

Maggi Muddle and Food Safety: Issues are much Bigger

The 100 billion dollars Swiss Foods Major Nestlé has ultimately been asked by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) to withdraw 9 variants of Maggi, for three alleged violations of the Food Safety Standards Act (FSS Act), all posing serious threat to Food Safety and Public Health. These three violations are: (a) Presence of 'Lead' detected in the product in excess of the maximum permissible levels of 2.5 ppm, (b) Misleading labeling information on the package reading “No added MSG”, and (c) Release of a non-standardised food product in the market, viz. “Maggi Oats Masala Noodles with Tastemaker” without risk assessment and formal grant of product approval. In the process, celebrities endorsing the product have also been found guilty of conniving in promoting such toxic products and are being booked for this malfeasance.

The Indian law with respect to Monosodium Glutamate (MSG), the flavour enhancer allowed to be added to food as per appendix A of the Food Safety & Standards (Food Products Standards & Food Additives) Regulations, 2011, specifically prohibits its use in certain specified food items including noodles (dried products). So, when MSG was found in Maggi, Nestle should have been booked long back for it.

Likewise, with respect to Lead as well, the Food Safety & Standards (Contaminants, Toxins & Residues) Regulations, 2011, clearly state that no food article should contain any crop contaminants or insecticides which are not mentioned in the regulation. Under this regulation, a limit for Lead content has been imposed for certain specified items, and for all other non-specified food items a limit of 2.5 PPM by weight has been prescribed. Noodles are not specifically mentioned in the list of specified items, so the maximum limit for Lead content in noodles is 2.5 PPM. Therefore, Lead content found above this limit in Maggi in lab-analysis is in violation of the regulation and punishable.

The FSSAI needs to be even more pro-active and vigilant in dealing with safety, by laying down stringent standards for food articles and regulate their manufacture, storage, distribution, sale, import and labeling, to ensure availability of safe and wholesome food. In this regard, there are two more issues which need urgent attention and redressal through proper enactments. One of them is mis-describing the products for the purpose of flouting the prescribed standards. Two such examples of deliberate misdescribing are use of the term 'Frozen Dessert' instead of Ice Cream for substituting cream by hydrogenated vegetable oil and the other one is the use of the term 'beauty soap' in place of toilet soap to reduce total fat matter (TFM) from 75% (prescribed for toilet soaps) to 50% for cost-cutting. The Anglo-Dutch company, Unilever's Quality Walls' brand of Ice-cream and the Lux beauty soap are an example of each of them. So how would one notice if a carton of ice cream has been, in a small and inconspicuous corner of the label marked with the term 'frozen dessert'. Today, in India, frozen desserts have taken over as much as 40% of the ice cream segment. Is it not a fraud? Frozen desserts are made with vegetable oils and usually those vegetable oils that we often avoid in our diet like coconut oil or palm oil. Ice-cream has to be made from milk and dairy fat instead of hydrogenated vegetable oil. Similarly the consumer gets confused that probably the beauty soap is superior to toilet soaps.

The ministry of consumer affairs, food & public distribution too should have shown more seriousness in claiming damages on behalf of innocent consumers, especially children, for misleading and deceptive advertisements by the food industry and making irrational claims through celebrities targeting children for creating a brand without any guilt.

The other issue is of clearly labeling Genetically Modified Food which is alleged to be all the more harmful and which is not allowed in the European Union and several other countries. The ministry should also take a serious note of unlabelled genetically modified food (GM Food) for making the consumer aware of what he is going to eat. The FSSAI has to frame regulations relating to genetically engineered or modified food in section 22. As consumers, we have the right to exercise our choice through mandatory comprehensive labeling so as to distinguish between food derived from genetically-modified organism (GMO) and without GMO. A draft bill was developed more than a decade ago in the ministry to make it mandatory to label every food containing any GM content and state the names of countries where it was banned. But vested interests ensured that it could not be

passed. The long-awaited definition of junk food based on WHO Standards on levels of salt, sugar and transfat found in the food also needs to be made mandatory for labeling. The Maggi controversy should now trigger better enforcement of food safety norms in all respects in our country.

Junk food needs to be marked so, as in the last twenty years, ready meals have become a big business world-wide. In fact, we spent over \$7 billion on them last year alone. As our lives are getting busier, ready meals have been fast replacing cooking from scratch. Therefore, intake of unhealthy ingredients like saturated fats, additives, excess salt and sugar is on increase. There are six common reasons why one should avoid processed fast foods if one can. First, Vitamins and minerals need synthetic in ready meals. As because of the processes they (ready meals) undergo before being packed, ready meals become almost devoid of most naturally occurring vitamins and minerals. So, synthetic vitamins and minerals are to be pumped into such food. Second, they might make you fat, as ready meals are more calorie dense than natural options and full of low quality unhealthy ingredients with high fat content. Three, they are full of sugar, which can make us fat or obese. Four, they are packed with additives, preservatives and colouring pigments, all of which are mildly toxic. Five, they are full of excess salt which can cause fluid retention around the heart which may cause high blood pressure, heart failure, strokes and even heart attacks.

Sixth, they can cause Metabolic syndrome. Results from a study entitled "Instant Noodle Intake and dietary patterns are associated with Distinct Cardio-metabolic Risk Factors in Korea", published in the Journal of Nutrition have shown that significant consumption of instant noodles increases the risk of Metabolic syndrome comprising a cluster of conditions which include increased blood pressure, high blood sugar level, excess body fat around the waist and abnormal cholesterol levels that occur together increasing the risk of developing heart disease, stroke and diabetes. In recent years, South Koreans have been reported to be experiencing a rapid increase in heart disease with a growing number of overweight adults. Hyun Joon Shin, lead investigator of this study has found that eating instant noodles twice or more every week may cause metabolic syndrome, especially in women. He said that the gender gap can likely be attributed to biological differences (such as sex hormones and metabolism) between the genders, as well as obesity and metabolic syndrome components. Likewise, another potential factor in the gender difference is a chemical called bisphenol A (BPA), present in the noodle is a well-known endocrine disrupter, and interferes with the way estrogen and other hormones send messages through body.

So it is high time that the ready meals Industry takes cognizance of its social obligations towards public health and safety, and the statutory authorities come up with more comprehensive standards which are stringent from content to labeling.



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