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FORTNIGHTLY ON POLITICS OF DEVELOPMENT, ENVIRONMENT AND HEALTH

FSSAI must ensure food regulations at schools are mandatory

Dated: - 27th December 2018 (Thursday)

E-paper

Despite directions and advisories, foods high in fat, salt and sugar are easily available in schools; this calls for stricter and mandatory regulations. Recent news reports show that the Delhi Commission for Protection of Child Rights (DCPCR) carried out an inspection at some private schools in Delhi to examine the food being served in the canteens there. “The commission conducted the inspection to understand what kind of food is available in school canteens. I personally visited most of the schools and it was depressing to see foods high in fat, salt and sugar (HFSS) mostly available in schools,” says Ranjana Prasad, member, DCPCR.

Although there is no report or press release on the study by DCPCR, this development highlights the crucial issue of availability of junk food to children in and near schools. In 2016, New Delhi-based non profit organisation Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) conducted an online survey—know your diet—to understand food habits of school children in urban areas. Over 13,200 children in the age group of 9-17 from 300 schools across the country participated in the survey and provided information related to their daily food habits.



The results showed that 93 per cent of children eat packaged food, 68 per cent consume packaged sugar-sweetened beverages more than once a week, while 53 per cent consume these products at least once a day.

It also showed that a large percentage of children, who consume packaged food more than twice a week, eat it at schools and buy the product from school canteens or stores located in the vicinity.

While some steps appear to have been taken to curb the availability of HFSS foods in and near schools, not much has happened on the implementation front.

In February 2015, while hearing a case by Uday Foundation for Congenital Defects and Rare Blood Groups, the Delhi high court had directed the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) to enforce its guidelines to restrict the availability of HFSS in schools and nearby areas.

This year, the FSSAI brought out draft regulations which categorised food items into three categories and sought to levy restrictions on availability of HFSS food. However, these draft regulations, in effect, are not mandatory for schools.

In January 2016, the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) also issued an advisory to all its affiliated schools to ensure that no HFSS food items are available in school canteens and within 20 metres of the premises.

The latest development clearly shows that directions and advisories are not working. The FSSAI must finalise its regulations and make it mandatory for schools to implement them.