FOOD SAFETY: 7 mobile food testing labs without a single trained technician in J&K

Announced as a milestone in food safety arena of Kashmir, the five mobile food testing labs procured at a cost of Rs 1.75 crore are defunct for want of trained technical staff, while food department has put up a “show” using “health department technicians.”

Seven months since five mobile food testing vans were flagged off by Minister of Health and Medical Education Bali Bhagat, no manpower has been hired to run these mobile laboratories meant to ensure safety and improve quality of food items available in the market. Resultantly, in a bid to “show” that the mobile labs are “functional”, the DFCO has “engaged” one technician from health department for the two mobile labs in Kashmir, a source in Drug and Food Control Organisation (DFCO) said.

The source said that DFCO’s attempts to get “anybody and everybody” as “stop gap arrangement” in crucial food testing business was proving detrimental to the entire set-up. “A health department technician has no training and exposure to food safety and standards. He is trained to test
sputum and blood samples,” he said adding that the current arrangement was a “mockery of the food safety laws”.

In addition to the five labs procured with Rs 1.75 crore funding allocated by state government in 2016 Budget, J&K has also been provided two additional mobile lab units by Food Safety and Standard Association of India (FSSAI), each costing over Rs 30 lakhs. These two high tech mobile labs are also lying unused due to the unavailability of technicians.

Another official of DFCO, who wished not to be named, expressed anguish over the fact that the department in spite of “acquiring state-of-art equipment for the labs”, as well as mobile labs, was unable to improve food testing in state.

“What is the use of high-end machines if we have no technicians to run tests on these?” he asked. He said that although the proposal for improving food safety and standards submitted to government had projected manpower requirement; that seemed to have been ignored. “Requirement for manpower was projected alongside the requirement for equipment. But somehow, equipment always gets the priority in acquisitions,” he said.

Another official in the department said that the proposal for manpower creation for the mobile testing labs was submitted to government over six months ago, but the file was gathering dust. “It (manpower creation for mobile labs) should have started the moment tenders were floated for procurement of these labs. But, even now, about one and a half year later, no posts for these labs have been created,” he said.

Currently, of the five vans procured with state government funding, two have been deputed to Kashmir division, two for Jammu division and one for Ladakh. One each of the two mobile labs donated by FSSAI is stationed at Jammu and Srinagar.

The mobile vans, as per FSSAI, are meant to strengthen the country’s food testing infrastructure and “enhance surveillance activities and outreach even in far-flung areas”. The initiative was taken to launch “food safety on wheels.”

Controller DFCO, Lotika Khajuria refused to comment over the lack of trained manpower for these labs and said she was "busy in a meeting."