Railways to partner FSSAI to improve food safety in trains

NEW DELHI, OCTOBER 17: The Railways and the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) will work together to ensure improved safety standards of the food being served in trains. The food regulator said it will also get a third party safety audit done soon.

“Our role will be to partner with the Railways and bring in systemic changes and improvements. Therefore, we will be getting a third party food safety audit done soon. This is not going to be an accounts or a performance audit, but a food safety audit which will help us understand the gaps within their systems in terms food safety,” Pawan Agarwal, CEO, FSSAI, told BusinessLine.

The Railways was in the news recently when an incident in the high-profile Tejas Express was reported wherein 24-26 people were hospitalised after “food poisoning”. The Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation (IRCTC), however, denied any food quality issues in its preliminary probe report. Incidentally, CAG in its report, earlier had also termed the food served in trains as “unfit” for human consumption.

In the new catering policy, IRCTC has called for zones of the Indian Railways or IRCTC to ensure good quality and hygienic food to passengers.

However, ensuring quality processes across the supply chain for food served is a huge challenge, given that Railways has over 7,000 stations and moves over 2.2 crore passengers every day.
IRCTC serves about four-five lakh meals a day in about 350 trains where it has pantry cars. It will be modernising its base kitchens at 12 locations — where the proposed meal production is is expected to be 5.7 lakh a day.

Third party audit of mobile units and base kitchen is to be undertaken by zonal railway periodically, by hiring an independent agency in accordance with Catering Policy 2017.

As regards the premium Tejas Express, which runs between Mumbai and Goa, catering services are optional for passengers and are factored in the fare. However, if a passenger asks for catering services at a later stage, an extra ₹50 per cent per service is levied, in addition to the cost of catering charges.

To spruce up its catering quality, IRCTC plans to set up new kitchens and upgrade the existing ones, which will be owned, operated and managed by it, and it shall be fully accountable for all issues pertaining to the base kitchens and quality of food.

All four base kitchens under departmental operation of Zonal Railways (Nagpur, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus, Mumbai Central and Balharshah) and all kitchen units — refreshment rooms at A1 and A category stations, Jan Ahaar, Cell Kitchens shall be handed over to IRCTC on ‘as is where is basis’.

It also plans to introduce station based e-catering, pre-cooked food (‘ready to eat’ meals), operation of centralised Catering Service Monitoring Cell for prompt redressal of passenger grievances relating to catering.

**Huge challenge**

However, carrying out a third party safety audit, though desirable, remains a huge challenge with the Railways managing a wide network of catering services spread over 131 base kitchens, 7,957 static catering units, 358 mobile catering units, 164 departmental refreshment rooms, 86 food plazas and 69 fast food units.