

# India's dismal food safety record

Before dawn every day he joins hundreds of wholesale traders at Delhi's Azadpur Mandi, a sprawling, chaotic market where trucks blare Bollywood music, porters haul huge brown sacks of fruit and vegetables and hawkers ply tea and cigarettes. His own trade is in rosy red apples, laced with calcium carbide. Bhim says he's been adding chemicals to his apples for years to artificially ripen them after a long journey from the Himalayan foothills, despite being told that it causes cancer.

As far as he knows, no-one has ever died from eating his produce. So he can't understand why the authorities are pestering him now, and why he has to pay so many bribes to keep his business afloat. "This is an age-old practice, trust me, I know. But suddenly doctors are claiming that it causes cancer. Come now, how is that possible?" he said, wrapped up in a woollen grey cap and anorak on a chilly Saturday morning at the Azadpur Mandi market. "Everyone still does it. The only difference is that it's done very surreptitiously now. And let me tell you, it will never stop. Why would anyone want to harm their sales?"

An interview with a senior food safety official starkly illustrates just how far India has to go to enforce the regulations properly. Although the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) has banned the use of calcium carbide as it is carcinogenic, the senior official to whom Reuters spoke said "it is not harmful". "Unofficially, it happens everywhere," he said, speaking on condition of anonymity. "How can the ripe fruit be brought from far away areas?"

During the interview, the official also had to check with someone on the phone whether calcium carbide was legal or not. Such attitudes explain why India still struggles to make its food fit for consumption. From rat poison found in vegetables and Diwali-festival sweets laced with caustic soda, to batches of moonshine liquor that kill scores of people at a time -- adulteration is rife.

A report by the FSSAI in January found that most of the country's milk was watered down or adulterated with products -- including fertiliser, bleach and detergent -- used to thicken the milk and help give it a white, frothy appearance. The report caused an outcry in the world's largest milk producer, where the drink is used for religious rituals and is a source of protein for hundreds of millions of vegetarians.

But that is just the tip of the iceberg. The same agency has also found that 13 percent of all food in the world's second-most-populous country failed to meet its standards. "The problem is so widespread that everything is contaminated," said Savvy Soumya Misra of the New Delhi-based Centre for Science and Environment (CSE). "If everything has problems, there is no choice but to eat whatever is available."

### A FEW BAD APPLES

After two decades of rapid economic growth and rising living standards, millions of Indians have a richer and more varied diet than ever before. There is a growing appetite for everything from French wine to sushi among the swelling ranks of urban middle classes, products that simply weren't available to their parents' generation. But safety standards have struggled to keep pace in a country that still has more poor than anywhere else in the world and where modern supermarkets remain relatively rare.

A world away from the swanky restaurants of New Delhi and Mumbai, awareness about safety only slowly trickles down to the country's millions of small-time vendors. Poverty tempts sellers to add dilutants such as water to products to make them go further. Cheap cooking oil is mixed with expensive oil, tea waste is mixed with new tea, and anything from urea to blotting paper is added to thicken the food sold at festivals. Poorly staffed regulatory authorities can struggle to cope. Given the scale of the problem, only a handful of people are prosecuted for flouting standards, let alone jailed, rights activists say.

"In China, those people who were found to be contaminating milk with melamine, they were given something as severe as a death sentence," CSE's Misra said. "But here, we're not even giving them any kind of punishment. So how are they supposed to get scared of the authorities?" In 2008 in China at least six children died and nearly 300,000 were made ill from drinking powdered milk laced with melamine, an industrial chemical used to give misleadingly high readings in protein tests. Two people were executed in 2009 for their role in the scandal.

### QUICK BUCK

Food safety is often worse in poorer areas where ignorance and the temptation to make a quick buck are greater. "Poor people don't care much about the quality. Whatever is cheaper, they'll buy it," said Ashok Kanchan, technical adviser at Consumer VOICE, a rights group. "They're just worried about how to fill their stomachs somehow." Bhim, the apple seller, is a textbook example of what is going wrong.

Delhi's traders often source their produce from hundreds of kilometres away. In India, where highways are often potholed and jammed with traffic, and where storage facilities are primitive, up to 40 percent of perishable food rots before it can be sold. Traders cannot buy fruit such as apples or mangoes when they are already ripe, because these would go to waste during the bumpy, un-refrigerated journey from the orchards. Instead, they buy the fruits and later ripen them with calcium carbide, a substance colloquially known as "masala", or "spice".

Using the white powder reduces a ripening process that normally takes weeks to a matter of hours. Traders are also tempted to polish or dip fruit in artificial colours to make its appearance fresh for sale. "The ones that shine are the rotten ones," said Ramdular, who has sold in Delhi's Azadpur Mandi for decades. "Looks good to the eyes, but ends up bad for the stomach."

Some traders at the market were willing to discuss such practices openly. Others only alluded to it in winks and nods. "He's taken your picture, so you're going to have to shut shop now!" one trader shouts teasingly to another as a Reuters photographer clicked away among the fruit stalls.

#### GLASS HALF FULL?

Authorities in Delhi and elsewhere say they are cracking down on safety violations, from fining culprits to conducting surprise raids of food outlets. Raids are especially important during festivals, when bad batches of items such as sweetened milk or flour can send hundreds of people to hospital.

"The Delhi government is already working towards tackling this situation and now that we've picked up this report, the government will take hastier steps to tackle the situation," A.K. Walia, the state's health minister, said about the FSSAI's report on milk adulteration.

But enforcing India's food safety laws is a tough task. "You can say that our laws are very good, but the implementation is very weak," said N.C. Basantia, director of the Delhi-based Avon Food Lab, which tests samples on behalf of government authorities.

Delhi, a city of 17 million people, has just 32 food safety officers and their job is all the harder because traders often see attempts to clamp down on bad practices as an attack on their livelihoods. "Whenever the department gets active, there is a hue and cry in the market," a second safety official said. Even assessing the scale of

India's food safety problem has been controversial. After the FSSAI published its survey on milk adulteration in January, state government after state government spoke out to deny the scale of the problem in their region.

On the other hand, Basantia of Avon Food Lab said the samples he tested for the government may flatter to deceive. "See, we can never be 100 percent sure about the food samples given to us, be it a private sector or a government study, because the samples aren't drawn by us," he said. "Obviously the officials will give a very good sample to us, we'll test it and report it to them, whereas the rest of the lot that they plan to export or plan to distribute is probably all contaminated."

Despite all this, India's food safety record may actually be much better than it once was, largely because there is a growing awareness of the issue. Indians are becoming more safety conscious thanks to higher literacy rates, clearer food packaging and a modernising retail sector. An explosion in 24-hour TV news channels in the past decade means coverage of safety scandals can run for days.

The FSSAI may have given a gloomy picture of India's food industry, but the organisation did not even exist before 2008, and is still in the process of upgrading laboratories with modern technology and training its staff.

India only has about 2,000 food safety officers -- compared with the 6,000 the FSSAI hopes to hire and train, according to its new chairman K. Chandramouli. Its budget for this fiscal year is just \$8 million, though it hopes to quadruple that in 2012/13. "Milk contamination is not a new thing. It's been happening for a very long period of time," the CSE's Misra said. "Why it's created a furore now is because it's (the survey) been done by a food regulatory body." "The government has said that your milk is adulterated. Now it's set an official seal on all these things that we already knew," she said (Reuters 13-2-12).