions, especially at the manufacturer's level. With micro food businesses, we are using a cluster approach, a systematic way not only to ensure compliance with food safety standards but also to organise/register hawkers and micro food vendors. With this graded approach, we hope to promote a culture of self-compliance by the organised food businesses, and support the informal food sector to develop their capabilities through training and audits.

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The FSSAI is encouraging a 'self-compliance' model as its approach and is moving towards a 'prevention-based' system with this shared vision. Scaling-up availability of fortified foods in both Government safety net programmes along with the open market; encouraging food options with lower levels of fat, salt, and sugar content; reducing level of transfats in various food items as well as fats and oils and improving the quality of information to consumers are some of the noteworthy efforts for transforming the food environment.

The aim is to encourage food companies to become joint stakeholders in assuring that Indians get access to safe and nutritious food. With this graded approach, we hope to promote a culture of self-compliance by the organised food businesses, and support the informal food sector to develop their capabilities through training and audits, thus developing a more mature private sector food ecosystem for the country. **NS**