

# INTERVIEW

**“Food Safety is a shared responsibility and it is the duty of every stakeholder including consumers to demand safe, healthy and sustainable food.”**



**Q** When you took over as the Chairperson of the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), what were some of the noteworthy action areas for the Food Authority and where are you today in terms of your priorities for the near future?

I took over the role of Chairperson in the year 2018. That year was eventful for FSSAI as we started accelerating the process of setting standards. As many as 27 new regulations for food standards were notified during the year, including alcoholic beverages, food fortification, organic food, advertising and claims, packaging, residues of pesticides, tolerance limits of antibiotics, etc. At the same time, we also focused on strengthening the laboratory network across the country along with identification of National Reference Laboratories (NRLs). The FSSAI also 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) programme. The FoSTaC programme today has over 255 training partners, 400,000 FSSs (Food Safety Supervisors) across India, and about 2 lakh people trained under Covid-19 safety training.

Today, our priorities are towards various regulatory reforms for enhancing efficiency and the 'Ease of doing Business' for the Food Business Operators (FBOs). IT-enabled resources are being deployed for improvement of our existing portals of licensing & registration, food imports and laboratories' network along with better delivery of various e-services including e-applications and e-inspections, thus enhancing the range of internet governance. We are institutionalizing and upgrading the scope of market surveillance to identify hot-spot areas of adulteration and conduct national-level surveys for milk, vegetable oils and other high risk commodities. Another core area of focus is improving the infrastructure and capacity of food testing laboratories and development of new National Food Laboratories (NFLs) at Chennai/ Mumbai. We are actively investing our efforts around training and capacity building for Food Safety Officers (FSOs) and field staff as well as increasing the manpower at FSSAI headquarters and across regional offices. We are also strengthening our Food Import



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Clearance System in order to ensure that only quality products, compliant with our standards are imported into the country.

More recently, we have significantly improved our connect with the States and 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

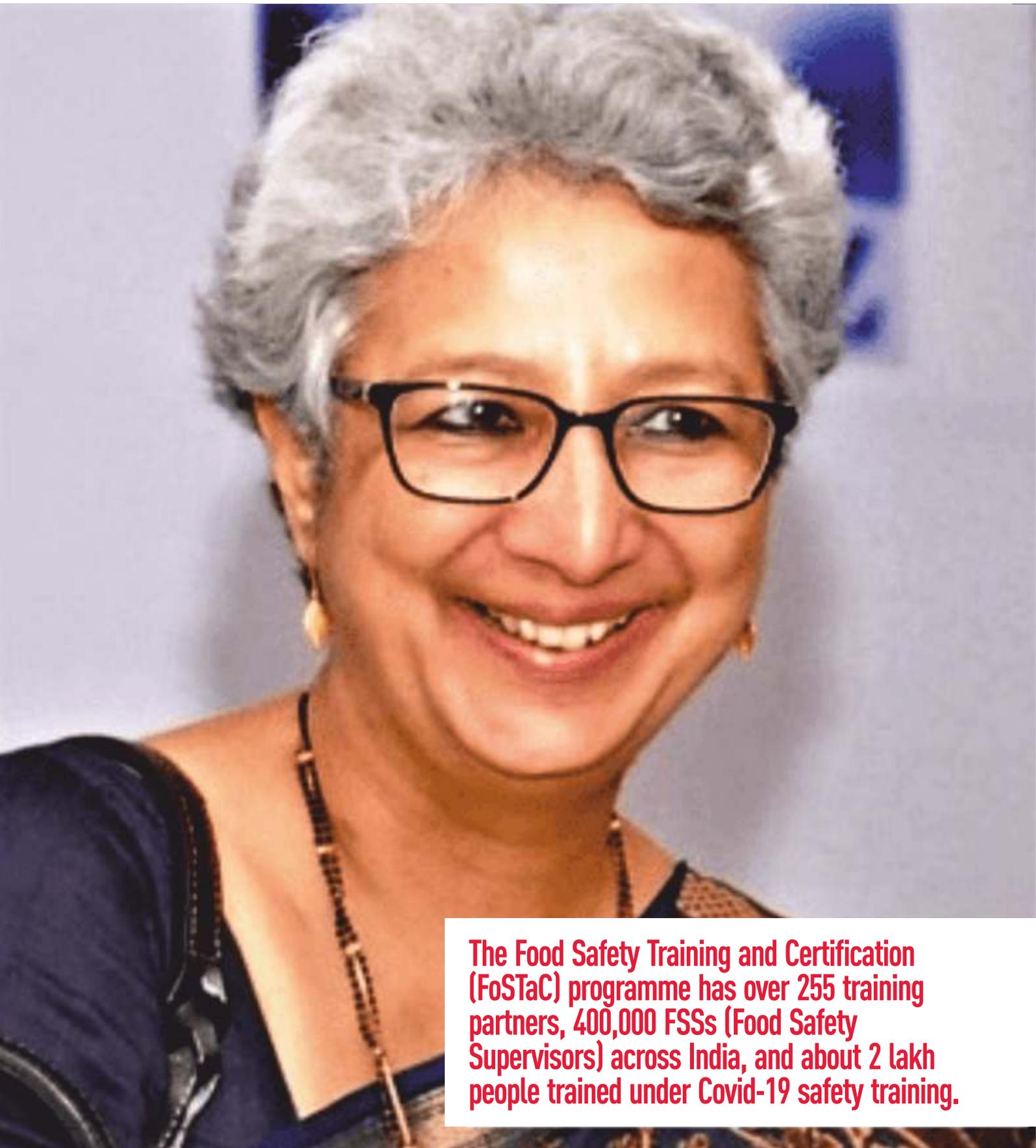
and Health Ministers of States/UTs to have a better coordination at the ground-level. This has helped a lot in improving the overall food safety ecosystem in the country and our efforts in this regard will continue. We are also providing technical and financial assistance to States/UTs for creation of necessary infrastructure, testing equipment and mobilizing resources for carrying out special camps, inspections, awareness drives, etc.

