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Food regulator sets sights on ads, looks to put in place new verification system

Just after he seems to have drawn the curtains down on the Maggi controversy, Pawan Agarwal, the four-month-old CEO of Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), is stuck with a new challenge.

“I had never dealt with food,” he said, but on his mind are a bunch of reforms, some conventional and some radical. Large food companies, street food vendors, temples, mosques and churches, and even the right kind of food advertisements, are on his radar.

“There is a very thin line of what is unsafe and what is unhealthy,” Agarwal said. The FSSAI will ensure that consumers are not misguided by what they see, hear or read, as advertisements. There are 167-million households with television sets. But, what is alarming is that the Advertising Standard Council of India (ASCI) in January alone upheld 51 companies, out of which 12 were food makers, for misleading advertisements. The list included wellknown names, such as, yoga guru Ramdev’s Patanjali Atta Noodles, Coca-Cola and Perfetti Van Melle.

Patanjali failed to prove that Atta Noodles were oil-free, and Dabur didn’t substantiate how Chawanprash helped in fighting pollution.

“In advanced countries, there are systems in place for verification of every such claim. As we move forward, we would like to put in place such systems,” Agarwal said. The industry is optimistic. The move will bring discipline in the food business, ad-guru PrahladKakkar said. “Consumers trust ads, but this does not

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mean that ad makers can claim everything and anything under the wrap of creativity.”

“It’s a welcome move. We assure that we make conservative claims,” said ParthoChakrabarti, vice-president, snacks, PepsiCo India.

The food regulator has also set its sight on “prasada”, offered at several popular places of worship. Agarwal is looking to ensure that lakhs of people visiting these places should not fall sick after consuming “prasada”.

According to the 2001 Census, India has 2.4 million places of worship, including temples, mosques, gurudwaras and churches, visited by 300 million people every day.

“God will take care of you, but even the FSSAI is taking care of you,” Agarwal said.

To begin with, Shree Siddhivinayak temple in Mumbai, Sai Baba temple in Shirdi and Sri VenkateswaraSwamy temple in Tirupati will play the role of seeding good food practices into the religious system. “They are very forthcoming... the role of priests in serving lakhs of devotees is limited... it’s the role of the large kitchens, which are adopting food safety management systems,” Agarwal said. He will also be talking to churches, mosques and gurudwaras, but “cautiously.”

If Agarwal is able to pull off these mega projects, the FSSAI will have a lot more than 15% of India’s food consumption under its purview. “We want to increase our reach to the balance 85% of the business, which is currently not under FSSAI,” Agarwal said.

God will take care of you, but even the FSSAI is taking care of you (on the regulator’s plan to keep an eye on kitchens at places of worship) PAWAN AGARWAL, CEO, FSSAI
