Be Wary Of Street Food, FDA Is Watching

In order to check the quality of food on the spot, the state Food and Drugs Authority (FDA) has got a mobile testing van. The Rs 41-lakh van has been sponsored by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) as part of the scheme of mobile food testing laboratories known as ‘Food safety on wheels’.

Goa has been rewarded by the FSSAI for its consistent performance on food safety and is the first state to get such a van. It is curious to note that though the van was delivered to the state in September, it remained idle for three months for unexplained reasons. The van is equipped with facilities to conduct tests of adulterated milk, water, edible oils and other items of food for daily consumption.

Its instruments are capable of drawing on the samples on the spot and generating reports within one to two hours. The FDA could use the instruments to check the quality of food items sold at the roadside kiosks, junk food stalls, city markets and other places. The van will thus serve as an FDA vehicle for maintaining surveillance on the quality of food.

Goans, young or old, male or female, are dangerously attracted to street food. The state has witnessed proliferation of roadside eateries, fast food outlets and street food vendors. The civic bodies have a hard time finding spaces for them. Despite awareness from personal experience that consumption of junk food has bad effects on health people crowd around junk food vendors.

Research has shown that fast foods and processed foods increase childhood obesity, heart disease and other chronic diseases. As the government cannot prevent people from eating food from street vendors, it can only try and maintain surveillance on the quality of the food they sell. Among many things, the FDA mobile van is meant to check food sold by street vendors. It is common for the street food vendors and others to reuse oil which gets oxidized. Most food vendors
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use soda for faster cooking of rice. The result is that the rice produces lot of carbon dioxide in the body resulting in uneasiness and stomach upset. The FDA officials have to regularly use the new facility at their disposal to keep a track on street vendors as things would not change with a random check here and a random check there. The street vendors, because of their poor means and poor sense of hygiene, have been in the habit of using unhealthy methods and unhealthy stuff and would not change overnight. The FDA van has to subject them to constant vigilance.

One good thing that the FDA mobile van can do is to pick up samples, carry out critical tests on the spot to get a report within an hour or two and immediately stop the vendor from selling the stuff if the quality is bad. The FDA officials can also impound adulterated or sub-standard items like milk, water, edible oils and other items of food for daily consumption. Food vendors selling items like tandoori chicken and sweets meats often use colours and sub-standard ingredients.

The FDA can take immediate action against them. However, for legal action the FDA would have to draw a formal sample and check on other parameters to proceed against adulterators. Under the normal circumstances the FDA takes 4 to 10 days to check the parameters as laid down under law and get test reports to act against unscrupulous sellers. Taking advantage of the time taken by the FDA, the shopkeepers and vendors would escape punishment by selling out all the substandard or adulterated food items.

The mobile van, besides being fully equipped with analytical instruments, has facilities like LED screen and sound system which could be used for creating public awareness in markets, gram sabhas and playgrounds about food consumed by people and safety measures they need to undertake. The van could be used to tell the people that consumption of unhygienic food could lead to health problems like urinary tract infection, abdominal cavity infection, gastroenteritis, vomiting and stomach cramps. Let us hope the van would help prevent sale of substandard or adulterated food items.

The FDA should also test loose masala powders sold in markets and fruits, vegetables and fish. Vendors of Goa State Horticulture Corporation have been complaining of receiving rotten vegetables and fruits. The FDA mobile van should also test the vegetables and fruits at the horticulture outlets. Chief Minister Manohar Parrikar and Health Minister Vishwajit Rane should get more mobile test vans to maintain surveillance and vigilance on the food quality all over Goa.