Through the 'Eat Right India' campaign launched in 2018, FSSAI will continue to ensure provision of safe food and healthy diets to the consumers. Initiatives such as 'Eat Right Campus' for consumers in workplaces, institutions, hospitals, jails and tea estates; 'Eat Right School' for school children and the 'Eat Right Toolkit' for front-line health workers to reach people at the grass-root level have been launched. Our 'Eat Right District Challenge' and 'Food Smart Cities Challenge' are galvanizing a large number of stakeholders. As we move forward, we plan to expand the reach of these initiatives in different parts of the country and nudge people's behaviour towards right eating habits.

**Q** You were already aware about the role India had within the Codex Alimentarius Commission because of your earlier assignment within the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, Government of India, according to you what are some of the key challenges even today in harmonizing the Codex Standards with our existing laws and standards?

It is clear that the global market demands safe and high quality products and, therefore, we need to ensure that all food products are produced and manufactured to match high food standards. The harmonization of our food standards, in fact, can be viewed as a necessary

**Mrs. Rita Teaotia, IAS (Retd),**  
Chairperson of FSSAI on the various actions and initiatives of the Authority and how far it has been successful in improving the overall food safety ecosystem in the country.



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prerequisite to improving the quality of domestically produced food products and allowing fullest possible facilitation of exports. Moreover, it is also pertinent that if we have less stringent national food standards, we run the risk of being a dumping ground for substandard products manufactured by third-world countries.

Whereas the importance of the Codex standards in consumer protection and facilitation of international trade cannot be ignored, in practice all Codex standards cannot be used as the basis for our own regulations on account of several issues. Some major factors that have been impeding the harmonization process include:

- Insufficient awareness among producers regarding quality food production and food safety issues.
- Lack of adequate knowledge and infrastructure for application of scientific principles including complex safety systems like HACCP, particularly in the production of food at the primary producers' level.
- Lack of appropriate industrial infrastructure.
- Lack of awareness and access to advanced technology for unorganized food sector.
- Widespread occurrences of high levels of chemical contaminants in our environment and absence of a comprehensive plan to control these.
- Tropical climatic conditions leading to varied levels of microbial contamination (aflatoxins) etc.
- Codex standards developed without inputs/scientific data from India are difficult to be adopted at national level, since these are not truly representative of the Indian scenario.

Even with these challenges, the FSSAI had initiated the harmonization of national food regulations/standards almost a decade back through a consultative process with an ecosystem of stakeholders, and based on the recommendations of the scientific support system in the Food Authority, harmonization of horizontal safety standards have to a large extent been accomplished in the last few years.

Likewise, harmonization of vertical food standards was also undertaken subsequently and it is expected that we will have many of our food standards at par with the Codex vertical standards in the near future. Nevertheless, the harmonization process needs to be advanced with much care as improperly conceived harmonization of standards across the board, without any prerequisite activities, will only result in a system which will be frequently subjected to violation as a rule, rather than followed or adhered. This is the reason we give equal importance to capacity building, development of infrastructure and collaboration with related Ministries and stakeholders.

