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A healthy step towards safety: Make food palatable, not poisonous



The adulteration of milk with synthetic detergents, water, chalk and baking soda among other things poses a serious health hazard especially to children. (HT Photo)

If the dictum ‘you are what you eat’ holds true, then many Indians have a lot to worry about. So it comes as a positive step that the Supreme Court has taken the issue of milk adulteration seriously and asked the Centre to amend the Indian Penal Code and the Food Safety Standards Act to make this punishable with life imprisonment.

The adulteration of milk with synthetic detergents, water, chalk and baking soda among other things poses a serious health hazard especially to children. A 2011

FSSAI IN NEWS

Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) study showed that 68% of fresh milk was adulterated as was 33% of packaged milk.

We can only hope that this proposed increase in punishment for milk adulteration will be extended to other food items. Bottled water, tea, coffee and spices have been found to be adulterated in many studies in the past. Dangerous chemicals like metanil yellow are added to turmeric, a condiment of daily consumption for most Indians.

Many popular food brands have been found to contain hormones, metals and toxins during checks -- these substances seem to find their way back into food once the attention is off. Last year, a study conducted before Diwali found that over 90% of the sweets sold were adulterated. These are frightening figures and leave people vulnerable to a host of ailments from skin allergies to digestive problems and neurological impairment.

Despite the fact that the adulteration story is well known to the authorities, the FSSAI shut down two sub-regional offices in Lucknow and Chandigarh some time ago when more testing centres is the need of the hour. The centres which exist themselves do not have the right equipment to test for a host of adulterants and are in urgent need of upgrade.

The FSSAI would also benefit from the expertise of scientists and technicians rather than the generalists that it relies on more. The effects of such adulteration not only threaten people's health but the toxins enter the food chain and contaminate produce and groundwater for years on end. Certain adulterants stay on in the body long after the contaminated food has been consumed. The SC has acted in the interest of people's health and well-being.

It must now be ensured that the changes sought in the law are implemented stringently. Food adulteration in effect amounts to poisoning people in order to make profits. If this is lessened, food would become that much more palatable and safe.
