



Nation's food regulator a hazard

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E-Paper

It is not the first time that the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) is coming under criticism for various lapses of commission and omission. But a comprehensive criticism of the body covering every aspect of its work has rarely been seen till now. The Comptroller and Auditor-General (CAG) report on FSSAI, which was recently tabled in Parliament, has pulled no punches and spared no area of the activity of the body from criticism. FSSAI is the regulatory body for food and has important responsibilities and functions to perform. After clean air, clean and hygienic food, which includes clean water, is the most important element of public health. Regulation of the food industry and implementation of the best norms there is vital, especially because the industry has become increasingly commercialised. The CAG report reveals that FSSAI has mostly failed in its duties.

The CAG found that FSSAI issued licences to food business operators without complete documents and does not have any documented policies and procedures for inspections. Regulations governing processes and guidelines based on the Food Safety and Standards Act of 2006 are yet to be formulated. Food testing can only be a sham when 65 out of 72 food laboratories do not have accreditation and are ill-equipped and short of qualified personnel. The audit found "systemic inefficiencies, delays and deficiencies" and violation of the law in many areas. FSSAI also failed to prevent the import of unsafe foods into the country. The CAG's conclusion is that the possibility of unsafe food being manufactured and sold is not ruled out, and this is due to the "failure of the Authority to monitor and cancel licences issued under the product approval system declared unlawful by the Supreme Court".

These are strong words but the deficiencies they point to are not unfamiliar to the people. Many hotels and restaurants sell unhealthy food and there are frequent reports that stale and bad food was found in raids. Food ingredients are adulterated with dangerous substances. Nothing is known to happen to places where such food is found. The CAG has recommended a review of all licences issued under the earlier system, accreditation of laboratories, recruitment of qualified personnel and early notification of procedures and regulations. The question that arises from the record of functioning of

FSSAI IN NEWS

FSSAI is whether it will function efficiently and sincerely even if all the recommendations are implemented. FSSAI, in response to the CAG's criticism, has said that it is committed to raising the bar for the food industry so that citizens can trust the food they get in the marketplace. It is a great promise. Will it live up to it?