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Fixation on product approval has to go: FSSAI chief



The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), the regulatory body for food and beverage products, imposed a nationwide ban on Maggi instant noodles, a popular snack sold by Nestle India Ltd, on 5 June 2015 after some samples were found to contain excess lead and traces of monosodium glutamate.

In September, a month after the Bombay high court overturned the ban, its chief executive officer (CEO) Yudhvir Singh Malik shifted to Niti Aayog as additional secretary. In December, Pawan Kumar Agarwal took charge as CEO of FSSAI.

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Pawan Kumar Agarwal, 54 Pawan Kumar Agarwal, an Indian Administrative Services officer of the West Bengal cadre of the 1985 batch, was joint secretary in the ministry of skill development and entrepreneurship before joining the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) in December as its chief executive officer. He has been principal secretary of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council, and has worked in the departments of urban development and education in the West Bengal government.

In an interview, Agarwal spoke about the need for new regulations and standards, changes in product approval processes, a push towards self-compliance by food firms and better surveillance by FSSAI. Edited excerpts:

Until the Maggi noodles issue cropped up, FSSAI was seen as a toothless regulator. Has it changed?

Even in developed nations, the entire space of food safety has been highly fragmented. Things started consolidating only in the mid-1990s and it took another decade to make it happen. The idea is to build public confidence that the food people get in the marketplace is safe. Confidence is the key word here. And for that, it is important that this body is trusted by both food businesses and also by citizens and consumers.

Fortunately, there are international standards available. Food today is no more entirely produced and consumed within the nation. There's a lot of import that happens. For a simple thing like pizza there are over 30 ingredients from 66 countries that are required.

The standards we have here will have to be globally benchmarked. We cannot have different national and international standards as it will create problems in import and export. The focus of the authority is on creating standards. Not surprisingly, setting standards is not an activity that is visible to people outside. That's the reason why FSSAI had limited visibility in the first few years. It is only enforcement that makes FSSAI visible.

What are your plans to ensure food safety?

We have to change the very culture of food manufacturing, the way food is served and that culture change can be brought about by working with the food businesses... You guide food businesses on what is right for them to do and see that

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they implement it. They do it because it is the right thing for them. And that's precisely the way the developed countries work.

So a lot of our focus will be on training, dissemination of what are ideal manufacturing practices, hygienic practices, hazard analysis and control and critical control points in a food processing unit. Ensuring that food is produced and processed safely and served hygienically are the focus areas of the work of FSSAI.

In this, my concern is not so much with big businesses. Many of the big food businesses will do it in their self-interest. They have their reputation at stake. My concern is the overall culture of food hygiene in this country is not so good. To improve that, we need to bring behavioural changes in society. And work with small and medium businesses to improve standards...

After the Maggi noodles controversy, companies raised questions regarding the product approval process followed by FSSAI. Is there a need to change that?

I am new here and am also trying to understand what's happening internationally in this particular space. These kinds of specific product approvals are unique to our nation. But that happened because we did not have standards for food categories. If we have standards, we would not need it.

We are working on formulating those guidelines. Once guidelines are in place, food producers would not require product approvals for every product.

In case of proprietary food products, if ingredients are the same, there should not be any requirement for product approvals every time. The fixation about product approval has to go. Our responsibility regarding product approval has to shrink. And then this authority will have greater resources to devote to some of these issues.

But FSSAI does not test product samples before giving approvals.

Product approvals are given based on claims firms make. They have to be responsible. They can either test it themselves or give it to us. If they give us a product for testing, obviously they give products that are tested by them before hand. So, our getting involved in testing does not add any value at all. Because we are not sampling and they won't give a sample that will fail our tests. Once it

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comes to the market, we can pick up samples and test to see if they follow safety norms or not.

Do you think the Maggi issue sent a wrong message to multinationals, especially, the ones looking at India as a potential market?

Unfair for me to comment on this.

You spoke of focus on inspection and surveillance. Would it require huge manpower?

The whole mindset of large manpower for regulatory compliance has to go. Standards have to be unambiguous and clear. They should be articulated and conveyed to the food businesses so that they follow those. Our priority is to simplify regulations and standards so that they can be easily understood by the smallest of food businesses. Once that happens, the expectation is they themselves will follow these. To monitor and maintain food safety, we would like our citizens to be more vigilant. We want citizens to be our inspectors. They give us feedback and we align our enforcement based on that. This is how we would like to move forward as we work in this authority and try to ensure food safety, get confidence of the public and the government.

You have proposed to bring e-commerce firms engaged in food business under FSSAI licence regime. Why is it necessary?

Globally, there is no difference between online and offline. Food is food. As a food regulator, I have to ensure food is safe across the value chain, from harvest to the dining table. E-commerce firms have emerged as important players in taking the food to your plates. There's no reason why they should be outside the ambit of food safety regulations. Some of them have opted for FSSAI licence. Of course, the clarity on what is expected of them as part of the licence is still to be defined. We had one meeting with them. We have asked them for suggestions. We'll also look at international experiences in this particular space and then put together the final rules.

By when?

Hopefully by end of this year, or even sooner.

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How is FSSAI ensuring safety in imported foods?

In case of imported products, there is an opportunity of scrutiny at entry. Currently, we are having 100% sampling of all food products that come in. This, in fact, is becoming a bottleneck. That causes delay. Therefore, we are trying to simplify that. We are trying to do inspections more on risk-based approach rather than doing 100% sampling of imported foods.

There is no regulation on advertisements of food products. Or on packaging. Do these things fall under the purview of FSSAI?

We are working on bringing regulations on responsible advertising of food products. We also need regulations on packaging. We have on labelling. But on packaging, we have a gap. A regulation on responsible advertising will come soon that cuts across food items. We are working with the Advertising Standards Council of India on this. Packaging is a serious issue. Migration of toxins can take place because of packaging. We are working with the Indian Institute of Packaging on this.
