

Food delivery platforms must check the plastic waste that they generate: Opinion

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[Pushpa Girimaji](#)



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E-commerce food delivery platforms have really changed the way urban middle class India eats. The ease of ordering food online, quick delivery, a wide variety of cuisines to suit every pocket and taste, have all made these platforms highly popular, not just with the young generation, but even the elderly! But on the flipside, they have raised two serious concerns- while one is the quality and safety of food delivered, the other is the plastic waste generated by them.

Since consumers ordering through online food delivery platforms have no way of personally checking on the eateries, the aggregators have a responsibility to ensure that the food

suppliers scrupulously follow the food safety and hygiene standards prescribed under the food safety laws and most important, that they have the required license/registration from the food safety authority and display them online.

However, the food safety authority's crackdown on the aggregators and the eateries partnering with them have shown their utter disregard for food safety laws .

In fact given the profiles of many of these e-commerce companies, consumers believed that they checked out the food businesses before putting them up on their platforms and ensured that they complied with the food safety laws. After all, it is common knowledge that no food business can operate without a license/registration from the state/central food safety authorities and those in the food business ought to know this only too well.

Yet, following consumer complaints of poor quality food, Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) found that a considerable percentage of food businesses listed on online platforms did not have the valid license/registration. So much so that in July last year, FSSAI had to direct ten aggregators to immediately delist unregistered/unlicensed eateries and submit an action taken report..

In fact the Maharashtra Food and Drug Administration 's inspections, last October, of 347 food establishments selling food through online platforms , revealed that 112 of them did not have the required license! Worse, many of them were found preparing food in extremely unhygienic conditions.

The fact that eventually, under pressure from the central food safety authority, the aggregators delisted as many as 10,500 eateries for not having the required FSSAI license, shows the extent of violation of the law. According to FSSAI CEO Pawan Agarwal, the list of these eateries have now been sent to the respective state governments for further action.

The Food Safety and Standards (Licensing and Registration of Food Business) Amendment Regulation, which was operationalized in February last year, lists a number of responsibilities of the e-commerce food business operators vis-a-vis food safety. For example, they have to display the FSSAI license/registration number of listed food operators on e-commerce platforms- this will help consumers determine whether the eatery has the required approval from the food safety authority before ordering food. (Consumers must always check this) The regulation also mandates that the E-commerce FBOs ensure that the last mile delivery is undertaken by trained delivery personnel and the safety of food product is not compromised at the time of delivery. Stringent enforcement and consumer awareness can ensure strict compliance with food safety laws.

But the issue of plastic waste has not yet got the attention that it deserves from the authorities or even consumers. According to an industry estimate, all food delivery aggregators put together processed roughly about 40 million orders a month, generating nearly 22,000 metric tonnes of plastic waste.

Given the rising popularity of these platforms, the food demand is sure to grow at a fast pace and so also the mountain of plastic debris generated by them. Unless this issue is

addressed seriously now and alternate, eco-friendly packages are made mandatory, we will not be in a position to tackle the problem. Consumer demand for packing materials made from natural fibres will also make a difference.