

“Foremost we are aiming at setting up our own labs”

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Pawan Agarwal, in his nearly four-year stint as Chief Executive Officer, at the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), has been able to make the authority visible across the country making it a public institution. Recently, he was transferred to the Ministry of Consumer Affairs as Secretary. As the outgoing CEO, FSSAI, Agarwal spoke to **Ashwani Maindola** on several issues pertaining to the food safety ecosystem in the country. *Excerpts:*

How have been the four years with FSSAI?

While all issues of food safety and nutrition in the country have not been addressed, there is now correct diagnosis and proper treatment regimen available to address all the safety issues in a comprehensive manner.

Over the past four years, FSSAI has embarked on an extraordinary journey to build a strong public institution from ground up with great ambitions. It has disrupted the conventional role of a regulator to enabler and adopted the food systems approach (much before the rest of the world found it out) through the ‘Eat Right India’ movement, putting citizens and consumers in the centre ("Consumer First"). The highpoint for FSSAI was when Prime Minister Narendra Modi recognised FSSAI’s transformation in his Mann Ki Baat on December 30, 2018.

Building a public institution like the food safety authority is not a sprint, it is like a marathon. At times we may appear slower than the others, but eventually we have to be ahead. To do that, FSSAI has built a solid culture of collaboration, inter-disciplinary approach, diversity, excellence, empathy, social consciousness, transparency, integrity, and long-term vision over short-term rewards.

FSSAI has come under serious scrutiny in the last several years. Comment.

Over the past four years, FSSAI has been under very intense scrutiny of the public, civil society, CAG and the parliamentary committees. At the same time, FSSAI has gained huge visibility. FSSAI has gained confidence of the consumers because they see in FSSAI an organisation that is fully committed to its mission, a ‘listening and learning organisation’, not averse to taking risks. ‘Intense scrutiny, greater visibility and full commitment have

helped FSSAI to become a better public institution and a model regulator that other countries around the world could emulate.

How do you see the support by the government, particularly in terms of scaling up the manpower?

The government has been generously supporting FSSAI in recent years. Its funding has been raised five times. About 500 new positions have been created. FSSAI has already initiated the process to fill up these posts. This is being done in two phases. Recruitments in the first phase are nearing completion. The process saw a huge interest from highly qualified people including those from the corporate sector drawing salaries several times compared to what FSSAI offers.

FSSAI does not have as much manpower as its peer public bodies abroad, however FSSAI today has a highly talented and passionate team, capable of delivering 'more with less.' FSSAI has changed many aspects of governance, dealing with businesses and consumer organisations, and earning their trust.

What changes do you see in FSSAI over the years?

In order to create a high performance culture in the organisation, FSSAI has adopted a goal-driven performance management system. This system is designed to ensure that employees and teams realise their full potential and recognise their role in contributing towards the larger goals of the organisation. The new system ensures individual accountability, rewards high performers and provides performance improvement plans to below average performers.

A major shift in the new system is the introduction of committee-based review as against appraisal by individuals. This is in line with high performing organisations. This would bring objectivity, transparency and avoid personal biases in performance assessment. All employees of the organisation will be assessed on the basis of their work output, alignment with organisational culture and personnel attributes.

Labs are one area on which FSSAI has been focussing a lot. Comment.

In the performance audit report of the parliamentary standing committee and the C&AG report have pointed out gaps in our lab infrastructure and we have done a complete survey of the lab infrastructure in the country and we have found that the gaps were real.

So first and foremost we are aiming at setting up our own labs. The FSSAI should have four labs of its own so that we can do large scale surveillance in a more proper manner and masking. So that people can have confidence and we can have confidence that testing has been done properly.

We are also upgrading the lab infrastructure in the states in terms providing funds and training. Rest part that include staff or space, the state need to look into it.

We are also asking them to use the private lab capacities which is underutilised.

There are challenges to push the states to do that and we are consistently working with the

state governments towards achieving the goal. The response in many states was encouraging but a few states there are lacunae and till such time the states come with such infrastructure, our national labs will take care of those needs.

Ghaziabad lab is running in PPP mode, Kolkata lab is owned fully by FSSAI and for Mumbai and Chennai labs we are looking into the possibilities about the possible way of running it.

How is FSSAI making food businesses realise their responsibility of ensuring food safety?

So moving forward we are introducing the scheme of testing and inspection. This scheme is essentially that businesses do testing at the hazard control points. Wherever there is a possibility of the hazard across the process involved for manufacturing of a product, the control mechanism needs to be strengthened. The FSS Act calls for food safety across the value chain while the previous regime of Prevention of Adulteration Act was more focussed upon the final product.

So the idea is to ensure safety of the food as it moves across the value chain. So this scheme is aimed at guiding the food businesses to ensure food safety of their products to avoid any unintentional hazards that may come up during the manufacturing of a food product.

The whole purpose of ensuring safety is moving from final product verification to ensuring safety across the value chain. That is the model system of food safety and that is where the food safety ecosystem is graduating itself.

Recently, FSSAI announced to open many offices across the country. How, FSSAI is utilising the regional offices?

Until now the work of the regional offices was primarily on computer to issue licences. Now we are expecting the food safety officers to go into the field undertake inspections. However inspections are not possible at all places and therefore random sampling based on surveillance should be done and to bridge the gap, third-party audits should be conducted to ensure food safety. Further we need to maintain the integrity of the entire system and there is no graft.

There were also allegations of FSSAI's cosy relation with the industry. Comment.

The businesses are responsible for safeguarding the interest of the consumers. No business would like to produce bad product. Our role is to trust the businesses that they are doing the right job but we do verification of their work. And the verification should be done in manner that there are no issues of graft and integrity. The inspector raj is not an option.

Our organisation has evolved this culture of having cordial relationship with every stakeholder of the food safety ecosystem.