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Food for Gods comes under FSSAI scanner



Having exercised its will over companies, local and multinational, India's food regulator has now set its sights higher- heavenwards.

It wants the prasadam (aka prasad or bhog; usually a food offering) of several popular places of worship to follow safety standards it prescribes.

"We are working on how to ensure safety of prasad that the temples distribute. We've begun some work with some of the famous ones like Shree Siddhivinayak temple in Mumbai, Sri VenkateswaraSwamy temple in Tirupati and Sai Baba temple in Shirdi, to figure out a model that can be replicated across all religious places in the country," said Pawan Kumar Agarwal, chief executive officer at Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI).

Every day, more than 60,000 devotees visit the Sri VenkateswaraSwamy Temple in Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh. On special religious occasions, the number is even more. The temple is famous for its laddus, offered as prasadam.

Indeed, many places of worship are famous for their prasadam. Mint's Sunday magazine Mint on Sunday runs a series on this, Sacred Food.(bit.ly/24iT84s)

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Not all prasadam are in sealed packets. Nor are the ingredients mentioned. And there is no concept of a "best by" date.

According to the 2001 Census, India has 2.4 million places of worship visited by 300 million people every day. There are temples, mosques, gurudwaras, and churches. And FSSAI wants all of them to follow the rules.

"It will not be an easy task because it has to do with institutions linked to social, religious and cultural issues. But it will happen," said Agarwal, who says he believes that the food regulator has to ensure safe food for "every citizen at every point where food is produced and, or, distributed for mass consumption".

"Authorities of these religious institutions will have to take licences from the FSSAI. If they source food from outside vendors, those will also have to have an FSSAI licence," he added.

The regulator plans to carry out periodic inspections as well.

"There is a need for building public confidence. In exceptional circumstances, we'll use the provisions of the law," Agarwal said.

But it may not be as easy as that. Many places of worship insist they already follow the best safety standards while preparing prasadam. After all, many claim, it is meant for the Lord.

"Prasadam is first given to God. It is pure. We already take extra care of ensuring safety, purity, hygiene and everything that is required," said a spokesperson of The Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD), the trust which operates and manages the Sri Venkateswara Swamy Temple in Tirupati. "We have our own rules. We always source the best quality ingredients. Every vendor needs to meet the standards set by the temple authority," the spokesperson added.

Ravi Yadav, deputy executive officer of Shree Siddhivinayak Ganapati Mandir Nyas (Prabhadevi) Trust that manages Mumbai's popular Siddhivinayak temple echoed those sentiments. "We follow strict rules to ensure safety and hygiene. There are many checks for both in-house preparations and supply from third-party vendors. The state government is also involved in managing the temple." For good measure, Yadav added: "Prasadam is what is offered to God. Nobody will mess with that."

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Still, the temple trust has been open-minded enough to start work with FSSAI. The regulator, the Association of Food Scientists and Technologists of India and the trust are working on a project to standardize the process of preparing prasadam ensuring hygiene and safety, and adhering to the provisions of the FSSAI Act, 2011. The project will serve as the template and food safety regulations for religious places will be finalized after it is complete.

Not everyone is convinced licensing is the right way to ensure quality of prasadam.

"When you cook for the Lord, there are always extra layers of care. A proper guideline to ensure safety and hygiene would definitely be helpful. But making licences mandatory may not be the best thing. It is a religious matter and everyone will do the best they can voluntarily," said a spokesperson at The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (Iskcon).

Licensing also raises the spectre of bureaucracy.

"We do our own bit to keep things very safe. Even third-party vendors are chosen carefully. Guidelines will be helpful. But licencing should not happen the 'licence raj' way," said PeerzadaAltamashNizami, a direct descendant of NizamuddinAuliya who is part of the HazratNizamuddindargah committee.

S. Mohinder Paul Singh Chadha, senior vice-president of the Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee, declined comment on the issue.

Father Joseph Chinnayyan, deputy secretary general and director of the CBCI Centre, the headquarters of Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, did not respond to calls seeking comment.
