

Quality standards form bedrock of food safety

The great epic of *Mahabharata* tells us about *Akshaya Patra*, the divine copper vessel gifted by Lord Surya to the Pandavas during their 12-year exile. The *Akshaya Patra* would provide unlimited food, which would not only feed the Pandavas but all the sages and people who visited them, until Panchali had her food.

While divine interventions assured an abundance of food in epics, as humans, we need to cultivate our own food. As we observe World Food Safety Day on June 7, we need to understand the importance of eating right and ensuring that the food is safe. Research shows a direct relationship between food and health. Safe food is essential for sound health as it not only meets our nutritional needs but also our overall well-being. India has developed a robust framework for setting food standards and regulations.

The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) was established under the Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006. The Authority has a scientific committee and 21 scientific panels that are its principal scientific arms in the standards development process. The authority has empanelled more than 200 scientific experts from different scientific organisations. These panels are constantly engaged in developing standards for categories, ranging from cereals, milk and milk products, fruits, vegetables and spices to oils and fats, water, fish and fisheries, meat and meat products, sweets, genetically modified organisms and food additives.

What are the possible areas where contamination can happen? Apart from pesticide residues and trace amounts of heavy metals that plants absorb from soil or contaminated water, aflatoxins secreted by mould and yeast due to improper storage or microbial contamination also affect food safety. Unhygienic handling of food is also a source of contamination and special focus is needed at crowded public places. A concerted and integrated approach for curbing food contamination at such locations, with measures such as stopping the sale of food in the open and ensuring safe potable water, is required from all stakeholders, including municipal corporations, *panchayats*, and food safety commissioners.

The government already has a framework

in place with food safety commissioners heading at the state-level, designated officers at the sub-divisional level, and 4,000 food safety officers keeping a hawk eye on food adulteration and contamination on the ground. There are 246 FSSAI-notified food laboratories in the country with state-of-the-art infrastructure, where highly qualified experts ensure food samples are tested in a time bound manner.

Enforcement is undertaken on the basis of surveillance, monitoring, inspection and random sampling of food products. A total of 370,949 food samples were collected between 2019 and 2022, out of which 90,473 were found to be nonconfirming. These included 14,636 samples that were found unsafe, 45,647 samples that were substandard and 30,190 samples that had labelling defects, were misleading or had other issues. On the basis of this, a total of 80,513 civil cases were

launched that saw 51,599 convictions and penalties of ₹159.69 crore being raised. A total of 13,496 criminal cases were also registered, which saw 1,957 convictions and penalties of ₹3.82 crore being raised.

A focus area of FSSAI has been street food. India's street food market plays a major role in the country's food culture and in shaping the food-based economy. Despite their contribution, street food vendors face several challenges, and concerns have been raised about hygiene and safety.

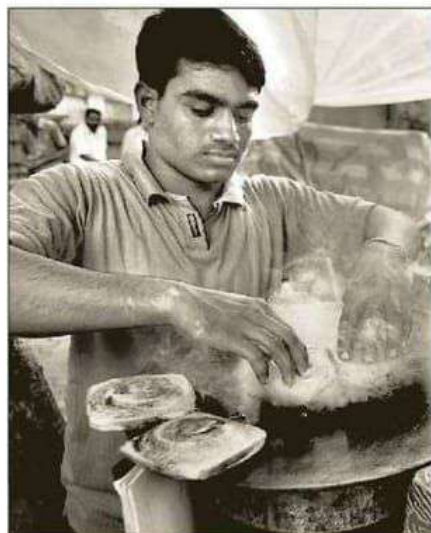
To resolve this, in 2014, the government initiated the Street Vendor (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act that facilitates the formation of Town Vending Committees (TVCs) at the local-level. So far, around five million street vendors have been identified as being eligible for benefits under the PM Street Vendor's Atma Nirbhar Nidhi Scheme (PM SVANidhi).

As part of its Eat Right India movement that aims to transform the country's food ecosystem, FSSAI carries out the Eat Right Street Food Hub initiative, with the objective of ensuring hygienic and safe food is served at these hubs, and the social and economic status of the street vendor community is improved by helping them improve the quality of their offerings. As part of the initiative, a total of 137 hubs have been certified so far.

Empowering food safety officials, food handlers and food business operators (FBOs) with the necessary tools to implement food safety and quality through training has been a focus area for FSSAI, and it has trained 1.1 million food handlers and FBOs since 2017. FSSAI plans to scale up its training programme to 2.5 million food handlers and FBOs in the next three years. On May 31, the Union Cabinet approved a mega operation of creating the world's largest grain storage plan in the cooperative sector, with a capacity of 70 million tonnes. While this would be India's *Akshaya Patra*, the health ministry is geared up with adequate machinery and regulations to deal with the safety aspect while invoking the divine blessings — *Shathamaanam Bhavathi Shathaayuh*. World Food Safety Day gives us an opportunity to understand the important role we need to play in this process and recommit ourselves to it.



G Kamala Vardhana Rao



FSSAI works to ensure that street food served is hygienic and safe

HT ARCHIVE

G Kamala Vardhana Rao, IAS, is CEO, FSSAI

The views expressed are personal