State to act tough on using printed paper to pack food

Food for thought: Officials are empowered to penalise fines ranging from ₹200 for street vendors to ₹1,000 for hotels.

In 2016, FSSAI called printed paper a food hazard that could lead to toxicity

Whether it is churumuri given in a neat cone of crisp paper at Cubbon Park or fried snacks from the neighbourhood food stall given on textbook sheets, cut squares of newspapers and other printed papers are near ubiquitous as packaging material.

However, a crackdown on this is set to begin as the Food Safety Commissionerate, Karnataka, is gearing up to enforce a ban on the use of newspapers for packing or serving food.

Around two months ago, the Commissionerate issued an order to “prohibit the storage, distribution or sale of food article wrapped or packed in newspaper and other printed material” in city municipal limits,
including Bengaluru, Mysuru, Mangaluru and Hubballi-Dharwad, among others.

The order, passed on July 18, follows a directive by Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), which in 2016 called printed paper as a “food hazard” that could lead to cancer-related health complications and toxicity.

“The concern is the entry of these inks and chemicals into the body over a long period of time,” said Harshavardhan B., Joint Commissioner, Food Safety Commissionerate.

A challenge

As the experience of banning plastic packaging shows, implementation is a daunting challenge. The Commissionerate has around 20 food safety officers for the whole city, where there are an estimated 1.5 lakh street vendors with tens of thousands of restaurants too.

“For the first year, we want to create awareness. There is no point slapping fine when people do not know the harmful effects of using newspapers. Thereafter, we plan to start an awareness intensive drive where issues around newspaper, use of colourants and cheap chemical-laden sauces are told to street vendors,” said Dr. Harshavardhan. That said, the Commissionerate is empowered to penalise — if the vendor is found to be repeatedly violating notices given — fines that range from ₹200 (for street vendors) to more than ₹1,000 for hotels.

“The key is to offer vendors an alternative. Banana leaves are a viable healthier, environmentally-friendly alternative to newspapers. It is not expensive,” he added.

The change in serving style will happen over time, said Rangaswamy C.E. of Beedi Badi Vyapari Sanghatane, who welcomed the move. “Street vendors will cooperate as they do not want to get a bad name in selling unsafe food. We are currently doing a survey of street vendors and we will educate them on this too,” he said.