

34,000kg adulterated tea worth Rs 70 lakh seized

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CHENNAI: In one of its biggest hauls ever, food safety officials seized around 34,000kg of tea adulterated with synthetic colours from a godown in Arumbakkam on Wednesday.

Based on a tip, a team led by R Kathiravan, designated food safety officer, conducted a surprise inspection at BR Tea Company on Senthil Nagar Street, Arumbakkam. Workers were found sitting hunched over the floor, packing low-grade tea leaves mixed with artificial colours.

While 33,291kg of adulterated tea was packed in gunny bags and plastic, 750kg was mixed and kept on the floor. Officials estimate the entire seizure is worth ₹70lakh. In addition, they also seized 300kg of tartrazine, carmoisine and sunset yellow –artificial colours that are permitted by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) in certain types of food that are not consumed on daily basis. “For every kilo of tea leaves, they had added more than 10 grams of these colours,” said Kathiravan.

For the last three months the unit had been under the department's scanner. "Our inspector had found traces of artificial colours on the shop's floor when he inspected the facility to renew its license. But we didn't have concrete proof it was being mixed with the tea," said Kathiravan. On Wednesday, officials got the breakthrough when a local alerted them.

On interrogation, the proprietor, who operated out of a three-storey complex, revealed that a majority of his clients was tea shop owners across the city. The colours, he said, were sourced from units in Coimbatore. He sold at least 2,000kg of adulterated tea a day. According to the food safety department's records, there are around 3,000 registered tea shops in Chennai. Officials have lifted samples of tea and adulterants for lab tests. "Once the results are out we will lodge a complaint and initiate action against the owner," said Kathiravan.

On Tuesday, officials had seized 1,500kg of adulterated tea from a warehouse in Ayanavaram. Workers were found manually mixing tea leaves with artificial colours.

FSSAI permits only eight synthetic colours to be added to specific foods. However, studies have shown that if consumed on a prolonged basis, these could cause cancer, nervous disorders, toxicity or heart diseases as they stay in the body for more than a month. According to the Food Safety and Standards Regulations, 2011, the quantity of colour should be a milligram or less for a kg of food.

Food safety experts and dietitians say artificial colours, especially those that lend orange, yellow and red hues, are added to tea leaves that are damaged during manufacturing process or are of inferior quality to improve their appearance and price. "One drop or a pinch of a chemical gives more colour than natural ingredients. It helps them hike the cost of an inferior product," said dietitian Mini Joseph.