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Food Safety: A Shared Responsibility

Food safety is a pertinent issue that has a significant impact on public health. It is a challenge for every nation across the globe to ensure its citizens are having access to safe food. Food safety is a critical link between good health and nutrition but is often neglected. The FSSAI's role is very vital to ensure maintenance of food quality all throughout the food value chain.

In India, food-borne illnesses remain a threat to the entire population and their consequences in terms of suffering, disability, and loss of life or foregone incomes and wages, these personal and social costs are usually very high. The burden of food-borne illnesses is comparable to malaria, HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis. It is estimated that every year 100 million cases of food-borne diseases (FBD) are reported in India and it costs \$15 billion annually to the country. The expected food-borne disease burden is set to rise from 100 up to 170 million people per year in 2030 in business as usual scenario – increasing from one out of 12 to one out of 9 people falling sick on average.

Recent research has unveiled a strong interconnection between unsafe food and adverse health and nutrition outcomes. Infection by food-borne pathogens results in poor absorption of nutrients from food, particularly of vitamins and minerals that impact the nutritional status of an individual.

Both food handlers and consumers often lack awareness on basic food safety, hygiene and sanitary practices leading to consumption of unsafe food, which results in food-borne illnesses. These food-borne ailments not only pose a threat to the health of the public but also affect the socio-economic development of the country.

Enforcing scientific standards

The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) is playing a critical role in the direction of food safety to empower India towards a healthy future. Established under the Food Safety and Standards Act (FSS), 2006, the FSSAI is the apex food regulatory body in the country with the mandate to ensure safe and wholesome food for all citizens. As a part of its core regulatory functions, FSSAI sets science-based, globally benchmarked standards for food safety; ensures credible food testing for quality and compliance to these standards and

processes through effective surveillance mechanisms.

In the past few years, the Food Regulator has been actively working to enhance the entire Food Ecosystem in a revolutionary way and has come up with various regulatory reforms to ensure food safety. The FSSAI has been working towards the revision of FSS (Licensing & Registration) Regulations that would simplify the process of both application and renewal, thus entailing reduced time and effort. The FSSAI is also releasing new regulations to facilitate and speed up import clearances and ensure that only quality products, compliant with the standards are imported into the country. These recent developments by the FSSAI will not only support ease of doing business but will also provide an easy understanding of rules and regulations to be followed by the food businesses as well as mandatory compliances to ensure food safety.

The FSSAI's role is very vital to ensure maintenance of food quality all throughout the food value chain, be it in the inspection of food manufacturing facility or distribution or retail facility and subsequent laboratory testing as defined under the FSS Act. In order to ensure better quality control of



food manufactured/distributed/supplied in the market, the FSSAI has over 200 notified testing laboratories for food testing across the country. All FSSAI notified labs are NABL accredited and have the capability to analyze various food matrices. In addition to this, some basic preliminary food testing can be done by following the DART manual of the FSSAI. Places that are far away from the FSSAI notified labs, can utilize Mobile Food Testing Laboratories (Food Safety on Wheels).

The FSSAI is incorporating a Central Sector Scheme for Strengthening of Food Testing Ecosystem with a total expense of Rs 481.95 crore. This includes Rs 300 crore for strengthening the network of laboratories across the nation as well as provisioning mobile food testing labs and other related equipment.

Expanding the scope and reach

The regulator is focused on strengthening the food testing laboratory (National Food Testing Laboratory) in Ghaziabad to perform better and advanced testing. A state-of-the-art laboratory on a Public Private Partnership model at Ghaziabad ensures training & capacity building of laboratory personnel in advanced methods and techniques. A total of 11 National Reference Laboratories (NRLs) have been set up across the country to develop standards for routine procedures, validation of such standard procedure/

testing methods, development of new methods and ensuring proficiency in testing across the food laboratories with special reference to the risks or food categories. The FSSAI is also focusing on improving the infrastructure and capacity of new National Food

Laboratories (NFLs) in Chennai and Mumbai.

Furthermore, the FSSAI has approved 53 rapid food testing kits/devices to ensure faster, better and cheaper real-time testing of food even at the field level, thus assuring the safe and good quality of food while raising the bar for food safety in the country.

The regulator is also concentrating on periodic risk-based inspections, third-party audits and focused checks, especially for high-risk category products to ensure that safe and quality food products are available in the market and earn the trust of the consumers.

Now the authority is significantly improving its connect with the States and Union Territories (UTs) by way of regular meetings through video conferencing and visits involving meetings with all regulatory staff, food businesses, training and audit partners as well as other important stakeholders and engaging with Chief Secretaries and Health Ministers of States/UTs to have better coordination at the ground level.

The regulator is also providing technical and financial assistance to States/UTs for the creation of necessary infrastructure, testing equipment and mobilizing resources for carrying out special camps, inspections, awareness drives, etc. by signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). To further facilitate State Food Safety Departments, the FSSAI is actively investing its efforts around training and capacity building of Food Safety Officers (FSOs) and field-level staff along with the Central Food Safety Officers (CFSOs) deployed across regional offices.

The FSSAI has significantly accelerated the training and capacity building of personnel in food businesses (both in the organised and unorganised sector) through the Food Safety Training and Certification (FoSTaC) - a unique programme to ensure that there is a trained and certified Food Safety Supervisor (FSS) on each food business premises. Almost 4.9 lakh FSS have been trained so far. To add more, the FSSAI tried to meet the novel demands of the unprecedented pandemic by quickly introducing an online training programme on hygiene practices required during COVID-19, which has already trained over 2.5 lakh FSS.

This year's World Food Safety Day theme celebrated on June 7, 'Safe Food for a healthy tomorrow', also manifests that the production and consumption of safe food have immediate and long-term benefits for people, the planet and the economy.

Along with effective regulatory mechanisms and standard-setting practices, it is important to understand that food safety is a shared responsibility and it is the duty of every stakeholder including consumers to demand safe, healthy and sustainable food. This will help in protecting the health and safety of the public. **NS**