**Q FSSAI has launched the Eat Right India awareness campaigns in partnership with food industry, industry associations and other stakeholders, according to you how successful is the campaign today and why?**

The Eat Right India movement, led by FSSAI, has been launched to transform the food ecosystem of the country to

ensure safe, healthy and sustainable food for everyone, at all times. The movement adopts a judicious mix of regulatory, capacity building, collaborative and empowerment approaches through a range of initiatives to achieve its vision. Through this, FSSAI targets both the demand side as well as the supply side of food. While the supply side interventions are aimed at building capacities of food businesses to promote self-compliance in food safety, the demand side initiatives work towards motivating consumers by engaging and educating them on eating right as well as demanding safe and healthy food.

The best outcome from this campaign has been that it has ignited a large-scale social and behavioral change among the people of India towards safe, healthy and sustainable eating habits. Simultaneously, nudging food businesses to reformulate packaged foods into healthier options has helped push the supply side in the right direction. Over 20 food businesses have already taken a pledge to voluntarily reformulate their packaged food products with less content of fats, salt and sugar.

We have backed our Eat Right India campaign with consumer-focused regulations such as Fortification of Food (2018); Safe Food & Balanced Diet for Children in Schools (2020); Banning of Transfats (2021).

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The various initiatives rolled out under the Eat Right India campaign have seen reasonable success and need to be scaled up to cover every corner of the country as we move forward. There is a need to align with all Ministries/Departments associated with food for the purpose of creating convergence and a coherent messaging to consumers and creating safety and hygiene protocols across the food chain.

**Q Front of the Pack Labelling (FOPL) and Hygiene Rating Scheme are pro-consumer initiatives in countries like India, do you feel it should be implemented on fast track mode or gradually? Should it be made voluntary or mandatory in India and why?**

Food is an essential part of health and wellbeing; and poor diet is the number one risk factor for disease and death. There are rapidly rising incidences of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in the country. Acknowledging the fact that a major contributing factor to obesity and diet related NCDs is the rising consumption of unhealthy foods high in Fat, Salt and Sugar (HFSS), FSSAI started working on bringing about a change in the existing labeling regime about a year and a half back.

The matter regarding Front-of-Pack labelling has been under consideration of the Authority. The existing global practices were referred and various consultations



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with stakeholders like government organizations, consumer organizations, and industry associations were held. Front-of-the-Pack Nutrition Labelling is, however, still under discussion and we aim to finalize it soon.

As bringing about a change through regulations typically takes time, we believe that while this will be mandatory in nature, it should be implemented gradually so that sufficient time is given to food businesses to invest judiciously in packaging as well as reformulation or other additional requirements that need to be planned at their level.

Food Safety is a shared responsibility and it is the duty of every stakeholder including consumers to demand safe, healthy and sustainable food. Demand always helps in generating supply. Only when a consumer demands safe and healthy food, will food businesses be pushed to provide us with healthier options.

We have made third party audits mandatory for most central licenses. Similarly, for hygiene rating, while it is not mandatory, we believe it is important. The Hygiene Rating Scheme is a technology-driven, consumer-friendly scheme where food establishments are given a rating on a scale of 1 to 5, where 5 indicates Excellent Compliance and 1 indicates Poor Compliance of food hygiene and safety standards. The ratings are displayed in the form of symbols i.e. smileys. This scheme not only encourages food businesses to ensure high standards of hygiene and sanitation but also allows consumers to make informed food choices. I sincerely hope that we will see acceleration under this scheme as consumers affirm choices for high rated establishments, encouraging more and more businesses to enrol themselves for the Hygiene Rating scheme.

**Q As you know, THE AWARE CONSUMER focuses on the rights and responsibilities of the consumers, what**

**in your perspective, should be the role of consumer organisations to facilitate FSSAI in amplifying various initiatives and key messaging?**

Consumer organizations can play a big role in making consumers aware about the recent changes in regulations and other important issues pertaining to food. Consumer organisations have a good reach at the grass-root level and can also influence the decision of consumers in the right direction. I sincerely hope and desire that consumer organizations work in tandem with the Food Authority and spread awareness amongst consumers and empower them about their rights as well as responsibilities.

FSSAI from time-to-time works on dispelling myths, clarifying misconceptions and ensuring that consumers are able to make informed choices by providing scientifically credible information on a range of topics related to food. A 'Myth Busters' section is available on our website, [www.fssai.gov.in](http://www.fssai.gov.in) that addresses myths or any negative/incorrect information circulating in the media, which misleads consumers or confuses them. All consumer organisations should visit our FSSAI page and make an attempt to disseminate right and authentic information to the consumers.

In this age of digital technology, FSSAI also uses various communication tools to disseminate right information on safe and healthy eating practices in the interests of the public. Every day, posts in Hindi and English from the official handle of FSSAI incorporating key messages of food safety, personal hygiene practices, healthy eating habits and other valuable tips for citizens are posted on various social media platforms. As consumer organisations directly connect with consumers, a lot of the messages can be passed to the target audience through the network of consumer organisations. ▶